BUILDINGS AT RISK

Looking at hydropathic bathing in Ramsey

Buildings at Risk covers buildings and structures in our island, domestic and industrial - those currently at risk, those lost, and those which have survived.

This week, Dave Martin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiguarian Society concludes the series on Ramsey Saltworks, looking at the Ramsey Hydro (now lost) and answering some gueries from readers.

hilst the discovery of salt beneath the north of

the Isle of Man led to industrial-scale salt manufacture, it also led to development of a brine spa in Ramsey.

Bathing outside of the home has been practised since at least the time of the ancient Greek athletes at Olympia,

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Jefy 2244, 1988.

Alkali Company

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Testimonial (from a fellow Manxman) on the quality of the brine from the

Point of Ayre. Taken from the prospectus launching the Manx Salt and

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CONCERNENCE PROVING

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whose first bath-house has been dated to circa 500 BC.

Those baths started off purely functional but routines were established, even to the point of 'ritual'.

Public baths were a wellknown feature right across the Roman and Ottoman empires, they were both functional and

as those developed by Lonan man Capt Henry Skillicorne

who commercialised a well on his father-in-law's land in 1738, founding Cheltenham Spa. Where there was a plen-

tiful supply of either mineralised spring water or geothermally-warmed water, spas such as at Bath and Bristol also offered bathing.

also social spaces.

In the 1700s it became

increasingly fashionable to

'take the waters' at spas, but

this usually referred to drink-

ing mineralised waters, such

Where brine was available, that provided a marketable advantage such as at Droitwich where St Andrew's Baths was developed with eventually both a large public pool and individual 'reclining baths'.

Prolonged immersion in water, cold or warm, fresh,

mineralised or even seawater. was increasingly promoted as medically beneficial and the term 'hydropathic bathing' became widespread, often shortened to simply 'Hydro' in hotel names.

Immersion in seawater was promoted as enjoyable and beneficial, and we're all familiar with the bathing machines of the Victorian era. Access to sea bathing led to the establishment of 'Hydro' hotels in many seaside resorts, and the Isle of Man was no exception.

Until the discovery of brine in the island though, these were all purely on the basis of seawater.

In 1842, Thomas Brett advertised that the Mitre Hotel in Ramsey provided access to 'the spacious Bay, unrivalled for the purity and clearness of its waters, affording the most

delightful Sea Bathing'.

Despite the warming effects of the Gulf Stream, without whose effects our climate might be like Labrador or Hudson Bay, bathing in the sea was still bracing, but by 1858 the Mitre boasted 'New and Superior Sea-water BATHS (hot, cold and shower)'.

BEACHMOUNT

n 1876, Capt Aaron Williams from Liverpool, then living at Ormly Hall, bought the Vollan Farm.

On a three-acre field to the north of a track to the beach, contractor Robert Corkill built 'Beachmount', completed in 1880.

When the estate was placed on the market after Capt Williams' death in 1894, the sale particulars disclosed



Beachmount had four entertaining rooms and seven bedrooms with kitchen, office, stabling etc and it was valued at £2,400.

By this date, plans were afoot to exploit the salt under the north of the island by pumping brine to the surface, but the pipeline was still some years away.

Beachmount's potential as a 'Hydro' hotel with seawater bathing was recognised though, and in 1895 Mr JT Cowley bought Beachmount jointly with a Mr E. Roebuck from Bowdon in Cheshire and 'The Ramsey Hydropathic Establishment Limited' was incorporated in 1895.

Beachmount now had a new life as 'The Ramsey Hydro'. Construction started in May 1896; a large detached block to the seaward had public rooms on the ground floor with 38 bedrooms over two floors above.

Beachmount was utilised as the entrance and offices; and baths - both fresh and sea water - were constructed alongside a corridor between the two blocks. The baths were heated and the Hydro had its own acetylene-powered dynamo for lighting and pumps to raise seawater to the hotel.

Unfortunately it appears no photographs of the Hydro's actual baths remain. The Ramsey Hydro was relatively successful during the season, attracting clientele particularly from the midlands and northwest of England, although they did advertise in Dublin as well.

When the Manx Salt and Alkali Company constructed their pipeline to bring brine

to Ramsey for the Saltworks, they included a header tank atop Balladoole brooghs and a link to feed brine to the baths at the Hydro.

This gave the Ramsey Hydro a real advantage, marketed as giving the best of all worlds – Royal Ramsey's sun and seaside, and brine spa as well.

Initially only open to residents, by 1910 the brine baths were open to nonresidents on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays

The Ramsey Hydro survived the cold wind which had blown across



Sea-bathing in Ramsey

Manx Museum

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Proud workmen prior to opening of the Ramsey Hydropathic Establishment in 1897

the island at the start of the 20th century after the failure of Dumbell's bank, but the impact of Great War and then the following depression resulted in the business being placed in the hands of a receiver in 1924 – unfortunately the first of many occasions that was to happen.

The eventual purchaser was a company promoted by Mr CHH Mitchell of Nottingham. Again, this was a trend to be repeated, those who perhaps had vacationed at the Hydro were seduced in the manner of many holiday romances, seeing the Hydro busy in season but not realising the burden of keeping such establishments running out-of-season.

Mr Mitchell's company carried out major improvements, including 38 more bedrooms, Nigel and Nikki Sperring

garaging for motor cars, electric light throughout, but by December 1927 the Hydro was back in the hands of a receiver.

During the 1930s the Hydro was relatively successful as a seaside hotel, including use by the families of Territorial Army officers on their summer camps (including one Bernard Montgomery, later of Alamein fame). After the second World War, the Hydro's fortunes



The St Andrew's brine baths at Droitwich spa

ebbed and flowed like the tide, but eroding gradually like the cliffs of the High Shellag to the north.

Although the Saltworks was in decline post-WWII, the Manx government propped up both the Manx Salt and Alkali Company and the Ramsey Hydro hotel in hope of promoting resurgence in tourism for brine bathing as cure for rheumatism. Passing through a series of liquidations and new owners, the Hydro was relaunched as 'The Grand Island' in 1962 under new local ownership but with Government support.

The whole hotel was modernised, central heating installed, some rooms made en suite, new kitchens built and a new entrance constructed through one of the former Beachmount's bay windows. The large seaward-facing dining room, where many readers will recall attending functions, was built by Parkinsons in 1964.

CC-BY

When the Hydro/Grand Island celebrated its centenary in 1997 hopes were high; but it finally closed in 2009 and was demolished in 2012, to be replaced by a modern housing estate and a soulless box on the Mooragh promenade.

evident contract of the previous instalments on the Saltworks, the author has received a number of queries:

ARTESIAN BRINE

Whilst the eye-catching headline was a (very modest!) 'run' of brine from the first test borehole at the Point of Ayre, the real discovery was the layers of crystalline salt.

As explained previously, the geology wasn't conducive to mining, but bringing the salt to the surface as brine was relatively easy.

There has been a suggestion that there was a massive underground lake of brine, but not only was there no sign of that in the test bores, the salt was between layers of clay and other seabed/glacial debris which would not support the 'roof' of a brine lake.

It has also been suggested that the brine, or at least water to dissolve the salt, reached the Point of Ayre from sources to the east (Walney Island, brine), north (the Scottish coast, fresh water) or even west (Carrickfergus, brines).

Long-distance lateral artesian flows normally require solid geology with fractures through which the water can flow. But the geology above, below and around the salt pan pockets under the Point and the north of the island is really very similar to that which is exposed on the surface, albeit with less sand.

The seabed is a layer of gravel and marl/clay and glacial/seabed debris, with in our



Fresh-water bore well-head at the Point of Ayre pumping station. The lift pump is down the borehole below the level of the fresh water table. The pump rod went down through a gland in the centre of the hexagonal nut on the left, while the fresh water was discharged through the two-inch branch that emerges to the right

case some relatively shallow but modestly wide salt pans.

Water doesn't reliably flow for tens of kilometres through the mixed fragmented geology between the Point of Ayre and the suggested sources.

The prosaic truth is that pressure of seawater above is adequate to bring the brine up to the level they found it at, as was proven by John Todd in a paper in Yn Lioar Manninagh.

ARTESIAN FRESH WATER

Similarly, there have been several questions/suggestions over the source of fresh water at the pumping station at the Point of Ayre. The main demand for fresh water was for the boiler which powered at least three pumps at the site.

It has been suggested there was 'a fresh water spring' but that is incredibly unlikely that a spring would rise through the sand and gravel exactly at the pumping station.

The northern plain's water table is not far below ground level, as evidenced by periodic floods and recorded more accurately by the dip-wells across the Ayres National Nature Reserve.

The head of the fresh water bore and pump remains in-situ and visible. It has also been suggested that they had another fresh-water bore/ pump further inland adjacent to the main road to the lighthouse but no evidence of this can be found.

SETTLING TANKS

It has been suggested that the three shallow tanks adjacent to the brine lifting pump were solar salt pans.

Although the Point of Ayre is the sunniest spot in the island, there was never enough solar energy to evaporate brine down to salt, but see 'Pilot plant' below. It has also been suggested they were fresh water tanks / and that the brine was so pure no settling was required.

In his 1896 paper, Todd describes how the brine was 'delivered into a tank, where any earthy matter held in suspension is allowed to settle at the bottom.' The three tanks were filled sequentially by cascade, and periodically swept out. Photographs show the tank nearest the main brine lift pump being filled from a sixinch pipe, which could come directly from the brine wellhead; and the central tank appears to have a brine-stained tide mark.

PILOT PLANT Craine Bros established a pilot plant at the Point of Ayre,

Further research by the author with assistance of staff at the Manx Museum even-

SULBY VALLEY

tually unearthed a pre-sale agreement. It includes clauses that the grantee (TW Caine) will not quarry on the land, guarantees not to cause pollution of the river and that prior to purchase Caine's men may enter onto the site to measure the flow of the river.

From this, it would appear that Caines/the Manx Salt and Alkali Company had notions of siting some form of works on the upper Sulby river, just below where the current hydroelectric plant (fed from Block Eairy) is now.



Land in the Sulby Valley taken by Craine Bros/Manx Salt and Alkali Company Manx Museum Library

but no plans or photographs are known.

In a paper in 1896, John Todd described the pilot plant's salt pan as '30 feet long by 13 feet wide by 18 inches deep', it would have had an iron evaporating pan but once the pan was removed, the footprint is similar to that of the settling tanks – maybe the settling tanks were built on/from the former pilot salt pan base.

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