

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Did island miss a trick with closure of marine station?

Our Buildings at Risk series looks at the island's built heritage and the role it played then, and now, in the community. In this edition, James Maddrell looks at the various buildings used for the Marine Biological Station and their impact on Port Erin and further afield.

In 2006 an interesting and important part of Manx life came to an end after 114 years of marine research, with the closure of the Marine Biological Station in Port Erin – a station that not only played a role in the community and island life, but has made significant contributions on the world stage.

This includes the work of Professor Richard Thompson (now Professor of Marine Biology at Plymouth University) who, during his PhD research at Port Erin, first spotted the problems of micro-plastics entering the seas and the marine food chain.

The Liverpool Marine Biological Committee (L.M.B.C.), a group of marine and fisheries researchers, first established an offshore field base in 1887 on Puffin Island (Priestholm) off the eastern tip of Anglesey. Within four years though, L.M.B.C had outgrown the wooden ex-semaphore hut they used, and were frustrated by accommodation on, and access to, the tiny 70acre islet.

L.M.B.C, chaired by Professor William Herdman, then determined to find a location suitable for a long-term research station. It was not by accident the Isle of Man was chosen, as William Herdman and his fellow committee members had been to the island and found the marine life most interesting.

They considered establishing a station with good transport links and with a hotel or lodging close by to be of 'more use to students and investiga-



The 1902 Marine Biological Lab falls victim to fire (Ballahane collection)

tors generally'.

The Liverpool committee made contact with the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society through the secretary P.M.C. Kermode, himself a keen marine biolo-

gist (who even has marine gastropod *Nassa Kermodei* named after him!).

The Society was enthusiastic and had the foresight to realise that the Liverpool Marine Biological Committee could be of great benefit to the island.

After deciding on the south of the island as base, William Herdman and Isaac Thompson visited in March 1892 to find a suitable location.

They concluded an agreement with Mr Thomas Clague of Rowany, who owned the Bellevue hotel (later known as the Port Erin Royal hotel and demolished in 2017). Mr Clague obviously saw a business opportunity and agreed to build the new three-roomed biological station which the committee would lease.

Students and committee members would be given a fixed tariff at the hotel.

The speed it was constructed is remarkable – the build-

ing was started on April 20 and was ready by June 4.

Sited on what is now known as Mortuary Beach, it was built of the usual Manx slate stone and described as a substantially built three roomed house 30 feet by 20 feet.

There were two small rooms for use as a director's room and library, and the secretary's office was convertible into a dark room. As you would expect the main bulk of the space was taken by the laboratory 22 feet by 20 feet.

In a small yard between the cliff and the building there was a concrete fresh water cistern for supplying the laboratory sink. There was also a small aquarium nearby built in 1893.

The opening of the laboratory was on June 4 1892 and the list of invitees reads as a who's who of the island at the time, such as Spencer Walpole



The first dedicated Marine Biological Lab of 1892 (Ballahane collection)

(Governor), Dr Straton (Bishop), A.W. Moore H.K., P.M.C. Kermode (Antiquarians), Rev F.B. Walters (principal of King William's College) and – I quote - 'and a number of ladies'. Following the opening

a sumptuous luncheon was provided by Mr Clague at the Bellevue.

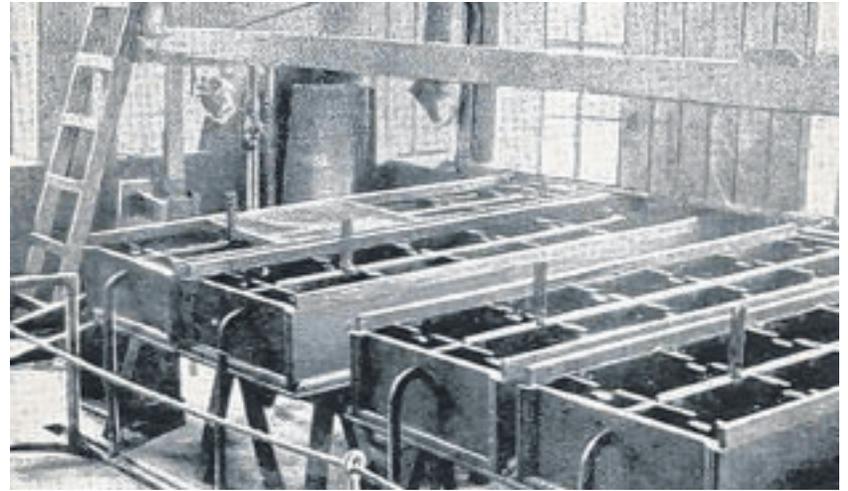
This first 1892 building served well, albeit a little cramped, until the new Marine Laboratory was built on



The 1892 Marine Biological Lab after destruction by fire (Ballahane collection)



**Demolition of the 1963 'white fish' extension in 2006, with spawning ponds visible between the building and cliffs (photo: Culture Vannin)**



**Hatching tanks**

its current site in 1902; the 1892 building later became St Columba's Catholic chapel mainly for holiday makers in the summer months only.

After the church relocated it was used as a mortuary – hence the name Mortuary Beach.

The building eventually stopped being a mortuary and lay empty until sadly a fire claimed the first marine biological station. Is there a recurring theme here for old buildings in the island?

In 1901 Tynwald agreed the sum of £2,000 for a new marine biological station as a joint partnership between the L.M.B.C and the government.

The overall site was to be controlled by L.M.B.C. However an integral fish hatchery was managed by the government. The government were concerned with the thriving herring industry at the time and Herdman's idea of cultivation obviously appealed.

For his part Herdman was concerned even then of dwindling fish stocks and had quite a good success rate with producing plaice.

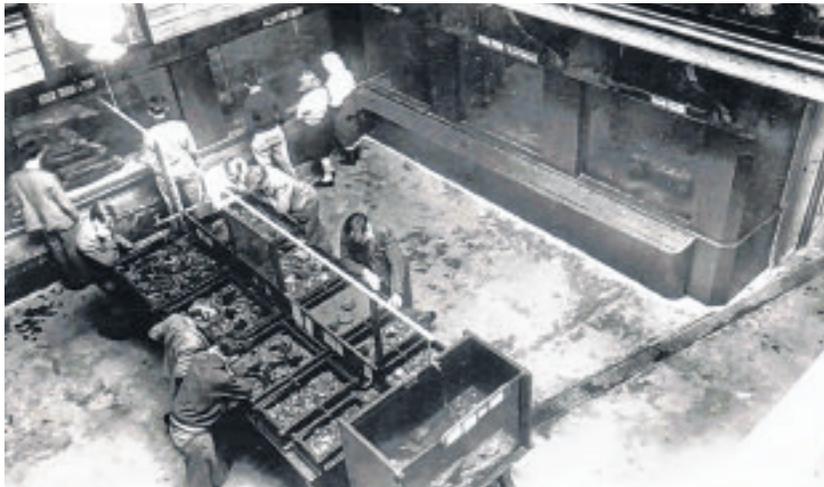
The joint station, built on the opposite side of the bay to the 1892 station, boasted a large spawning pond for the purposes of aquaculture at the western end of the building.

The pond was excavated from the rock measuring 90 feet in length nearly 50 feet in breadth. It varied from 3 to 10 feet in depth and held around 130,000 gallons of sea water.

The core 1902 building was constructed out of Manx 'slate' stone, probably quarried on site to make the pond and the building at the same time.

The building is 100 feet in length and 40 feet in breadth, with attractive red brick lintels above windows and doorways and one circular window in the centre of the building.

The stone is dressed well and in better form than many Manx built random rubble constructed buildings. The layout of the station consisted of a central public aquarium



**The teaching/public aquarium**

with a museum in the gallery above.

Flanked by a sea fish hatchery on the west and an eastern wing for the use of the university students, it contained laboratories, library and a dark room; this was the first wing to be extended in 1910 to enhance the research facilities.

At the rear of the hatchery were two large storage tanks which held water, pumped from the sea in a 4ins pipe 10 feet below the level of the road, for the hatchery and the aquarium.

Responsibility for the biological station was taken over by Liverpool University in 1919, under the Department

of Oceanography. The laboratory was given UK grants in 1912 and 1922 which helped with re-equipping of the facility. Under the Liverpool University / Manx Government partnership, the building was extended many times during its use as a laboratory.

**D**uring the mid-20th century, the British White Fish Authority was experimenting, unsuccessfully, with large scale plaice rearing in Lowestoft. As Herdman had previously proved that it was possible many years earlier at Port Erin, in 1963 the island

was chosen to try and improve the situation.

Known as the west wing, a new building and more ponds were erected. This building had temperature-controlled rooms which had various uses after the plaice rearing proved successful but not economically viable. This building was steel framed and clad in steel and asbestos sheeting and not particularly pleasing to the eye; it and the tanks were demolished in 2006.

The next big extension to the laboratory happened in 1966 and cost £45,000. The first extension built in 1910 was replaced by one which included research rooms, of-

fices, a laboratory workshop, wet fish room, dark room and five controlled temperature rooms.

The building was described by the Governor of the day Sir Ronald Garvey as 'designed to blend in with the old' which for the 1960s is fairly unusual. He also mentioned that the station contributed to the Manx tourism industry by providing the aquarium and 'I trust the university will never contemplate discontinuing this interesting though possibly unprofitable display'. Sadly it did shut in the 1980s.

The final extension was built by Parkinsons Limited and opened on April 15 1980 by Governor Sir John Paul. As with the 1963 white fish extension the building is functional in appearance but built out of brick as opposed to steel.

The ground floor was broken down into engineering workshop, diving technician, decompression chamber, diving unit and a drying cupboard. The first floor had a laboratory, toilets, and a preparation room. The second floor was devoted to the library. This was the final development for the station.

The bean counters finally caused the station to be shut in October 2006, it has to be said that with the biosphere status now given to the island we possibly missed a trick in not continuing with this facility.

In 2009 the Department for Local Government and

Environment commissioned a report into a conservation area for Port Erin by AOC Archaeology and Costain Heritage. Sadly most if not all of it has been ignored by the apathy of the local authority and government. Port Erin had some interesting built heritage which has now gone or are going naturally; the 1902 part of the Marine Biological Station was included in the conservation area.

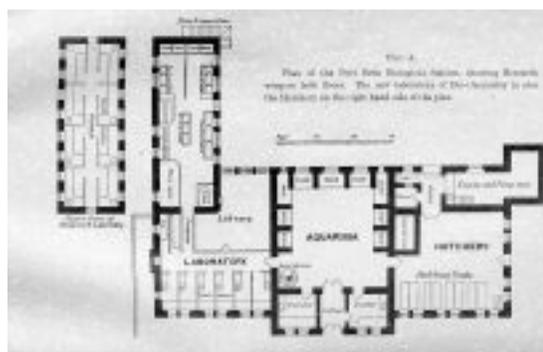
**S**o what of the future for this historic site? Well it looks pretty bleak for the current buildings.

No one could argue that the 1966 or 1980 extensions are visually appealing. However the 1902 part of the building is worthy of incorporating into a new build. This building would give the proposed restaurant and exhibition centre part of the development historic context.

What Port Erin is now not short of is overpowering unimaginative white boxes with balconies on the front. Port Erin has the chance to do something different to Milton Keynes. One very imaginative use for old industrial buildings is the Peppers silo hotel in Launceston in Tasmania. Launceston as a community decided they did not want the old grain silos demolishing and so they were incorporated into a new development. If there is a will there is a way. Sadly I fear the imagination is not there and this problem does seem to be island-wide.

The problem with Port Erin sweeping away her past is there will be no way to tell how Port Erin was and how it developed into what it is today.

Yes, there will be photographs and records but from personal experience of doing research for this little article for the Alliance for Building Conservation, it is amazing how little is remembered in detail and passed on and how hard it is to track down the past.



**Plan with the 1910 extension added**



**The station c. 1910**