

BUILDINGS AT RISK

HMS Urley to Clagh Vane – from Eagle to White Stone

This regular feature covers buildings at risk, lost and saved – and our built heritage evolves, making memories as it shapes the lives of those it touches.

In this edition Patricia Skillicorn of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, who spent part of her childhood at Clagh Vane post-war, looks at the wartime origins of what became the Clagh Vane estate at Ballasalla.

In the next Buildings at Risk, she will look at some of HMS Urley's legacy and how it evolved from military to civilian and domestic use.

Civil aviation came to the Isle of Man early in the 20th century, initially for pleasure flights.

In July 1919, what is often considered the first commercial flight service to the island started, flown by Capt Howard Pixton who operated a float plane from Windermere to land at the Queen's Promenade beach.

The first use of Ronaldsway was in 1928 when Captain Olley brought newspapers to the island in a 14-seater aircraft. Use of the open Ronaldsway landing ground increased and in 1929 the air ace Sir Alan Cobham, on a promotional tour, encouraged the establishment of a permanent and proper aerodrome in the island, backed up by Amy Johnson and Jim Mollinson when they visited in 1933.

Tynwald rejected the idea of a national airport but did issue Ronaldsway a licence in 1934. Facilities were improved and a traffic office and hangar built, followed by air traffic control in 1937.

A private company, Olley Air Service, won a mail contract from the Post Office and by 1938 ran passenger services to the Isle of Man from Liverpool, Blackpool, Manchester, Belfast and Carlisle. During 1938, more than 10,000 passengers were taken to and from the island.

The Isle of Man was the destination in an annual air race. Planes set off from Hatfield to Liverpool, then crossed to the Isle of Man via Blackpool and then raced around the coast of the island.

In May 1938, six Nazi pilots took place in the race,



(Above) View from Clagh Vane Camp looking towards Ballahick Farm showing the Chain Home radio direction finding masts

Photo: Fleet Air Arm Museum



(Left) Aerial view of Clagh Vane Camp taken November 16 1944

Photo: Fleet Air Arm Museum

the Empire.'

All the same, people were making preparations for the summer season as usual.

The Palace and Derby Castle Company set out a programme of plays, reviews, dancing and pictures planned to cater for the thousands of visitors expected.

Closer to home, concerns were more local. In Ballasalla there was a proposal to close the elementary school on the grounds of falling numbers – there were only 42 pupils in the school.

One classroom had already been shut down and it was proposed the remaining pupils would be sent to Victoria Road in Castletown.

No fewer than 250 villagers turned up at a public meeting to protest, exclaiming that Ballasalla was not a dead village.

A dozen new houses had been built there in the last year.

In fact, far from closing the

school, people demanded the building of a new one.

They'd only have to wait another 20 or so years.

WAR
By September 3, 1939, the people of Ballasalla had more serious concerns.

BWith the outbreak of war, all airports came under the control of the Westminster government.

The Air Ministry had already identified the island's potential for both training and opera-



(Above) Interior of one of the Nissen huts

Photo: Fleet Air Arm Museum

tional aerodromes. Construction of RAF Jurby began in 1938 (initially for training but later for fighters), and while the site had also been identified for the fighter base at RAF Andreas (later used for training), construction there only began in 1940.

Despite the RAF presence in the island, at the start of the war Ronaldsway was still a civilian aerodrome.

In almost the same way that the Isle of Man was seen as a safe place to corral internees, Ronaldsway was initially pressed into service as a safe location at which to gather civilian aircraft from all over Britain.

They were flown to and then parked at Ronaldsway and their pilots accommodated at the Golf Links and Derbyhaven hotels, from whence they were dispatched on flights around Britain.

The Buildings at Risk column in the Examiner of January 14 and 28 earlier this year described how the island became home to a number of the Chain Home RDF (radar)

network stations.

Sites at Scarlett and Cranstal were surveyed in January 1940 and soon 'Advanced' Chain Home temporary wooden masts and mobile cabins were being



Wren Joyce Shepherd outside one of the Clagh Vane camp Nissen huts

Photo: Fleet Air Arm Museum



Flight Deck Officer training pilot to land on simulated carrier deck



Pre-war airliners at Ronaldsway

erected, to be followed later by permanent buildings for the equipment and operators, plus quarters for those operators and maintainers.

Early in the second world war, one of the RAF's major concerns was to defend aerodromes against enemy attack, which led to urgent training of RAF personnel – soon to become known as the RAF Regiment - to man ground and anti-aircraft defences.

In May 1940, Ronaldsway was requisitioned by the RAF to form No.1 Ground Defence Gunnery School, which became operational in July 1940 just as the Battle of Britain started.

Ground-based gunners would practise their shooting against banner and sleeve targets towed by a motley mix of aircraft. There were also ground-shooting ranges at Langness and other locations on the coast.

The existing buildings of Ronaldsway farm were converted into offices for the Air Ministry, but the actual flying operation was only of modest size. The Target Towing Flight (TTF) aircraft operating from the still mostly grass airfield, shared with the continuing limited authorised civilian use.

RAF ATC grew though, as it played a role in coordinating traffic in the Irish Sea basin.

The TTF aircraft were unarmed but one Gauntlet aircraft 'attacked' an Isle of Man Road Services bus with its undercarriage whilst coming in to land from Derbyhaven.

It clipped the roof of the double-decker bus - the aircraft crashed but the bus had



The Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) about to load a torpedo into the Fairey Barracuda just visible top-of-shot

only minor damage! Initially, while trainees were accommodated under canvas, the RAF requisitioned a number of local properties in Castletown to accommodate the permanent staff, including 6 and 7 The Promenade, 23, 25, 27 Arbory Street, and Bridge House.

A HMS URLEY s the losses of the Battle of the Atlantic imperilled Britain's supply lines and more aircraft carriers entered service, the Royal Naval Air Service (Fleet Air Arm) needed to train significant numbers of torpedo-bomber crews.

In 1942-43, discussions

with the Admiralty which was looking for a site on which to base training units for Fairey Barracuda aircraft culminated in four Torpedo-Reconnaissance squadrons being based at Ronaldsway, permission having been received to take over Ronaldsway from the RAF.

In order to extend the airfield, surrounding farms were leased or compulsory purchased.

The RAF handed Ronaldsway over to the Admiralty in March 1943 and a major construction project ensued for what became HMS Urley (Urley is Manx for eagle).

As it was to be used to train crews for carrier-based



Memorials inside the terminal at Ronaldsway. The motif on HMS Urley's crest is a stylised version of the Stanley 'Eagle and Child' emblem

operations, the grass airfield was replaced by hard tarmac runways, of a similar width to a carrier's flight-deck.

As trainee pilots would now be flying at Ronaldsway, it was decided that the tall Chain Home masts at Scarlett posed too great a risk and as the CH station at Dalby was operational, CH Scarlett was closed.

Unlike RAF Ronaldsway which only had a small target-towing flight, the Fleet Air Arm would eventually have more than 120 aircraft at a time at Ronaldsway, so as well as the actual aerodrome, bomb stores etc, significant numbers of both aircraft dispersal/hangarage and personnel billets were required.

HMS Urley was commissioned on June 21, 1944.

Pilots practised being 'batted' down onto a carrier in time to catch dummy arrestor-wires painted across the runway, and dropping torpedoes at sea.

There were two target ranges – one off Port Soderick and one at Perwick.

Just to make sure novices found it, a large 'this way to the target' concrete arrow

was laid out on the ground at Kallow Point – painted white at the time, it can still be partly seen alongside the path to the IoMSP memorial.

HMS Urley had a large ship's company, with many roles being undertaken by WRNS.

The existing RAF accommodation at Ronaldsway and the former CH Scarlett was insufficient, much more would be needed.

Some accommodation was provided in huts similar to those seen in the First World War at Knockaloe, but much was in Nissen huts which consisted of sheets of curved corrugated iron constructed on a concrete base.

The name comes from Captain Nissen who in the First World War thought up the idea of these easily-constructed and dismantled huts, the record being one hour 37 minutes.

The billets were dispersed to reduce casualties if attacked so as well as those close to Ronaldsway, such as the site called Janet's Corner, there were clusters further afield, including a camp built on

farmland at Ballasalla – Clagh Vane. A large hut in the centre of the HMS Urley served as an all-purpose meeting place and is the only surviving structure left from that time.

It serves now as the meeting place of the Manx Legion and as a general community centre and has recently been added to the Protected Buildings Register.

RAF Ronaldsway and HMS Urley both had relatively short operational lives.

The war in the Far East ended in August 1945 when Japan surrendered and from then the Admiralty no longer had any need of HMS Urley. By December 1945, the Nissen huts were empty.

More information on the military history of RAF Ronaldsway and HMS Urley can be found at the Manx Aviation and Military Museum, in Paul Francis's books published by Culture Vannin, and on Jon Wornham's Island Images website.

● Next time we'll look at some of HMS Urley's legacy and transition from military to civilian and domestic use, and how Clagh Vane evolved.



Arrow at Kallow Point pointing the way to the target range off Perwick

Courtesy of John Wornham, Island Images