

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Old lag's new life: fascinating story of historic courthouse

Buildings at Risk looks not only at buildings lost or at risk, but also those that have been saved. This week Vicki Gillings, of Peel Heritage Trust, with research from Frances Coakley, looks at another of Peel's little gems - the Old Courthouse on the Quay, and we see how despite no longer being needed for its original purpose, several new chapters have been written allowing it to continue a useful life.

If you wander along East Quay in Peel between the chippy and the Peveril there is a quirky looking building, with its gable to the quay.

When you have climbed up onto Peel Hill the building looks incongruous in the quay scape. What is that large window and why is it at an angle to the quay?

Why does it look older than its surrounding buildings?

This is the Old Courthouse which is situated between Castle Street and the East Quay. It features in many photographs from Peel Hill over the years.

Architectural historian CM Morris wrote that the Old Courthouse was 'a rendered building consisting of a rectangular rubble-built block, lit [has windows] front and back and down both sides and then the quay line.

"The facades are pedimented as is the quay entrance with large sash window above'.

The building isn't a conventional rectangular shape - the western gable is at an angle which follows the river/harbour edge.

There are six sash windows on the south elevation, one on the east elevation and one on the north, plus one 'feature' window in the western quay-side gable.

Courthouse Lane runs along the south side of the courthouse. Prior to reclamation of the East Quay, this was one of two access lanes to the harbour side, the other being St Peter's Lane.

This building has been



Leece Museum frontage, Courthouse Lane on the right, the remaining Salthouse wall on the left

used as a courthouse and administration building for at least several hundred years. It

was recorded as a courthouse since at least 1706, though it was indicated that it been in the 'Lord's hands' since 1616.

Prior to this the site was indicated as a house and garden belonging to Edward Apithell since 1513 at a rent of 8d to Lord Derby.

A letter from William Sacheverell to Lord Derby dated July 1692 states 'entreat your Lordship to give the country an old house you have in Peel which I think is not above thirty shillings a year and the country will willingly repair it'.

Frances Coakley's research suggests this is probably the Courthouse.

Accounts show that in 1714 John Saint, a glazier from Castletown, was paid for '12 1/2 foot of new glass done for our Honbl Lords Courthouse

in Peeltown'. This seems to be a regular job as he was again paid to repair the windows in 1739 and 1742.

There are records of a bill in 1744 for 9,000 slates and new timber for Courthouse which was 46 feet long by 14 foot wide. James Parr was paid for the nails and Robert Brewer for 'slating the Courthouse of Peel'.

There is mention in an October 1745 report by Governor Lindsay that the high expense in the receiver's accounts are due to the Courthouse at Peel and that they are 'firming the ground' - this would probably be reclamation along the river bank.

Peel has quite a few areas of reclaimed land along the shore and river frontage.

In 1785 the courthouse

was recorded as being used for the customs service. This continued until the Customs and Harbour House was built in 1863.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the first decades of the 19th century, several new Manx courthouses were designed by George Steuart, some of which were completed by Thomas Brine.

At Peel, Brine enlarged the existing courthouse, aligning the front façade of the building to the new East Quay.

By the late 19th century, the Old Courthouse was deemed unfit so in 1891 a competition was held to design a new Courthouse (see Buildings at Risk in Examiner of 14 February 14, 2017). The new Courthouse was built at the corner of Albany Road (registered building number 266); latterly it serves as the local police station.

The Peel City Guardian reported in August 1893 that Sir James Gell, Attorney General, said at the opening of the new Courthouse that the Old Courthouse on the Quay was a dreadful space 'having no air space and always full of people who had nothing else to do, and if the day was wet there were all sailors and fishermen. The room was not fit to be in'. The smell can only be imagined!

For nearly a century, the Old Courthouse on the Quay was then used as a chapel/meeting-house by the Plymouth Brethren.

The Plymouth Brethren

sect started in the late 1820s in Dublin; their foothold in Peel may be due to the port's sea links with Ireland.

The Peel chapel's congregation wasn't just local, it was attended by visitors as well; in the heyday of the Manx visiting trade the old courthouse was packed every Sunday with people 'even sat on the windowsills'.

NEW LIFE

The Plymouth Brethren vacated the Old Courthouse in the 1990s. It was then purchased by the Peel Town Commissioners and opened as the Leece Museum in 2000.

Most of the original features are still evident today. If you start your tour at the East Quay entrance there is still a flagged stone floor with stairs on the right rising to the court room.

There is a corner fireplace for the prison guard. Directly ahead down two steps is the holding cell called the 'Black Hole', where prisoners were kept before and after trial, serving out short sentences and also were held for transfer to Castle Rushen prison.

It was unlit with a small ventilation grate onto Castle Street; it had a cobbled floor, roughcast walls and a barrelled ceiling similar to the vaults in the 'Old Foundry', 29/31 Castle Street (registered building 104).

The Black Hole was transformed in 2015 to house a TT and Manx GP motorbike display. The cobbles were covered by decking, the walls



The former 'Black Hole'



The extension with angled gable



1784 Plan of Peel harbour by John Corris, note the rectangular building and Courthouse Lane providing access to the as-yet-unreclaimed harbourside

were tanked then painted, and lighting was installed. This has changed the eerie feel of the area; however if you ask Roy, the curator, to turn out the lights it returns to its creepy feel.

You can follow the same route as prisoners up the corner wooden stairs into the long court room which now holds many exhibits from the Leeca Museum.

These stairs are modern, the original stairs were very steep like on a ship. The court room was wood panelled with two fireplaces, both now demolished but the hearths are still present.

The wooden planked hard wood floor has signs of carpentry. There were two sets of benches for spectators and



Castle Street entrance

the accused stood in the middle of the court room, apparently not in a dock.

The Deemster had a full height panelled wall behind his chair at the Castle Street

end, which is intact. There is a door into the Deemster's room, covered by a display cabinet at present. The ceiling is new.

There is a toilet, which was



View from Peel Hill, the Old Courthouse dwarfed by the neighbouring Salthouse

(courtesy Roy Baker)



First edition Ordnance Survey (1865) showing the extended angular courthouse fronting onto the improved quayside

added during the use as a faith building. The Deemster's robing room is now a kitchen.

The entrance from Castle Street is up an exterior stone stairs to the court room level. The room on the left was used by the police before the police station in Crown Street was built. This room is now used for temporary exhibitions.

Part of the northern wall of the Courthouse was keyed into the warehouse known as the Salthouse although, especially in later years, it seems to have been used for various storage materials not just salt. This was demolished in 1952 leaving the party wall in situ.

There is also a small lean-to building keyed in to the Old Courthouse behind the Peveril pub fronting onto Castle Street. This has a loft access to Castle Street and was probably part of the stables attached to Peveril House, now a public house. The exterior mouldings continue onto the lean-to. This may have been a storage space for the Stables either at Peveril or stables behind the Parson's House at 31 Castle Street.

EVENTFUL COURTS

The Old Courthouse has heard many amazing tales from defendants, witnesses and prosecutors, not least following the Peel flour riots.

In 1821 Peel witnessed a serious disturbance caused by the high cost of flour and bread. The oats and barley crops had failed and the British landowners who supported the English Corn Laws of 1815 were seen to have prevented the import of cheap foreign wheat that would have eased the situation. On Sunday September 30 1821 angry inhabitants of Peel rioted.



The court room

The mob ran amok, breaking windows of grocers shops in the town, including that of Mr John Ward (whose son donated the money for the Ward Public Library and St Peter's Clock). John Ward sent word to the Deemster.

The Yeoman Cavalry was called, but unfortunately only six turned up – apparently the fishing delayed other troops.

They were apparently outnumbered and attacked by sturdy Peel women and left the environs of Peel very quickly.

Commander Captain Gawne managed to seize some rioters and take them to the Courthouse.

In the Courthouse the ringleader, Thomas Shimmen, promptly knocked down a Crown witness, attacked the constables and the Coroner of Glenfaba, and then it is claimed bit the High Bailiff on the leg.

It apparently took six men

to hold Thomas Shimmen. The Deemster even came down off the bench to help, and got punched for his trouble!

The uproar inside was matched by the growing riot outside. The rioters stormed the Black Hole and released the prisoners. Stories abound that there were six women and one man in the Black Hole. This could just be Peel Skeet.

We wonder who actually needed rescuing!

It is remarkable that we all have the chance to experience the Old Courthouse today and enjoy the museum. The forethought that the Peel Commissioners showed in buying this special building for Peel and then establishing a museum has kept it alive for generations to come.

This also shows that if sympathetic new purposes can be found, some of our built heritage can continue to serve useful lives.