

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Ballacregga Mill shows the importance of water power

### Feature

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For centuries, the power of the streams flowing down the Isle of Man's steep valleys fulfilled a crucial practical role in powering mills to give islanders their daily bread and clothing.

This began as early as the Viking period: the name of the Cornaa valley in Maughold parish comes from the Norse 'Kvernardalr' – 'mill stone dale'.

At one time all residents of Maughold and Ramsey were required to grind their corn at Cornaa and after the Reformation the mill passed to the Christian family of Milntown (where there is also an old mill and waterwheel although the old mill pond is now a garden lake). In 1642 the Cornaa mill was the property of William Christian, 'Iliam Dhone'. It ceased working in 1951 but the wheel remains.

Another important use of waterpower was for fulling – the finishing of cloth by pounding it in water, along with plants such as soapwort, using enormous wooden mallets. Such Manx 'tuck' mills existed at St John's and downstream of Mullin-y-Quinney on Santon Burn.

In the early 19th century William Kelly built the large woollen mill on the Douglas to Peel road that became known as Union Mills. Little of it now survives but at around the same time former corn mills at Sulby and Rhenwyllan, near Port St Mary, were converted into woollen mills.

Many small mills in the 18th century were used in linen production. Known as 'scutch mills', they usually had a 'dub', or pond, in which the flax plants were first soaked ('retted').

For the finished linen, bleach greens are known to have existed at Lower Laxey and two sites at St John's. In 1790 Moore's linen mills were established near Douglas. The mid-19th century saw old island mills being expanded and new, larger-scale ones built.

Case Study 1: St George's

Mill, Laxey - What is now known as Laxey Woollen Mills was established in 1881 by the Lancashire silk weaver Egbert Rydings to revive the traditional skills of wool spinning and handloom weaving. The project was backed by prominent Victorian artist, critic and writer John Ruskin and his Guild of St George.

However, by 1900 growing competition from synthetic fabrics led to the mill being turned over to power looms.

After the Second World War, however, mill manager Robert William Wood, a skilled weaver from Scotland, reintroduced hand looms and in the 1950s Robert and his wife Sarah took over the mill, later producing the Manx tartan in the 1970s.

In 1976, their son John Robert Wood began a five-year apprenticeship under his father and now, 40 years later, is the island's only commercial pattern weaver. In 2007, John and his sister, Dian Skelton, took over the business and began a major programme of refurbishment which has only just been completed. They have had anti-vibration floors installed and some disused outbuildings have been restored as a craft centre. Visitors can see the looms working. Dian also runs her ViewPoint Software business from the mill.

Case Study 2: St John's Mill (formerly Tynwald Mills) – In its heyday this was a fulling mill. However, in 1846 the building was substantially enlarged, becoming one of the earliest factories in the island. In the 20th century the building fell derelict but then in 2000 its future was secured when the St John's Mill charity was established as a Millennium project supported by the island's churches as a central facility for training and community activities.

It was opened by Bishop Noel Jones in April 2003 after two years of careful work transformed it into a stunning restored building. It is overseen and managed by a board of trustees, led by Bob Jeavons, a small number of employed staff, plus many dedicated volunteers.

Since its restoration, The mill has hosted businesses, government departments, charities, community groups, organisations and individuals, churches and



Ballacregga Mill at Laxey (near the Lady Isabella and the Salmon Lake, as it's called now) following restoration by Stuart and Barbara Clague. The firm which used it as a factory moved to Ramsey and it lay empty for some years until the Clagues took on a full restoration to keep their workforce busy during the recession of 2008

voluntary sector organisations, providing an outstanding venue for many hundreds of events.

Work on restoring the 12ft wooden waterwheel began in 2007, directed by Eric Wilkins, a former chief engineer of the National Trust, assisted by former MEA chief Stan Kewley. The then Department of Local Government and the Environment (DLGE) and the Manx Heritage Foundation contributed funding and the restoration was completed in 2009, helping to add to the mill's authenticity.

As well as these textile mills, a number of the island's old corn mills survive. Not normally open to the public but still containing its original mill machinery is the Golden Meadow Mill at Castletown.

The smaller Kentraugh Mill near Colby is periodically open to the public and visitors can see all the mill's machinery in operation, albeit now with electric power.

Other mills have been beautifully restored as private residences, such as the until recently roofless ruin of the Old Glen Grenaugh Mill, next to the lane leading to Port Grenaugh, which has re-

cently emerged as a beautiful house retaining its original flavour. Another picturesque mill converted into a house is at Garwick Glen, passed by motorists on the Douglas to Laxey road.

There is, however, is an old corn mill building which can be regularly visited by the public after being put to a new use: Case Study 3: Ballacregga Corn Mill, Laxey - Owner Stewart Clague told me it used to be the local mill for the Agneash area, where his ancestors lived in the mid-19th century.

The mill was first documented in 1863 and was called Creer's Mill after William Creer, the miller in 1880. The last miller was Lou Killip, who ran it between the First and Second World Wars along with a small fair, while his wife sold refreshments and ice creams.

A decade ago Stewart was running his own plumbing, heating, air conditioning units and building business, but then in 2008 his trade was hit by the recession.

By that time Ballacregga Mill, which had been converted into a small factory, was lying unused. Stewart and his wife Barbara bought the mill, helping their workforce weather the recession by employing them to undertake its restoration.

In repointing the stone-

work they used historically correct lime mortar and, as the old waterwheel had been scrapped, they had a new one made, helped by Bob Jeavons, trustee of St John's Mill.

It now has a cafe and tea room on the ground floor while upstairs, in the old drying room, there is a restaurant. In line with the nearby Lady Isabella, Stewart named his new mill wheel Barbara after his wife and says a popular feature with customers is a picture window allowing them to watch the wheel turning.

After the December floods, a lot of hard work has had to be done to put right damage caused to the building, but this has now been completed and a new water overflow system put in. The Clagues are delighted to report a large numbers of visitors this summer.

Stewart says that restoring Ballacregga Corn Mill has given him a huge amount of satisfaction in helping to bring back something for the good of the area.

All those who have renovated the island's historic mills have shown that old buildings can be restored, put to new uses and turned into things of beauty while preserving for future generations the traditional character and heritage of the Manx built landscape.



Milntown millpond.



Exterior and interior views of Golden Meadow Mill on the edge of Castletown, which still has all its original machinery intact although its waterwheels have seen better days.



## Opinion

# Review fine, but reform of Building Registration needs to be included

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**S**ome Manx buildings, like the mills featured here, the Drill Hall on Peel Road and Peel's Sailors' Shelter covered in previous articles, are fortunate in that they're currently in safe hands – although that good luck only lasts whilst the current owners are so minded.

The vast majority of others are more vulnerable, and the only way their future can be protected is by a robust Planning and Building Registration system.

Many of those concerned with our Island's built environment, including the groups behind the 'Buildings at Risk' campaign, welcome the news that this week's sitting of Tynwald will consider the report on a 'High Level Strategic Review of Planning in the Isle of Man'. The core report, from 'Envision' consultancy, sets out some excellent Key Principles and proposals to de-politicise and improve transparency in planning.

This is a crucial report setting the framework for any future reform of the Island's planning system. It has been approved by the Council of Ministers and we hope that it will also be endorsed by Tynwald if it can be modified as we suggest below.

Whilst the report does briefly mention the care to be given to buildings that are already Registered or are located in Conservation Areas, it notably fails to address the failed Building Registration system – especially the process by which buildings are added to the Protected Buildings Register.

We seek to address this gap by providing the following set of additional Key Principles for Tynwald to add to the 'Envision' framework in order to promote conservation of the Island's built heritage and achieve an independent, open and

transparent Registration process which will benefit the Island.

Building Registration should be separated from Planning and should be determined independently from Executive Government

Transparency is key to confidence in the Building Registration system

There should be a clearly defined and accountable Registration process which is open to public scrutiny

Information on all buildings proposed for Registration should be public at all stages of the process

Registration is determined solely on a building's architectural or historic importance – neither development nor commercial considerations have any role in Building Registration

When the necessary segregation between Planning and Building Registration has been achieved, then, where appropriate, the spirit of the Key Principles identified in the 'Envision' Planning report should also be applied to the Protected Buildings Register.

We also suggest that any changes to Planning should ensure that – irrespective of whether buildings are registered or not – resources and training are available to Planning and Building Control staff to help them to discharge their duties in relation to building conservation, and that qualified information should be available to building owners to assist their sustainable stewardship.

The review has many good aspects concerning Planning; but the group behind 'Buildings at Risk' (with some several thousand members across the Societies and Trusts) believes that if the situation is left in its current plight and the opportunity is not taken to similarly improve the situation with respect to our Heritage buildings, then it will inevitably lead to the continued loss or spoiling of many more of our important historic structures, and we will lose the Manxness of the Island's cultural and built landscape.