

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Fleet Air Arm to 'Ballasalla Temporary Housing Estate'

*Buildings at Risk looks at how our built heritage evolves and shapes our lives.*

*In this edition, historian and author Patricia Skillicorn of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society, who spent part of her childhood at Clagh Vane post-war, continues her first-hand story of how a wartime camp became home to civilians.*

**T**he war in the Far East ended in August 1945 when Japan surrendered and from then, of course, the Admiralty no longer had any need of HMS Urley.

By December 1945, the Nissen huts were empty. By the end of 1946, my mother, father and myself – soon to be joined by my sister Freda – were living in one of those Nissen huts.

Our family was lucky – my soldier father came home, safe and without injury.

But he came home to an island without work and to a home which was two rooms on the top floor of a terraced house in Circular Road in Douglas.

It was next to a newsagents shop – both buildings have been demolished now.

There was, I think, a water supply in the living room/kitchen, plus a gas stove and gas lighting.

We shared a lavatory on the landing with the Little family and fortunately, my mother and Mrs Ida Little got on well.

It is a fact that the war was followed by an immense investment and improvement in living conditions for Manx people, housing being just one area.

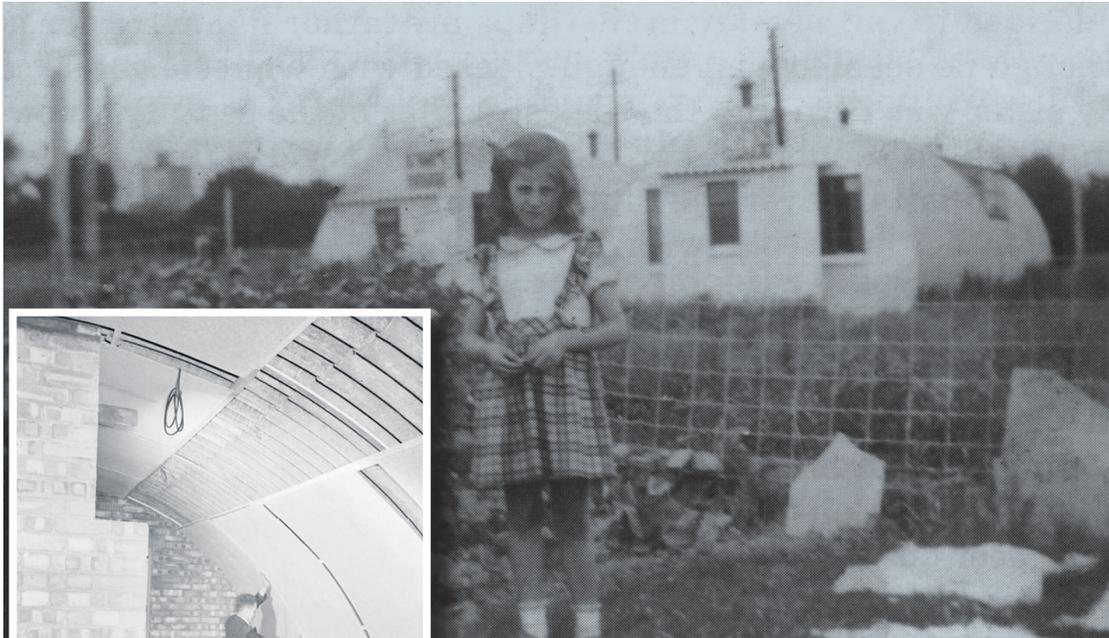
Even before the war ended, Tynwald in February 1945 had agreed to invest in housing, intending to bypass local authorities who often blocked such plans.

But it would take years to produce new houses in sufficient numbers as there was a shortage of bricks, cement, timber, paint, as well a shortage of skilled workmen.

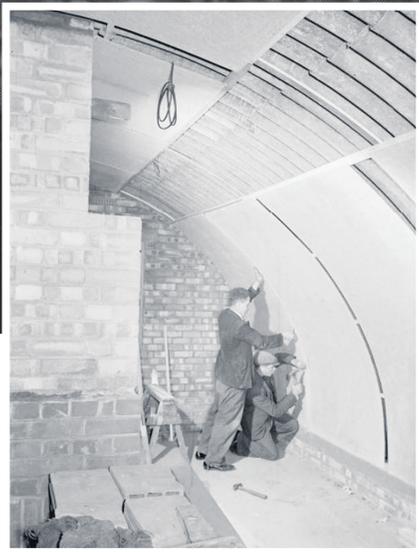
But there were the camps of wooden, concrete and Nissen huts at Ballasalla and Castletown (and elsewhere).

'Buy these estates from the Admiralty,' the Isle of Man Examiner urged.

'Adapt them so that they can be used as temporary



**Pat outside their Nissen Hut at what became Clagh Vane. 'We even had our own garden – each hut was allocated part of a garden area opposite the huts. It was assumed that men wanted a garden to grow vegetables, particularly potatoes, to help feed their families.'**



**Workmen fit an inner lining of asbestos cement to the interior during conversion of a Nissen Hut into a temporary house, 1945** (Photograph © Imperial War Museum D24178)

housing for demobilised servicemen.'

And Tynwald did. Negotiators from the Admiralty crossed to the island on May 27, 1946 to finalise arrangements, financial above all.

The Admiralty after all had spent the equivalent of millions of pounds for a relatively short time and wanted something back.

Eventually, the price was settled at £32,000 and Tynwald agreed to set £25,000 aside for the necessary renovations.

Tynwald debated the matter.

Alfred J Teare of the Manx Labour Party thought the price high but it was essential something be done: 'Tynwald should put its hand into its pocket.'

Mr Alcott opposed the proposal, saying: 'If farmers housed cattle in these conditions, they'd be prosecuted.

Yet you say that they're fit

for Johnny when he comes marching home.'

Deemster Cowley agreed that the huts would have a limited life but were better than some of the conditions people were living under:

'Ex-servicemen are compelled to live in conditions which do not tend either to matrimonial happiness or the health of the occupants and their children,' he said.

Whatever the case, more than 200 applications were received to live in one of these huts and one of those applications obviously came from my father.

On August 16, 1946, the Examiner announced that alterations had begun and that the Nissen huts would be ready in six weeks' time, 64 at Ballasalla and slightly more at Castletown.

The rent for a two-bedroomed hut would be 10 shillings a week and a bus would be provided to take men

into Douglas since most men would be working there.

The first tenant moved in on Monday, October 11, 1946. She was Mrs Ruth Kelly, a war widow with three children whose husband had died at Dunkirk when the Mona's Queen was sunk.

'I'm looking forward to meeting my neighbours', she said.

'We can really help each other in a place like this.'

She was delighted with the layout of the camp, with the beauty of the surroundings and the nearness of a shopping centre.

It is amusing to think of Ballasalla as a shopping centre, but at that time you could get most of what you needed in the village: there was a bakery/newsagent, a post office with a general store, a more upmarket grocery shop and a butcher.

Castletown was only two miles away with its Co-op and several groceries, bakeries, greengrocers, two butcher's shops, hairdressers for men and women, a wool shop, shoe shop and dress shop.

Once we were there, each Wednesday Margaret from the Co-op sat in our kitchen while my mother dictated her week's grocery order which was delivered on Friday.

If we didn't want Ken-naugh's bread from the village shop, Norman from Quirk's in Douglas stopped his van outside the house to deliver bread to the door.

Who needed internet shopping?

Another early occupant was Mrs K. Moffit who had formerly lived in Athol Street, Douglas with her husband, father and three children, paying 14s a week rent.

Although she was allocated a hut, one of her children had to sleep in a bedroom in another hut which seems strange to modern ears but all the same.

She said: 'This is heaven.

There is more room in my Nissen kitchen than in all the rooms we lived and slept in before. This place will give my children their health back. They can go swimming and fishing.'

We moved there later in the year.

On December 13, the Examiner rejoiced that 36 families had moved to Ballasalla Temporary Housing Estate and would spend their Christmas



**Imperial War Museum Archive picture of the living room in a completed temporary house converted from a Nissen Hut** Photo: © IWMD24180



**UK Ministry of Information photograph of the kitchen in a typical converted Nissen Hut in England** Photo: © IWMD24181

in comfort.

We were one of those families. Again, I have just impressions: sitting in the back of the van with my father – and not being very comfortable about it – drawing up outside this strange shaped building, walking into a room with curved walls.

The single space of the wartime Nissen hut had been divided by brick partitions into a tiny kitchen and a lavatory on either side of the door. The central space was the living room with a stove in the middle and a dormer window carved out of one side.

There were two very small bedrooms at the far end. There was no room for a bath, but each hut was allocated a separate bathroom in the former ablutions block nearby.

An early report to Tynwald said that some families would have to be content at first with communal cooking arrangements and hoped that they would be content to stay in that situation, but in our hut the kitchen provided minimal cooking facilities with an electric stove and hot water supply.

I don't think that my parents were ecstatic at what they saw but as my mother said: 'At least it's all our own and we don't have to share a lavatory. Hot water. It won't be forever. It will do.'

So we had a home – No.99 Ballasalla Temporary Housing Estate – and soon my father had work as well after he was offered the job of caretaker on the estate, perhaps because he had a good war record.

There already was a caretaker appointed for the housing estate – Mr Eric Taggart. Eric was employed to collect the rents while my father did more of the maintenance work, although they worked together for the rest of their working lives.



Freda and a friend outside No. 99 Ballasalla Temporary Housing Estate

So, by the end of 1946, my parents had a home and a steady wage coming in – there were many who would have envied him.

This was a time of massive seasonal unemployment in the Isle of Man when winter works schemes provided the only source of work for hundreds and men were sent to work in the beet fields of Lincolnshire.

For years, though, I think that living in Ballasalla had a temporary air for my parents. My mother was brought up in the north of the island, although she'd been living in Douglas during the war years.

She knew nobody in the south and though she settled, being a gregarious woman, she

never quite reconciled herself to living in Ballasalla.

My father too had been brought up in Abbeylands and then Douglas.

Neither of them had relations in the south of the island at a time when kinship links were very important.

It was a relief to my mother when her brother moved to Janet's Corner.

Almost as good, our neighbours in Douglas, the Little family, were allocated a hut near us in Ballasalla.

For me and even more so for my sister, Ballasalla was just home. I started school a few weeks after we moved to Ballasalla.

Far from closing the village school (now the scout club), the authorities had to re-open the middle classroom to cope with the post-war baby boom of the next few years.

Freda was born on January 22, 1947.

Snow began to fall on her birthday and continued to lie on the ground until March – it was the coldest winter of the 20th century.

Life was more difficult in some ways than during the war.

Though of course, no bombs or rockets were falling, even bread was rationed and there was a shortage of coal.

My father scavenged wood wherever he could, anything to keep that stove burn-

ing. We had

a one-bar electric fire that my mother kept burn-

ing in the bedroom that I shared with my

brother but still there was frost on the

inside of the windows every morning.

We did have one advantage though: our hut was lined with asbestos which kept us warmer than people living in the unlined huts.

Anyway we survived, flourished even, under the solicitous care of the welfare state, with its provision of free malt extract and cod liver oil, free milk (not always welcome), the new and free medicines for my frequent tonsillitis and the prospect of free education at the new secondary school in the south of the island.

The huts were only ever intended to be temporary.

By 1949, Tynwald had agreed to provide funds to do away with the huts and erect permanent houses.

To be continued...



As the erection of new permanent houses would be a very slow business it was considered advisable to promote schemes for temporary houses, and with this object in view, the former Fleet Air Arm Camps at Ballasalla and Janet's Corner, Castletown, were purchased by the Insular Government in August, 1946, the operation and administration of the scheme being entrusted to the Board. The work of reconstructing the Nissen huts on the said camps was commenced without delay and is still proceeding. Progress has not been as speedy as was expected, due firstly to bad weather, secondly to a trade dispute, and thirdly to the supply position, but nevertheless, results have been achieved as the following figures will show: Position at 31st May, 1947—Whilst there is an estimated accommodation at Ballasalla for 92 families and 116 at Castletown, 73 families are in residence at Ballasalla, comprising 273 people including children, and at Castletown there are 72 families in occupation, comprising 218 persons, including children, or a grand total of persons in occupation at both estates of 491. The number of applications received for these estates was 391, of which 37 were withdrawn. Further temporary schemes are contemplated at Andreas, which will house approximately 83 families, and Glenmaye, which will house approximately 21 families, but negotiations for the acquisition of the sites, which have been protracted through no fault on this side, have delayed the commencement of the schemes.

(Above) A progress report to Tynwald by Mr JF Crellin on Tuesday June 17 1947, that 73 families (comprising 273 people) were now in the former Nissen huts at Ballasalla, and another 72 families (218 people) at Janet's Corner (Tynwald Hansard)

(Pictured left) Deemster Sir Percy Cowley, who helped move the conversion of the Nissen huts at Ballasalla and Castletown for civilian families, seen here during Naval service in 1918. Through his membership of the War Consultative Committee during the Second World War, Deemster Cowley also became deeply involved in negotiations with the UK about greater constitutional autonomy for the island (Photo: iMuseum)

**IN "NISSEN" TOWN.**  
 "Congratulations on a magnificent job, which will go a long way to add to the sum total of happiness of many people," said the Home Secretary to Mr. A. J. Davidson, architect in charge, after making a thorough inspection of the Ballasalla temporary housing estate during his tour to the South of the Island on Saturday.  
 Walking through the new estate, now looking smart with green-roofed huts and cream walls, Mr. Ede first called at the home of Mr. and Mrs. R. H. Skillicorn, and was very impressed by the bedroom furniture made by Dowty's at Laxey. Next call was at the house occupied by Mr and Mrs Moffitt and their family, Mrs Paul Kelly, a war widow, Mr and Mrs Gregson, and Mr and Mrs Taggart.

Report in the Isle of Man Examiner of 1 November 1946 on the British Home Secretary's visit to the Isle of Man, including 'Nissen Town' (iMuseum)



Alfred James Teare (left) founding father of the Manx Labour Party and prime mover behind the conversion of the Nissen huts at Ballasalla and Castletown for civilian families, receiving honorary freedom of the Borough of Douglas from Mayor TA Corkish in 1964 (Photo: iMuseum)