

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Rustic cottages: A look at the archives about rural builders

In this latest article for the Isle of Man Examiner's Buildings at Risk series, Sarah Christian - who works for Manx National Heritage but represents Ballaugh Heritage Trust and is also secretary of The Isle of Man Family History Society - takes a look at both the rustic cottages around the island that families built for themselves out of local materials, and also what the archives tell us about the jobbing builders who not only constructed and repaired rural buildings but also undertook a huge variety of other repair and maintenance tasks for farming families.

Just a glance at the built environment around the island has much to tell us about the social history of the Isle of Man.

For me, it's always about the people connected with a building and much less about the pure architecture.

There are always reasons why a building was constructed in a certain way and great pleasure can be gained pondering the different reasons.

Manx so-called vernacular architecture has much to do with the pragmatic elements, such as the available materials and budget of the builder.

On the marriage of a son, a farmer may have gathered friends and neighbours together to construct a dwelling from the materials close to hand.

Wonderful research by Sue Cannell in her book 'Rural Architecture in the North of the Isle of Man' backs this up.

She says 'Both a man and his wife took part in the construction of the dwelling.

'If the man was away fishing, his wife probably made the decision as to the materials used in the construction of a building, possibly opting for the most accessible and therefore the quickest.'

The famous picture of Mary Gilrea outside her cottage sums this up for me.



James Brew outside an outbuilding he constructed next to his self-built home Kafue Cottage, named after a river in South Africa that he knew from his time building railways there. (Picture courtesy of MNH iMuseum)

tage sums this up for me.

Mary lived in this cottage at Nappin Mooar with her first husband, James Brew,

who was a cooper making wooden barrels to earn his living.

Jurby has very few trees,

so this trade is a little surprising. After James's death, Mary married William Gillray in 1875 - don't worry about the spellings of the names, they are different on every document I find them in!

Sadly, William left Mary a widow once more in 1890.

One might imagine such a cottage being an unhealthy environment to live in, and Mary did lose the two children born to her, according to the 1911 census.

But the old lady herself lived at Nappin Mooar cottage well into her seventies before boarding with Miss Ann Brew at Ballagarraghyn.

She passed away in 1911, aged 94, 'a fine specimen of Manx longevity' it said in the local paper.

She had worked as a servant for the Farrant family at the Ballamoar estate - it must have felt odd to work in a grand house and then return in the evening to her

own smoky rustic dwelling.

But what of the island's professional builders? Although many country people were able to construct their own cheap and simple cottages, many men earned their living in the building trade, and in the archives at the Manx Museum I have come across little-accessed records kept by some of these skilled tradesmen.

I talked earlier of a member of the Brew family marrying Mary Gilrea, and one workman's record was kept by a joiner, wheelwright and millwright of Sulby called Thomas Brew.

The scruffy, pocket-sized, coverless book of 76 pages charts his work activity between 1868 and 1870.

It would have acted as a timesheet to help his keep track of work done for billing his customers.

He records not only the

time he spends on jobs but also work done by a lad called Daniel Lowey who worked with him.

The breadth of work Thomas carries out is quite incredible - certainly no two days would be the same.

Although there is no record of him building a whole house, Tom would carry out roofing works, and make and fit doors, windows and gates.

House repairs were a frequent task but he would also repair household furniture.

Tom made a range of items from scratch, including carts and cartwheels.

The farmers he worked for were in need of repairs to all kinds of equipment, ranging from technical gear such as threshing mills to fitting new handles on hammers, sickles and scythes.

Tom also made ladders, wheelbarrows, pig troughs and sheep-dipping enclosures.

There is a definite impression that customers would save up a load of jobs and then ask him to call.

He may well have stayed overnight on some farms as he worked through the list of items to construct and gear to repair.

His patch was mainly Lezayre and he was paid mainly in cash but sometime in potatoes or barley.

Country joiners would often be asked to make coffins for the dead and in his little book he notes not just who paid for the job, but who took their final journey in it.

If you would like to look at this document, please quote the reference to the staff in the MNH Reading Room (reference MS 05165).

Three similar books for a John Christian of Sulby are at reference MS 00248, covering work from 1849-1888.

A later record was also kept by a joiner, wheelwright and millwright of Sulby (MS 0248C) but dated from 1914, so I think he is a generation on.

This John travelled further afield, and he seems to have had some connection with the Skinner family at Crosby, as he worked there regularly.

Like Tom Brew, he must have set aside time for cutting and finishing timber



Kafue Cottage is on the road from Sulby Bridge heading to St Jude's



The exterior of James Brew's brick-built Kafue Cottage as it is today

and he also worked on farm machinery like harrows and binders, plus cartwheels.

It seems he did a bit of papering and painting and lent his lad out for agricultural jobs like docking turnips and setting potatoes when the need arose.

These books act as a lovely source for family historians, as listed are the farm names worked at and the names of the employer.

John worked for the church and school too.

Another joiner bearing the name Brew and from Sulby was James Brew, likely the son of Tom.

James was a brother to J.T. Brew of Kella Mill in Sulby, which seems appropriate for a millwright.

As a young fella, he travelled to South Africa, working as a carpenter on the Cape to Bulawayo railway.

When he returned to the island, he took on a croft with three acres, reared stock and carried on a trade as a wheel-

wright and joiner – he had been trained by his father.

James was 79 when he died in 1957 and an obituary read as follows: 'He was a fine type of Manx Craftsman and one of the few remaining in the island who worked as a mill-wright and wheel-wright... He always retained his love of farming and had a very keen interest in Manx affairs.'

'His bearded figure was familiar on field and road in the district and only a few days before he was taken ill just recently, he was engaged in carting peat from the curraghs in readiness for the winter.'

'He named his home – Kafue Cottage – after the Kafue River in South Africa.'

James contributed to The Folk Life Survey in 1949, which was an exercise carried out by Manx Museum staff intended to capture the memories of a generation of old Manx people.

Miss Killip visited him

and collected his reminiscences, and James showed her the saws he used.

She listed them as follows: 'The Rip Saw for cutting on the length and with the grain, for a long cut-fine and coarse teeth on the same saw – to rip the wood once the first cut was made.'

'The Cross Saw – for a short cut and cross the grain – shorter than the rip-saw.'

'The Panel Saw – for cutting a circular piece of wood – a very fine blade.'

'The Pit Saw – Long saw, four feet or so long, for cutting wood in the saw pit.'

'A long metal handle on one end, and a handle could be attached to the thin end of the blade worked by two men.'

'One stood down below in the saw pit, and the other up above him, and the piece of timber to be cut was laid across a framework made of wood.'

'One of the four corner posts of Mr Brew's frame-



Mary Gilrea outside her sod cottage at Nappin Moor

(Picture courtesy of Manx National Heritage)

work was a piece of bog-oak. The logs were brought to the joiner on a little bogey behind a cart.

'To act as a brake when the horse and cart were going downhill, the end of the log on the bogey was tilted slightly so that it touched the back of the cart – this kept the loaded bogey from running into the cart.'

'The logs were cut into four, or perhaps only three, large pieces, and these in turn were cut into planks.'

James describes his grandfather's cottage, saying: 'When my grandfather was to be married, he built himself a house on land that wasn't his.'

'It was on land belonging to a man named Quayle.'

'He built it on a corner of Quayle's land. In later years the family bought the land off Quayle.'

'It was sod-built, only small – two rooms – but eight

of a family were brought up in it and my grandfather kept it spick and span, all nice and clean... No, there were no stones in it, not in the walls at all, and no stone courses.'

'Just two rooms and the hearth out to here (about here feet) and my grandfather made a plaited cover coming down for a chimney with just a hole in the thatch to let the smoke out with a sewn bent cap on it to keep the water out... I built my own house, four rooms in it, for £120.'

'I did all the joinery myself, and only hired one mason to help put the brick work up.'

The cottage that James Brew built stands on the road from Sulby Bridge heading towards St Jude's, opposite the wonderful farm shop.

I have driven past it hundreds of times. It was a popular informal 'pit stop' during the Parish Walk this year – the grass will be lush for months to come!

The 'for sale' signs are clearly displayed but there is no clue as to the cottage's name.

The image of Brew, courtesy of Manx National Heritage's iMuseum website, clearly shows James's out-building in the background and the decorative contrasting-coloured brickwork.

A skeet in James's workshop shows the cattle stall where he kept his stock.

The rafters display the hooks he used to hang up those saws, half of a saw-horse and a measuring stick (that's the technical term) remains suspended amongst the cobwebs.

Planning permission was granted in 2012 to extend and join Kafue Cottage and barn together to make a five-bedroom house on the three-acre plot, which is currently for sale for £325,000.

I wonder what James would think of that building project and whether the property will keep its build-



Even the chimney stack is overgrown now



The door was made by James Brew himself



The cattle stall where stock would have been kept