

BUILDINGS AT RISK

The men of Queen Street who made the ultimate sacrifice

The Buildings at Risk series of articles is looking not only at endangered structures but also at the heritage and stories connected with the island's surviving period buildings. In this week's article, Susan Temple, of Castletown Heritage Trust, looks at how the destiny of a community from a single Castletown street was forged by the events of the First World War.

One hundred years ago, those Manxmen still alive who had been fighting or otherwise contributing to the struggle in the Great War were being demobbed and returning to their homes and their communities in the island.

Those communities sustained not only memories of those who were away at war, but also the families left behind.

In September 1916, the *Manx Herald* published an article headed 'A Patriotic Street', recording the hanging of the 'Queen Street Roll of Honour' in the Queen Street Mission Hall in Castletown.

The scroll commemorated the 44 men who had joined the armed forces up to that date.

A year later, the total was reported as having risen to 54, of whom 33 were in the Army, 12 in the Navy, three were Prisoners of War, two had been discharged, and four were dead.

By the end of the war, 64 men had joined the armed forces and, in addition, there were several who had joined the Merchant Navy. Seven of the men had died during the conflict. All these men came from a street of only 39 'habitable' houses.

Queen Street in Castletown is about 300 yards long. It extends from Castletown Square to the last houses in the street before becoming the road to Scarlett.

It is made up of houses built of dressed stone, most probably from the quarry at Scarlett, with a small mission chapel (now bandroom) on the seaward side about half-way down.

At the top of the road is the Thomas Brine-designed Church of St Mary's, built in 1826 for the people of Castletown and for the British troops garrisoned there who formerly worshipped at the Parish Church of Malew.

The houses at the top end of the street, where it joins the Square, were larger than those at the bottom; several of the houses on the landward side at the top of the street were demolished in the 1950s to widen the road, which then became the beginning of the Castletown bypass (Farrant's Way).

Queen Street itself was and still is, a very narrow road.



Queen Street Mission Hall at the heart of the street and the community, where the Roll of Honour was originally displayed - an example of a building that was at risk through loss of original purpose but has been saved, cherished and sympathetically extended by a community group who have given it a new life as the bandroom for the Castletown Metropolitan Silver Band (photo: Richard Hoare cc-by-sa/2.0)

It is a dead-end which only leads to Scarlett Quarry and three farms. It must have been little more than a lane beside thesea and was not an adopted road until after the war.

The farms and the quarry would have provided work for the men in the street, and in the 1911 Census, several men are recorded as farm labourers or stone masons.

The stables for the George Hotel were behind the buildings on the Square, but apart from that, there was just farmland. Many of the houses built in the early 19th century are small cottages of between two and four rooms.

Some of them have been joined together to make larger houses in recent times, but at the time of the Great War there were still some one-room houses in the street.

They were inhabited by working people who were essential for the smooth running of the larger houses and the town as a whole. The 1911 Census shows that many of the houses in Queen Street were in multiple occupancy.

At the rear of the landward side of the street was a huge area of allotments, which disappeared in the 1960s when the land was sold for building.

Castletown at the time of



The Queen Street, Castletown, roll of honour with its colourful patriotic heading and a close-up of the names on it

the First World War had a total population of 1,800 people, of whom 800 were male (including male children and older men).

Of this total, 77 men (and one woman, a nurse) died in the conflict, making a total of more than 10% of the adult male population.

This was a devastating total for such a small town out of a total number of deaths on the island of 1,261 - about 5% of the male population.

The original idea for the creation of a Roll of Honour for Queen Street came from

the Reverend G A Bayley, Rector of Clonmore, Ireland, and temporary chaplain at St Mary's, who, it was reported, 'during his sojourn in Castletown, has won the esteem and goodwill of all those with whom he came into contact'. An offer to meet the cost was made by a 'Castletown Gentleman who wishes to remain Anonymous', and the names of the men were beautifully inscribed by Mr R W Moore of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Bank, Castletown.

It was encased in a heavy oak frame under the head-

ing "For King and Country"/ Roll of Honour/Queen Street/ Castletown/Isle of Man'.

The unveiling took place at an 'impressive ceremony' at the Castletown Mission Hall in the presence of Colonel Moore HK, High Bailiff, and Mrs J S Gell (who performed the ceremony) and Mr and Mrs H E Gelling.

It was also the Farewell Service for Reverend Bayley.

After the singing of a special hymn, composed by Mr W H Gill, the first verse of which ends 'Our soldiers bless on land and sea, come death, de-

feat or victory', a salute was sounded by the drums and bugles of the Church Lads' Brigade.

The names of the men are in three columns, listed alphabetically, with two additional names added at the end. Eight names are underlined, indicating those that fell. The roll was subsequently held for many years at the Royal British Legion Hall at Janet's Corner.

It is now in the Manx Aviation and Military Museum at Ronaldsway.

The men from Queen Street went mostly into the Army, initially serving in the Manx Volunteers, itself part of the Cheshire Regiment, via the King's (Liverpool Regiment). In May 1915, they were largely transferred into the regiments of the North West - the Manchester, Cheshire and Liverpool Regiments. Their role was to fill the gaps already existing in the ranks.

Of the eight men who died and whose names are recorded on the Roll of Honour, these details are known:-

Private Robert Charles Christian (31 Queen Street), age 21, killed in France 12.10.1916, no known grave. 20th Battalion, King's (Liverpool Regiment).

Corporal Thomas Francis Hodson (48 Queen Street), age 32, died 18.10.1918, buried in Kirkee New Cemetery, Poona, India. 8th Battalion Cheshire Regiment.

Leading Seaman George Lace, RNR (Queen Street), age 36, died 19.4.1917, buried in England. Served on SS Star of Freedom. He had four children.

Private Robert Ernest Quine (45 Queen Street), age 42, killed 26.3.1918, buried in France, 733 Company, Labour Corps attached to Ordnance Gun Park No.5.

Private John Smith (17 Queen Street), age 38, killed 9.7.1916 in France, one of two men of same name killed that day. Worked for Mr J T Watterson, Scarlett Farm. No known grave. He had five children. 11th Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers.

John Henry Taubman (23 Queen Street), age 29, killed 4.11.1918, buried in France. 9th Battalion Cheshire Regiment.

George Kelly is proving elu-



Private Robert Charles Christian, of 31 Queen Street, who served in the 20th Battalion King's (Liverpool) Regiment and died in France, aged 21, in October 1916. There is no known grave (Pic: MNH)



Thomas Henry McGratten, of 22 Queen Street, died in the Atlantic at the age of 31, following the torpedoing and subsequent sinking of the SS Belgian Prince and her crew by the German submarine UB-55 on July 31, 1917 (Pic: MNH)



Private John Smith, of 17 Queen Street, who died in France in July 1916 while serving in the 11th Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers. He has no known grave and left five children (Pic: MNH)



John Henry Taubman, of 23 Queen Street, who died in France at the age of 29, and in the very last November days of the war, while serving in the 9th Battalion Cheshire Regiment (Pic: MNH)



Corporal Francis Thomas Hodson of 48 Queen Street died serving in the 8th Battalion Cheshire Regiment at the age of 32 in October 1918, near the very end of the First World War, and is buried in India (Pic: MNH)



A Victorian map of Queen street in Castletown as it was in the 19th and early 20th centuries

sive. A George Kelly lived at 47 Queen Street, joined the Isle of Man Volunteer Corps aged 17, then transferred to the 16th Battalion Kings (Liverpool) Regiment in May 1915.

He served in Salonika and France and was wounded and gassed in November 1917 but there is no record of his death at this time.

However, George Hedley Kelly, of 4 The Parade (now demolished), lived in the corner house of Queen Street and the Square. He enlisted in the Isle of Man Volunteers, transferred to the 1st Battalion the Manchester Regiment in Mesopotamia, was wounded and was taken prisoner by the Turks on March 2, 1916.

Sadly, treatment of British prisoners was poor and he died in July 1916, aged 19. It took over a year for word of his death to reach his family.

Thomas Henry McGratten (22 Queen Street) died aged 31, following the sinking of the SS Belgian Prince after being torpedoed by German Submarine UB-55.

UB-55 was commanded by Kapitänleutnant Wilhelm Werner. Since commissioning in August 1916, this U-boat had been responsible for the sinking of 64 ships, including the hospital ship Rewa; the damaging of five others, including the Guildford Castle, a hospital ship with 450 patients on board; and the taking of two Swedish ships as prizes. Hospital ships had Red Cross emblems and sailed fully il-



George Hedley Kelly, who, aged 17, served in the Isle of Man Volunteer Corps, then the 1st Manchester Regiment and died, aged 19, a prisoner of war of the Turkish army in July 1916 (Pic: MNH)



Leading Seaman George Lace, of the Royal Naval Reserves, who served on the SS Star of Freedom and died in April 1917, leaving four children in the island (Pic: MNH)



Private Robert Ernest Quine, who served in 733 Company, Labour Corps attached to Ordnance Gun Park No.5, and died in France at the age of 42 in March 1916 (Pic: MNH)

luminated. The best-known ship Werner sank was the Carpathia, which had steamed towards the sinking Titanic and rescued most of the survivors back in April 1912.

In the case of the SS Belgian Prince in which Thomas Henry McGratten sailed, it did not sink immediately. After Werner had ordered the 43 survivors from the ship on to the casing of the U-boat, the stricken ship's Master, Henry Hassan, was taken below and never heard of again. The crew of the submarine removed the lifebelts from the crew of the Belgian Prince, then smashed up the ship's lifeboats. UB-55 then submerged, drowning 39 men.

Three survivors were

picked up 11 hours later by a British vessel. Sadly, Thomas Henry McGratten of Castletown was not one of them. Three months before, Werner had behaved identically to the crew of the SS Torrington – however, in that instance the captain had survived to be sent to a POW camp in Germany.

In the aftermath of the attack on the SS Belgian Prince, Thomas Henry McGratten's body was washed up two months later on Scotland's Ardnamurchan Peninsular in Argyll. He was identified by his Seamans' Continuous Certificate of Discharge, which was still in his clothes.

Later Wilhelm Werner was charged with war crimes, but

escaped to Brazil, only to return to Germany in 1925 and join the Nazi Party, where he became a member of Himmler's staff.

He died in 1945, unpunished. UB-55, meanwhile, had surrendered to the Japanese in 1918 and become part of the Japanese Navy.

Most of the men from Queen Street who died in the First World War were married, and several had children – James Smith, for example, had five, of which the youngest was under two years old. It was not until August 1919 that war pensions became a statutory right – be-

fore that they had been given as an 'act of grace'.

The mathematics regarding the amount paid was complicated.

A widow was entitled to a pension of 20 shillings per week, or 26 shillings and eight pence if she was over 40 or unable to work. Widows also received an allowance for each child under 16 of 10 shillings per week for the first child, seven shillings and sixpence for the second child and six shillings for each subsequent child. She may also have received a gratuity of £5 on the death of her husband, and £1 for each child. The pension ceased on her remarriage. If a child also became motherless, they would receive 12 shillings

a week. Illegitimate children received eight shillings per week. Those whose wartime travels had taken them off-island had seen much – for some this meant better times, but for many, far more difficult and harrowing times.

They were no doubt sustained by knowledge that their loved ones were safe in their local community, and by memories of events in that community.

While some of the houses the survivors returned to were small and crowded, they represented continuity and roots for that community. Some of those buildings in Queen Street remain, and continue to carry the community's story with them.