

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Heritage: Water, water everywhere...and where there's water, there's power

The spirit of enterprise made Laxey into the hub of industry

By PATRICIA NEWTON
Isle of Man Natural History
and Antiquarian Society

Glen Roy, Snaefell/Laxey, Glen Moar and Gretch Rivers are four powerful sources of water that provided the motivation for the spirit of industrial enterprise that characterised the Laxey Valley before, during and after the mining industry came to dominate it.

In the 13th century Chronicles of the Kings of Mann and the Isles, a mill is recorded on the Laxey River upstream of Laxa Harbour at the boundary of Gretaz and Abbeylands.

By 1511 Lonan was recorded as having three mills and seven people holding licences to brew ale, while by 1798 there was one flax mill, one dyeworks and three cornmills, and the early 1800s saw the start of three breweries – not bad for a village of just over 30 houses!

Industrial enterprise exploded in the 19th century with buildings having various, often successive, roles including a red herring factory, corn mills, flax mills, paper mills, a saw mill, breweries, a chemical factory, a dyeworks, a woollen mill, abattoirs and, by the 20th century, a clothing manufactory, a carpet factory, a waterworks, an electricity generating works and a precision engineering premises. Lieutenant Governor Dundas was 'amazed' at the range of industry seen in his 1955 visit to Laxey.

Designed by local, usually unnamed, architects and, frequently in the 19th century, built by miners who were not fully employed in the winter months, most of these buildings relied on the availability of water in the valley. But when there is too much water, as some discovered on December 3, 2015, it can flood buildings, while when there is too little such structures can be destroyed by fire.

The earliest recognisable corn, and also possibly flax, mill with associated kiln at its side which could also have been used for malting barley for a brewer was Creers or Killips.

Closing in 1939, the building was subsequently used by Manx Engineers and now is Clague's Salmon Centre (see recent Examiner Buildings at Risk article on watermills). Its overshot wheel was origi-



Laxey Pipe Factory, Williamson's behind



Captain Richard Rowe

nally fed from the Glen Moar stream via the tail race of the Great Laxey Wheel but it was the unassociated reservoir above it whose blocked sluice resulted in water being decanted through the building a year ago.

Below the confluence of the Glen Roy and Laxey Rivers, which can be clearly seen from its southern frontage, was Ruskin's St George's Woollen Mill (also featured in the watermills article).

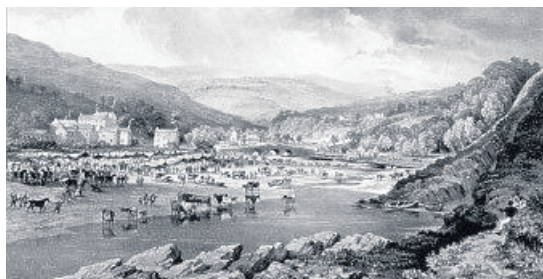
It started life in around 1850 as Moughtin's flour mill, with ownership divided into four shares. After water had been taken over and under the mining industry washing floors and back towards the river, it could then be diverted via a lade to the mill, whose wheel was sandwiched between two sections of the building.

Under the initiative of Lancashire silk weaver, Egbert Rydings who acquired one share, and the patronage of leading Victorian artist, critic, social thinker and philanthropist John Ruskin, it was converted to a woollen mill in 1872 and extended upstream to include a dyeworks to form Ruskin's 'First achievement of the St George's Company in Romantic Architecture' on July 10, 1882.

By 1921 the Holroyds had taken over as owners, followed by the Wood family, Robert Wood having come from Ga-



Old Laxey fair in 1833, brewery seen centre



Laxey Bridge, 1832

lashiels in 1947 as a weaver and designer of patterns. Externally the buildings remain substantially unaltered.

Glen Roy River's mill was rejuvenated the opposite way around. Both Robert Corlett's dyeworks and Southward's (later of Sulby fame) woollen mill buildings were downstream of the former duck pond, which served as the mill reservoir.

One of them occupied the current screen house, now hidden behind the giant silos of the 1860 purpose-built Laxey Glen Corn Mill. The former two-storey building was later heightened by Corlett's millers with architectural detailing of string courses added to match the main mill building.

A turbine was inserted and was fed from a much longer mill lead extending up the Glen Roy River. This left the reservoir redundant until it became part

of Victoria Park, now better known as Laxey Glen Gardens.

Built for owner Captain Richard Rowe of Laxey Mine by local miners, externally the three-storey, seven-bay, hip-ended mill building constructed of stone from the quarries of John James Moore, Baljean, is said to be based on the design of a Belfast linen mill.

Originally the woodwork, like that of the wheel, was painted red. Internally the machinery layout was by Robert Casement, of Lady Isabella wheel fame.

In 1900 the publication *Mercantile Manxland* described it as a 'striking and prominent feature of the lovely landscape with its background of Pen-y-Pot'. After a disastrous fire in 1921 – one of four such occurrences at a time when the horsedrawn fire engine from Douglas took hours to arrive –



Glen Flour Mills



Laxey flour mill and bridges



View of Laxey in 1795 by John 'Warwick' Smith

the original shallower building with rear extension and tall chimney was re-roofed minus chimney and reopened in 1924.

An arch between the main building and its out-offices was raised, reflecting the change of transport from horse and cart to wagon, the gap also enabling any overflowing river water to escape. Midway down the Laxey River, two tributaries also gave rise to buildings, one of which was perhaps the site of the 13th century mill.

The remaining walls of a former brewery, also with Rowe associations, form the backdrop to private garden and upstream, below the waterfall, the walls of a wheelcase, discreetly bearing the date 1906, once housed a waterwheel which operated the sawmill of Robert Corlett, who followed the Mylroie family as builder of many houses in Laxey, Bald-

rine and Garwick. John Mylroie's workshop on Glen Road is identifiable by the mask on its frontage put there as a tribute to his medical student son, who died of influenza.

Close by, and still intact, is the handsome former Upper Co slaughterhouse – once one of four in Laxey but now accommodating a Department of Infrastructure works depot. Increasingly covered in ivy, the building is in danger of becoming a victim of intentional neglect, but it contains many features of its former trade and deserves better.

The substantial stone storage building occupied by A C Swales Ltd completes this industrial corner.

This building started life as a much smaller spinning mill in the 18th century before becoming Walker & Topliss's and then Alexander's paper mill. It

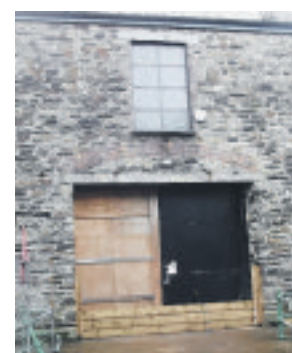
Pictures courtesy of Manx National Heritage



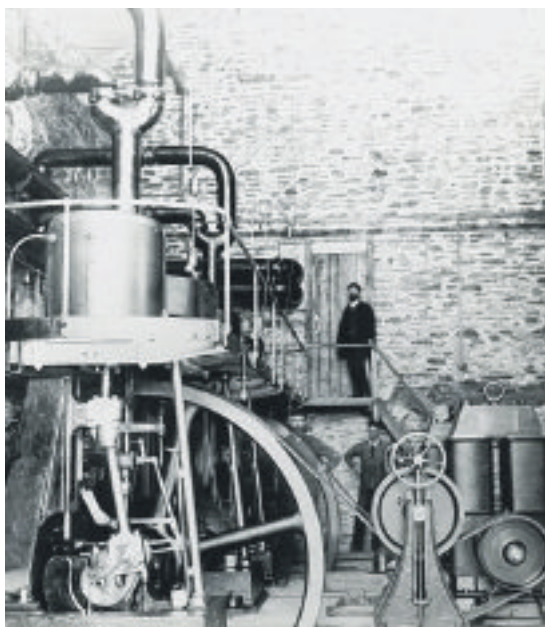
Power station



Laxey Warehouse and Williamsons premises



Swales store flood defences



Laxey power station



The slaughter house



Moughtin's Mill



Laxey Gardens



Laxey original mill pond and rear of mill

then became a dyeworks associated with St George's Mill, and next a power station with flues the height of New Road behind for the Manx Electric Railway in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Associated with a turbine generator plant downstream, with water flow carefully controlled between the two, it was later closed but not before the disastrous 1930 flood blocked its upstream sluice, leading to the MER being heavily fined for causing the resulting flooding of Glen Road.

A carpet factory followed on the site until it was burnt out in 1960, then a film studio. In the 2015 flood, its massive doors were completely ripped off by the surging water but thanks to the efforts of its owners, it is now in use again but with additional flood defences in place.

With ale being safer to drink in past centuries than water, George Dobree established the British Brewery in Lower Laxey in the 1807.

This was quickly followed by Taubmann's brewery in the building featured in an 1833 photo of Laxey fair and now still a brewery hidden behind and dominated by the 1837 Shore Hotel. Still recognisable as being of a quality vernacular industrial design, despite

its age it has survived the floods thanks to the efforts of its owners.

A hidden niche between Shore and Tent Roads once housed a veritable hive of domestic industry – a five-stall stable, a coach house, a large warehouse, a bakehouse, a slaughterhouse, a garden and premises, all belonging to James Williamson, brother of Robert of Victoria Park fame. While their uses have changed, these stone buildings survive.

The team of Rowe, Moore and the miners were also responsible for the four-storey warehouse near the harbour, which was completed on January 31, 1866, and designed so that wave action would swirl around it, not through it. It also has open-grilled windows and a door to its semi-base-



Rowe's crest

ment, and cast iron columns throughout. Supposedly originally intended as a grain store, its capacity far exceeded local needs and from the opening ball held for the construction workers and the local artillery volunteer regiment (Rowe was captain), its open top floor was used for community purposes, such as Wesleyan tea parties, Salvation Army meetings and AGMs for the Co-op Society – 400 are said to have sat down at a Co-op tea in 1871. Later acquired by Henry Bloom Noble and used as a store by the Snaefell Mining Company, and appropriately now occupied by MMD (Mining Machinery Developments) GPHC Ltd, in between it was owned by the Laxey Industrial Cooperative Society during the First World War, then in the 1920s by the Laxey Water Works company. There are still one or two of the latter's mains covers around.

Another change of use followed in 1930 after on December 6, 1929, Laxey Commissioners had minutes: 'Ques-

tions were asked regarding the lighting of the village and it was explained that Mr V A Bellamy [an electrical engineer from Baldrine] is rearranging his electrical plant and it is hoped that an improvement will be effected very shortly...' Laxey Electric Light and Power Company was formed in 1933 but receivership followed after Pulrose power station took over as main generator.

Despite competition from Peel, the large pool of female labour – over 100 were employed – attracted The Erskine Clothing Co Ltd of Bootle to Laxey in 1938 and production of overalls and nylons continued until 1963. The tobacco pipe factory Manxman Pipes followed on the site, along with at least three fires.

By this time the government had removed the traditional warehouse frontage, albeit it has since been partially reinstated.

Regretfully, there can be no guarantee that flood and fire will not affect our industrial heritage again. And if they were to do so, what guarantee is there that these buildings would be repaired to their existing state?

While no longer water-powered, the surviving industrial buildings and associated struc-

tures of Laxey record the huge importance of this source of power in the past. They exemplify not only Laxey's but the island's manufacturing heritage, but what protection do they have? None.

Some are in Laxey's Conservation Area but, as seen in the case of Old Laxey Bridge, that does not even guarantee an application for demolition, let alone provision of an appropriate replacement design, especially if government owned.

Five buildings have been suggested for registration and four commissioned reports were produced on their architecture and history for the planning division of the former Department of Local Government and the Environment. Did they float away in a flood or go down a mine shaft? Nothing has been seen or heard of them

since. Successive ministers ignore their duty to register such buildings and instead, under separate powers, put them at risk by allowing inappropriate designed development.

The stories of these buildings don't feature polished architects' names: they are classic Manx industrial vernacular structures built by Laxey people and representing design made purely for practical intent and without, save for one exception, any ornamentation.

The exception is Rowe's crest adorning Laxey Glen Corn Mills. Stemming from his upbringing in Cornwall it carries a symbol used on tin exported to the Mediterranean to indicate purity of the product. Surely this symbolism should be extended to all of these buildings and used to recognise the desirability of their conservation.