

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# The Butt was the historical heart of Onchan village

Our Buildings at Risk series looks at how the island's built heritage has evolved from, and to meet the needs of, the community. In this edition Keren Corkill, of the Friends of Onchan's Heritage, looks at The Butt – an area at the heart of Onchan village now bypassed by many, how the church there has changed, and the remarkable survival of a pair of charcoal sketches.

**O**nchan is one of the original 17 ancient parishes of the Isle of Man.

During pre-Christian times, the divisions of land for cultivation were known as treens, usually along natural borders and within family groups.

It is said that these areas would have been of 200 to 600 acres. It is within these treens that keeills (small churches) were to become the first religious meeting places with a priest in attendance.

From the fifth century, Ballakilmartin and Sulby Farm were sites of early keeills.

With the settlement of Vikings and their integration with the indigenous Christian people, sheadings were created as administrative areas.

It is suggested that the name sheading relates to the number of oarsmen needed for a warship.

In the ancient Parish of Onchan it is interesting to note that of the nine treens, eight have Norse names e.g. Slekaby, Begod, Bibaylo, Hawstrake, etc.

It is likely that the small church, which preceded St Peter's, was built on the site of an ancient keeill.

A wonderful display of carved stone crosses now inside St Peter's Church is evidence of an early settlement.

Viking runes are inscribed onto one of the crosses, and three of the crosses incorporate carved heads of what appear to be dogs with long tongues which wind around their paws. Onchan District Commissioners use this emblem on the Coat of Arms and it is also incorporated on Onchan School's badge.

Elsa Bridson has made a study of these and the area of The Butt along with artwork, and it had been suggested that they symbolise an Irish Saint Conchan, apparently the Gaelic name for St Christopher (JJ Kneen) or a later suggestion by Mr Megaw, former director of the museum, that the name is more likely to come from a ruling family of the fifth or sixth century, or Connaghyn named as an early bishop.

Whatever we conjecture from this information the manorial roll of 1511 shows the Parish, written in Latin, as Parochia Sti Conchani.



Old St Conchan's church, as portrayed in a stained glass window in St Peter's

Very little is known of the first parish church which stood in the graveyard north of the west door of the current St Peter's Church.

It was 56ft long and 15ft wide. It had a bell tower against the belfry and an outside staircase to a gallery.

In 1769 an unfortunate parishioner Ann Clague had tugged the bell with such force it dislodged and fell to the ground, breaking the tiller and two pieces were knocked off the edge.

She was summoned to the Ecclesiastical Court but escaped punishment as it appears she didn't turn up.

It was the church in which Captain William Bligh RN married Elizabeth Betham in 1781.

Her father was the customs officer, who lived at The Hague on Summerhill Road.

Inscribed on a copper collection box are the words 'Ye Parish Church of Kirk Conaghyn' (although in Place Names of the Isle of Man, JJ Kneen refers to the church as St Catherine's).

The wall which bends round from the dip would have continued on to encircle the keeill and then the old parish church.

Embedded in the wall is a large stone which was probably used to tether the vicar's horse, as there are two holes at the top on either side which would have secured the reins.

It may originally have been part of a circle of standing stones from ancient times. This stone is also often referred to as the whipping post.

At the back of St Peter's Church a wooden plaque displays the names of known vicars, the first in 1408, so it



Site of St Conchan's church on The Butt (map: Manx Heritage Foundation, drawn by Vic Bates)

is credible to think that this early church was built around that date.

Where the wall bends, down near the Jubilee lamp, the gateway of the church can be detected. The bell tower it-

self can be found in the garden wall of St Catherine's House on St Catherine's Terrace.

Elaine Moore is writing biographies of the vicars of the Onchan churches, of which several are complete.

These give an excellent insight into the lives and ministries of the vicars of Onchan with information about the times in which they had lived; copies are available within the Church and Harvey Briggs library.

**A**nd so it was that a small community evolved, nestled between two inclines from the Howstrake – old Norse for high track – at the east descending to a sheltered dip next to a water source and a slope up towards the west.

Signposted Church Road, it is often referred to as The Butt. Reasons for this are shadowy but most likely a Butt was used to describe a strip of land on which the plough turns at the end of a field and in Ireland, Scotland and Northern England it indicated a boundary... abutting a lane or road.

The manorial roll of 1643 and the parish register 1681 describes the small hamlet as Kiondroghad, Manx for Bridge End. The possible reason being that a small causeway (cassa in gaelic) of rushes across the dip allowed people to cross the stream, which had flowed from the dam near what is now Lakeside.

It would have been wet and marshy underfoot and provided a drier crossing place for the parishioners on the way to the church which they were expected to attend. The large pond provided water to turn the wheel of the mill in the then meadows in what is now Royal Avenue; a house named 'Mill Brook' is built on the site.

Between 1681 and 1799 at irregular intervals just six families appear in the church registers, those of Christian, Kelly, Crow, Lewin, Skillicorn and Cowin and all of these surnames are familiar in Onchan to this day.

In 1771 the small parish church having no room for a growing population and in a dilapidated state, a new church was proposed. The population of Onchan in 1726 was 370, by 1784 it was 560, and continued to rise so that by 1831 it was 1,482.

However, it wasn't until 1829 that it was decided to build the replacement church. It is worth noting that at this time what little education was



The Cockerel from the story of St Peter, as sketched on the church wall by EH Corbould RI



St Peter's keys, as sketched in charcoal on the church wall by Rev John Howard



The artist tells of the remarkable preservation of his cockerel sketch



Kirk Conchan cross, as drawn by Maureen Costain-Richards

offered took place within the church. Bishop Wilson had been the power behind the Education Act 1704 which was meant to provide 'education for all' mainly for 'religious learning and good manners'. It was a long time coming. Finally, in 1730 William Christian was licensed to teach and a schoolroom was found in the village.

St Peter's Church was originally planned to be built next to the marshy land known as the Glebe, but objections were made after the foundation stone was laid.

Mr Banks of Balnahow Farm offered land which had a higher aspect and on being accepted the Bishop returned to re-lay the foundation stone albeit without the chorus of children or the £1 already given to buy a treat for 'their sweet voices in song and praise'.

The church was designed by architect John Welch and constructed by John Sam Skillicorn. Its design echoed those of other churches e.g. Lezayre, Kirk Michael and Lonan with similar pointed pinnacles. It took three years to build. Its walls were of Manx slate and when the spire was finally put in place it would have been an amazing sight to the people of Kirk Conchan and dominated the little cluster of dwellings in its immediate vicinity.

Bishop Ward and the Rev Edward Craine led the service of dedication to St Peter on December 5, 1833. Constant



St Peter's Church

(photo: Peter Killey, manxscenes.com)

refurbishing and repair have taken place since 1863.

In 1866, whilst Edward Corbould R.I. – who was art tutor to Queen Victoria's children – was staying at the vicarage, he executed a drawing of a cockerel in charcoal on a wall inside the church. Similarly, his host Rev John Howard had drawn a sketch of the crossed keys, both symbols of St Peter.

It is wonderful to see that in spite of re-decoration over the years they have been left untouched. It is worth noting that St Peter's was the first church to be connected to the electricity supply of the Isle of

Man Tramways and Electric Power Company.

A century later in 1933 money was raised from all quarters of the community for the 'adornment' of the church.

Mr JD Kelly of Kelly Bros of Kirk Michael undertook the carving, in oak, of the choir screen, taken from an earlier design. The skilful craftsmanship is admired to this day.

To complete the refurbishment, walls were re-plastered, old wood re-stained, wall hangings and carpets renewed and the organ tuned and decorated. Constant repairs and refurbishments have contin-

ued. In 1970 modern designs by Mr Wilfred Quayle replaced the 12 corroded windows of 1933. With plain backgrounds, the subjects and scenes are designed and coloured in complimentary contrast to the biblical stained glass of the older windows.

More recently the old pews have been replaced by chairs to make the church seating more flexible and accessible for groups to meet there; a controversial change and not without some dissatisfaction at removing such an historic part of the church.

To be continued...



Monolith, once used as a tethering post, and sometimes known as the 'whipping post'