

BUILDINGS AT RISK

John Welch: Talented architect – but an outrageous character?

Frank Cowin looks at the work of Manx architects of the early 1800s, much of whose work is unrecognised, unprotected, and at risk.

One important group of buildings that are at risk at this time is that of the churches and chapels.

As congregations diminish and maintenance costs increase the degree of risk inevitably rises.

By their very nature they create an immense problem when closure is inevitable.

It therefore seemed appropriate to feature some of them in this series of articles, but rather than focus on the buildings themselves, to focus on some of the architects responsible for them.

Three men – John Welch, Thomas Brine and John Taggart – were involved with the building of what can be termed the Bishop Ward churches and they are all interesting characters in differing ways.

John Welch is the most outrageous of them through the book attributed to him: 'A Six Days Tour by a Stranger', a tour supposedly undertaken in the autumn of 1835 and published on April 1 1836, the date itself perhaps telling its own story.

The book is dedicated to Sir William Hillary, Bart. and what follows is blatant self-publicity mixed with flattery and praise for his patrons and friends, and highly critical (and amusing) comment on the works of other architects and those he disliked.

Strangely, this last group includes the very man responsible for the majority of the buildings Welch was involved with – Bishop Ward himself.

We do not know when John Welch arrived in the Isle of Man, but a lot of his work was having foundation stones laid in April 1830.

The biggest works include not just his but those of the firm in which his brother Edward was a partner, Messrs Hansom and Welch who are described as a new young firm based in Liverpool.

Joseph Aloysius Hansom is the man who developed and patented the 'Hansom Cab' – the 'black taxi cab' of the Victorian period.

He also went on to patent a system of ventilators for public buildings and to be the founding editor of the long-running magazine 'The Builder'.



Kirk Christ Lezayre - designed by John Welch

Hansom was not only partnered with Edward Welch but at varying times with E.W. Pugin (brother of the great Augustus Welby Pugin), with his brother Charles Francis Hansom (who designed Clifton College at Bristol), and later two of his sons. J.A. Hansom was working up till the time of his death in 1882.

The earliest large work of Messrs Hansom and Welch was the Town Hall in the centre of Birmingham.

This commission was won in a hurried competition in 1830 just as a number of contracts in the Isle of Man were starting. The builders for the Town Hall went bankrupt in 1834 leaving Messrs Hansom and Welch with massive financial problems.

This probably explains John also having financial problems and on occasions having property seized and sold (including his library).

It is not known if Hansom ever visited the Isle of Man, but Edward Welch seems to



Birmingham Town Hall - designed by Messrs Hansom and Welch

have done so but probably for not very long.

In early 1830 permission was given to obtain plans for the building of King William's College and Messrs Hansom and Welch were appointed architects for the project.

The foundation stone was laid on April 23 of the same year.

In 'The Six Days Tour', John Welch says of King William's College: 'The original design

was made by Messrs Hansom and Welch, architects but the execution of the work including the design of the great tower was made under the direction of John Welch.

'The great tower affords one of the finest specimens of masonry, out of rough materials, to be found in this country.'

Of St Peter's Church, Onchan, the building work for which started and finished at

roughly the same time as King William's College, he says: 'The principal, indeed the only object to look at [in Onchan] is the new church, very pleasantly situated. ... The church was built ... by Mr John Skillicorn, vulgarly called 'Johnny Sam' (the wittiest wag in the parish) under the inspection of Messrs Hansom and Welch, architects.

'A queer tale is told about a mason taking up the grave

stone of Elizabeth Hayes from the churchyard below, for one of the pediments of the spire, which rests there to this day, with the inscription 'Sacred to her memory' on it, for a puzzle to posterity.

'From the circumstance of having built every modern house in this part of the country, there would be no impropriety in handing this man's name down to posterity, with the epitaph written by Swift for the Dutch architect, Vanbrugh, tacked to it.

"Lie heavy on him, Earth for he laid many a heavy load on thee."

Other than King William's College, St Peter's and Ballaugh Church are the only works which John Welch attributes to Hansom and Welch.

Of Ballaugh, John Welch says very little, only: 'Behind the village of Ballaugh is a fine



Ballaugh 'new' church - parts variously designed by either John Welch or Messrs Hansom and Welch (photo: Peter Killey, manxscenes.com)



King William's College - designed by Messrs Hansom and Welch



St Luke's, Baldwin - designed by John Welch



St James, Dalby - built to John Welch's design?



St Peter's, Onchan - designed by Messrs Hansom and Welch (photo: Peter Killey, manxscenes.com)

glen. 'The new church was built about four years back, under the management of Messrs Hansom and Welch.'

He omits to say that the tower is a smaller version of the tower for King William's College which he rejected and used his own design as we have already seen.

The foundation stone was laid in May 1830, very much the same time as King William's College and St Peter's Onchan.

It was consecrated in Sep-

tember 1832, dedicated to St Luke; and the Rector, Hugh Stowell, wrote in the Register that the consecration had happened 'after much delay and many obstacles'.

It is said he considered it to be designed only by John Welch and was 'the best of his bad designs'.

John Mason Neale, a member of the Ecclesiastical Society who campaigned and wrote about church design, visited the island in 1848 and labelled it as '...remarkable for nothing but its ugliness', a comment

copied by many of the early tour writers.

I doubt many of the current parishioners share these views!

At Lezayre he says: 'In this parish too is a very beautiful new church, in the early English style of architecture with double lancet windows, designed and carried into execution by Messrs Welch, architects, the site of which could not be more happy or picturesque.'

The vestry entry however, as included in 'The Annals of Kirk Christ Lezayre' written by Canon R.D. Kermode MA, who served as vicar of Lezayre from 1920 until 1945, says: 'Resolved that a Committee be appointed to enter into the contract with Mr Welsh, to superintend the work and generally to arrange and manage all matters connected with the building.'

He also comments that 'Mr John Welch never learned to spell the name 'Lezayre'.

Both in his book, and on the print, it is spelled 'Lezayre'". A case of tit for tat!

Kermode also quotes a letter, dated June 2, 1830,

and signed 'Observer' which decries 'the un-necessary pulling-down of our parish churches (most of which, if they were properly repaired, are sufficiently commodious) is a very oppressive tax upon the parishioners ...'

Kermode then commented: 'It had been much better if the Bishop and his supporters had paid more heed to 'Observer's' advice.'

'Within four years St Stephen's Church was built in Sulby in the west of the parish and in 1862 St Olave's in the east. The rural population was decreasing rapidly, and so we are left with a huge church in the most thinly populated district.'

'The seating accommodation is sufficient to give two seats to every man, woman and child in the district.'

This is the problem that the church authorities are still endeavouring to resolve today!

Although considerably altered since, St Stephen's Church at Sulby was built almost identical to a design by John Welch for St Luke's Baldwin, as was St James Dalby, but neither was started

until after John Welch had published his book and disappeared from local record.

Of St Luke's Baldwin, all that John Welch says is: 'Looking down from below the new church of St Luke towards Douglas, the scene is really bewitching ...'

Canon John Gelling in his book 'A History of the Manx Church 1698-1911' tells us: 'Bishop Ward was deeply perturbed that there was no Anglican place of worship in the Baldwin valleys, then part of the parish of Braddan.'

'He had obtained nearly £1,000 from the Government for building schoolrooms, and it was his own idea to annex a chapel with sliding doors.'

'On 17th November 1834 he visited Baldwin with his son and daughter to choose a site, and with the help of the local people, the building was completed in less than 18 months.'

The new building was divided internally into three parts using timber sliding screens, each part having its own separate entrance, giving two classrooms and, nearest the road, the chapel.

On Wednesday, May 14 1836, the chapel at the east-end was consecrated (the schoolroom part was not con-

secrated).

St James, Dalby, differs as a result of the steeply sloping site allowing the construction below one end of a habitation for the school master.

This has recently been altered to provide an excellent small display area telling the story of the surrounding community and a space for walkers to rest and refresh themselves, and even to spend a night before continuing their journey.

John Welch was not very complementary about the Dalby area, saying: '... which on account of its total seclusion from all society may be denominated "the fag end of a God-forgotten-world".'

'The uncontaminated Manx breed of men and cats, may be found here in all purity.'

We might wonder if this helps to explain why he does not appear to have a good word for Bishop Ward, despite carrying out so much church work and his glowing references to so many other people.

Has he heard that the good Bishop is going to use the plans he has for St Luke's for other places and perhaps not pay a further fee!

To be continued ...



Hansom Cab - designed and patented by Joseph Aloysius Hansom