

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage

Changing attitudes could help change the landscape

SIMON ARTYMIUK takes a look at changing attitudes to buildings conservation on adjacent shores of the Irish Sea to give a personal view of how the Isle of Man might draw inspiration from them

Feature

Back in 1938 the Isle of Man showed an early awareness of threats to its buildings heritage by making Cregneash one of the earliest folk museums in Britain.

Fortunately it and its thatched cottages are still with us to demonstrate the Manx crofting way of life which has otherwise disappeared - though the preservation of Manx Gaelic which was also a spur to Cregneash's conservation has borne fruit in a noteworthy language revival.

Visit the Albert pub in Port St Mary and you will see photographs on the walls of the 19th-century transformation of the island which saw the beginning of the end of traditional crofting. One that stands out for me shows a thatched cottage above Port Erin, with the new Victorian terraces of the village rising on the cliffs above the beach behind.

Ironically, now, in the 21st century, it is many of those stuccoed terraces which have vanished, as sure as have now long gone the many 'Nicky' fishing boats to be seen crowding Port St Mary harbour in other old photos on the pub's walls.

As some of this series of Buildings at Risk articles has shown, there seems now to be a strong preference in the island for building from new rather than restoration - but is this always necessary when it results in the destruction of characterful buildings which have helped shape the island as it is today?

The 'visitor industry' may be a shadow of what it once was but it helped endow the island with a capital boasting what Michael Portillo in his Great Railway Journeys series called 'a picture-perfect Victorian seafront', while others have also admired it as having 'rather a colonial air'.

Although closer examination of the buildings may not find them all 'picture-perfect', at the moment they



The Gulliver's Travels mural in Whitehaven is there not only to brighten up the blank end of row of houses but because the port's coal and shipping trade arose principally to supply fuel to Dublin. Also, in the early 18th century the author Jonathan Swift, while a young boy, was abducted from the Irish capital by his nurse and taken to live in Whitehaven. It was three years before his family discovered his whereabouts

all retain the same sense of proportion and scale with each other as when many of them were built in the era when Governor Loch was giving the island a greater degree of self-control in the late 1860s-70s.

The question is whether development plans for the Sea Terminal-Lord Street area will see this sense of scale marred or more of these stuccoed terraces, too, being replaced by glass-balconied flats.

With no conservation officer currently in place and

the buildings registration system also needing improvement, there can be few safeguards.

If we look across the Irish Sea to neighbouring coasts, we find there is an increasing emphasis in planning matters on the sustainability and maintaining a sense of community heritage and individuality by conserving and restoring old buildings and putting them to new uses.

The greatest turnaround in policy has been in the Republic of Ireland, where until the 1990s there was very little

south of the river became homes and offices for lawyers and businessmen. Then, in the 1920s, with the creation of the Irish Free State, these former homes of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy were seen as an unwelcome reminders of the imperial past.

In the 1930s Irish leader Eamon de Valera even proposed totally demolishing Merrion Square, one of the city's grandest collections of Georgian houses, but fortunately the outbreak of the 'Emergency' (as the neutral Irish term the Second World War) meant this was never enacted.

Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 70s large numbers of Georgian buildings in St Stephen's Green and Fitzwilliam Square were demolished and replaced with modern office blocks and by the 1980s the northside Mountjoy Square was in such a state that some of its buildings were used by film-makers to represent London in the Blitz and also by U2 as a bleak and atmospheric backdrop for a music video.

However, the same era saw the dawning of a change in perceptions, initially thanks to a New Yorker undertaking a photoshoot to promote his home city's St Patrick's Day celebrations in 1970. While visiting Dublin, Bob Fearon was struck by the elegantly-proportioned doorways in the Merrion Square area, all topped by beautifully proportioned fanlights and each with a differently-coloured door, and took photos of 40 of them with the idea of creating an art collage for himself. When Joe Malone, manager of New York's Irish Tourism office saw the result, however, he wanted it as a poster for his window. The poster, entitled 'Doorways of Dublin', became an award-winning hit which still inspires postcards, posters and tourist brochure photographs to this day.

Gradually, with the arrival of more tourists with their cameras, the Dublin authorities woke up to what a draw their built heritage could be, as did the public,

who staged protests when what was claimed to be the world's longest Georgian terrace was interrupted by the demolition of 20 houses for the building of an uncompromisingly modern electricity board office.

Other large-scale protests took place in Dublin when excavations to build new office blocks at Wood Quay on the Liffey unearthed the remains of the original Viking trading port - but the development continued regardless.

Since the 1990s, however, increasing protection has been given to Dublin's Georgian squares and terraces which are now seen as a keystone to the city's identity and to making it an attractive place in which to live and work. Ireland's Local Planning and Development Act 2000 introduced further safeguards, though conservationists point out that there needs to be protection, too, for the gardens, lanes and mews buildings which give a landscape setting to the terraces themselves.

In Ireland as a whole, the Tidy Towns initiative run since 1958 has enjoyed great success in brightening up cities, towns and villages across the Republic by introducing an element of friendly competition. Entry is purely voluntary but while 36 communities entered in the first year, 700 regularly enter nowadays and have to meet criteria based on enhancing buildings, removal of eyesores, creating environments for wildlife and so on. Sponsors offer a cash prize for the winner but it is the honour of being the tidiest town which is really the goal.

It is thanks to this competition that the visitor to many an Irish town is greeted by ranks of brightly-coloured buildings - an idea which seems at least to have reached parts of Peel and Ramsey in the Isle of Man too.

In her recent report Sustaining The Historic Environment, Jacqui Donnelly, Ireland's Architectural Conservation Advisor Department of Arts, Heritage and

Merrion Square in Dublin. The city's Georgian squares and terraces are now seen as a keystone to the city's identity



Left, a sculpture by John Paul Jones on Whitehaven's restored harbour. Right, Whitehaven Castle, a building by renowned architect Robert Adam restored as flats



the Gaeltacht (ie Ireland's specially protected Gaelic-speaking areas) said: 'The conservation and management of the historic built environment is an essential component of sustainability.

'The continuity of use, adaptation and protection of the built heritage results in:

- Reductions in carbon-dioxide emissions
- Reductions in demolition waste

• It represents a highly significant resource that is often not adequately considered in energy and sustainability policies

• In terms of whole-life costing, the historic building stock outperforms modern construction

• It sustains communities and promotes social cohesion, traditional buildings skills and cultural tourism.'

Of course, the picture is not all rosy in the Republic. Many towns have lost trade to out of town store developments, not helped by the downturn resulting from the collapse of the Celtic Tiger boom. Just last week the Irish Times published an article criticising the new building controls for Dublin's Georgian squares as being

to rigorous 'so no one lives in them any more'. Clearly there do have to be compromises to allow for adaptation to modern life, but officials now firmly prefer renovation to demolition and the aim is now to create a 'cultural corridor' linking Heuston station in the west with the new canalside developments of The Point in the east, with the Georgian city as its heart and the River Liffey as a prime focus.

Another example of new life being breathed into old buildings can be seen across the water on the other side of the Isle of Man. Whitehaven in Cumbria in the 18th century became one of the earliest post-medieval planned towns, both as a coal mining and shipment centre and a port trading with the West Indies, Virginia, Maryland and Ireland, as well as being the harbour from which the Isle of Man's main packet boat connection with England sailed until the advent of the Steam Packet. The town suffered a 19th century industrialisation and then decline which saw its numerous Georgian buildings remain intact but becoming down at heel.

However, its formerly dejected air when contrasted with the tourist honey-pot towns and villages of the nearby Lake District has now been reversed by a regeneration scheme involving Millennium Commission funding to turn its extensive and historic harbour into a marina with fishing fleet facilities. A row of modern flats has been built overlooking the harbour but at the same time the harbour's connection with the old town has been enhanced, the historic houses restored and brightened up with a lick of paint and imaginative murals, and a series of treasure hunt-style town trails called the 'Quest' set up, helping visitors to learn about the town's heritage in a fun way by finding clues at locations which form part of the regeneration project.

The main centre for people beginning the Quest is the attraction called 'The Rum Story' - a kind of 'Peggy boathouse' of the spirits trading world, as the former Jefferson's rum supply warehouse was abandoned with a full cellar of rum bottles still in it. The premises has been renovated at a

cost of £3m into a House of Manannan-like attraction telling the story of the port's trade with the West Indies and the ins and outs of the slave trade which was, sadly, part of it.

Whitehaven's renovation has also seen a modern circular museum tower called the Beacon being built next to the harbour, concentrating of other aspects of maritime activity in the Irish Sea;

the restoration of some of the structures connected with the coal mining of the area; and statuary helping to tell the story of the 1778 raid on Whitehaven by Scotsman turned founder of the US Navy, John Paul Jones, during the American War of Independence.

These are just a few examples of how communities can derive benefit from retaining their historic

buildings. Obviously the Isle of Man already has its unique historic attractions and community initiatives, as with the display boards now to be seen around Port St Mary. However, perhaps taking a holistic approach to safeguard and provide funding to encourage restoration of vulnerable older buildings might bring with it still wider benefits in the long run.