

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# ‘Nissen Town’ to Clagh Vane

## – the growth of a community

### (and a palm tree!)

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 account of the evolution of the estate as homes – not just houses – and brings it up to the present date.

The Nissen 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: 66 at Janet’s Corner and 74 at Ballasalla with more to be provided if necessary.

Some Tynwald members doubted whether it was wise or necessary to build so many houses. A Mr Moore worried that most of the men worked in Douglas and would move to Willaston as soon as they could and what then would happen to the houses in the south? They’d be lying empty.

Mr Gerrard defended the decision: Douglas Corporation was not willing to house families living in Janet’s Corner and Ballasalla, despite the promise that they’d keep their places on the Douglas housing register and despite the fact that these families were living in ‘appalling conditions...the Nissen huts were long past being fit for habitation despite all endeavours to patch them up’.

An interesting insight! I had no idea at the time that I was living in ‘appalling conditions’ – I just took the hut for granted. The main thing for young children was the security of living in a loving family.

My mother may have had a different opinion about living



Cecil McFee MHK

**Permanent Buildings to Replace Nissen Huts**

The Local Government Board have approved a lay-out of 66 houses on the Janet’s Corner site at Castletown, to replace the Nissen huts there, and a Liverpool firm with a Manx origin, Messrs Robert Costain and Sons, Ltd., have been awarded the contract for the first 14 houses. Only two tenders were received, the other from a local firm, but the English tender was much lower, and was the lowest recent tender received for a housing scheme in the Isle of Man. The figure has not yet been divulged.

The Local Government Board’s policy is to erect these 14 houses first, and when they are occupied they will replace the Nissen huts with permanent buildings, a gradual process until all the Nissen huts have been dismantled. Most of the houses will be of the three-bedroom type, but there will also be four- and two-bedroom houses, and in the first 14 there are two two-bedroom bungalows for old people.

A similar scheme will be undertaken at Ballasalla, where a lay-out for 70 houses has been approved to replace the existing Nissen huts. At Bride the Local Government Board will build 10 houses.

#### The announcement of rebuilding plans

in Ballasalla but she did her best to provide a comfortable home.

I remember the arrival of a three-piece suite in a green moquette bought on ‘tick’ (credit) from James Caine. One of the Caine gentlemen came around to collect each weekly instalment.

We lived in the Nissen hut for only a few years.

By March 1951, Mr J. Crellyn of the LGB reported to Tynwald that 28 houses at Ballasalla were in the course of erection and that several were already occupied.

There were worries about the cost but Cecil McFee, Manx Labour Party MHK for Rushen, said that Tynwald

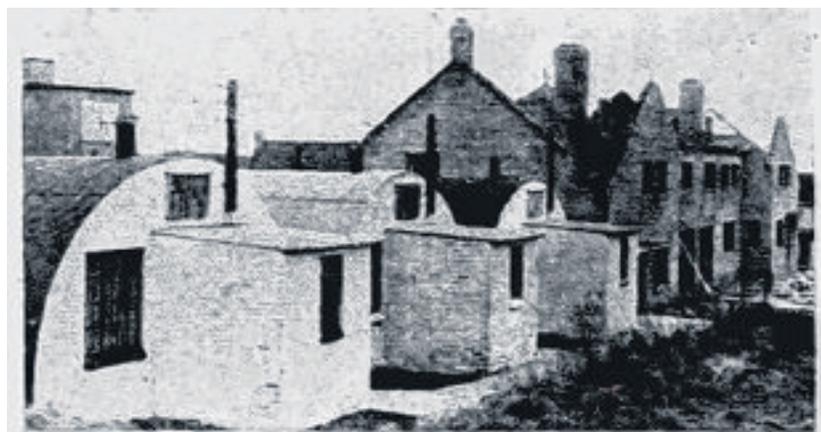
must have vision: ‘We are building not just for today; we are building for 50 years ahead.’

I don’t know the exact date but I suppose that we were one of these 28 families to move into one of the new houses, right on the front of the estate by the main road.

We lived in one of a pair of semis and the Taggart family lived in the other half.

The Nissen huts were gradually replaced.

Like the Knockaloe huts 30 years previously, the Nissen huts were dismantled and sold to be re-erected as stores or workshops on farms and elsewhere; even now their recognisable curved angle-iron



**PROGRESS.** — Nissen huts are giving way to permanent dwellings on the Ballasalla Temporary Housing Estate, and our picture shows how matters stand this week. The houses are being built to the order of the Local Government Board.

(Above) Because of the pressure on housing – and budgets – the huts were replaced by housing incrementally, and families sometimes only moved a couple of doors down when their new home was ready

Extract from the Isle of Man Examiner - Feb 10, 1950

skeletal remains are still to be found in Manx hedges.

#### CLAGH VANE

Another change – we were no longer living in ‘Ballasalla Temporary Housing Estate’.

Having first been merely rechristened ‘Ballasalla Permanent Housing Estate’, or just ‘The New Housing Estate, Ballasalla’, by 1956 our address was 101 Clagh Vane – White Stone in Manx Gaelic.

I’ve often wondered but never taken the trouble to find out whose idea it was to use a Gaelic name. Mid-20th century was a time when the Manx language was held in utter contempt. Who’d want to learn that auld language?

What use would it be?

It was a delight for Mum to be in a house that nobody else had ever lived in. It smelt of fresh wood and plaster – clean, unsoiled by the stain of other people’s lives. And spacious too, with a large living room running from front to back.

It’s a pity that we never used it except at Christmas or on Sundays if relations were coming to tea. We had to have a fire in the range in the kitchen because this heated the hot water. We couldn’t afford to keep a fire going in a second room, but Freda and I could have a bedroom each, at least, until my mother’s brother came to live with us.

He was older, a bachelor who’d always been a farm worker on a farm in Ballaugh Glen. But times were chang-

ing. Farms were becoming mechanised and farmers didn’t need so many workers, especially not one who lived in the farmhouse.

So he wrote to his sister who said yes, come and live with us – he was family after all. Therefore, he moved into the back bedroom and lived there until 1960 when one morning he sat down on a bale of hay at Ballahick farm and died.

#### ESTATES

Some years ago, at Lancaster University, I met a young journalist called Lynsey Hanley who had recently published a book called *Estates*, a mixture of the history of social housing in England and her personal

## 64 FAMILIES STILL LIVE IN NISSEN HUTS

In a report to the Local Government Board, published this week, Mr. W. H. Karran, the Secretary, estimates that at least 30 more new houses are required at Janet’s Corner housing estate.

This compares with the estimate of 43 houses needed when he reported at the end of 1952.

Mr. Karran states that in the first six months of this year, nine Nissen huts at Ballasalla and a further nine huts at Janet’s Corner have been demolished.

This was the situation in 1953

Courtesy of the iMuseum



A vibrant community grew up at Clagh Vane



Demolition of Clagh Vane which took place in 2011

experiences of growing up on a huge overflow estate on the outskirts of Birmingham.

I recognised the flow of events and policies here in the island, on a smaller scale of course.

As the Second World War ended in 1945, there was the desperate dash to provide housing, any kind of housing as the men and women came back from the wars.

We've all heard of prefabs – a few still exist. They were much loved.

The Nissen huts were not – they were cold and draughty and it was difficult to fit furniture around the central stove as the walls curved inward at the bottom.

Plus they carried a stigma – living in a hut equalled low status.

Then came the building of new permanent houses. They were built to high standards of space and were objects of envy.

People look back at the 1950s and dismiss them for their boredom and their lack of action.

But for the mother and father and their contemporaries, I believe that they experienced the 1950s not as boredom but as stability at last with the traumas of war receding, the privations of the post-war years eased, families growing up in comfortable homes.

Because Ballasalla houses did become comfortable by our standards: linoleum was replaced by carpets, hard chairs by upholstered furniture and in the mid-1950s, a small grey television appeared, bought from Uncle Cecil's football win although he himself only watched it on Sunday nights when the Whitestone was closed.

Gradually a twin-tub washing machine, a refrigerator and even eventually a piano in the front room – that symbol of respectability – were added.

Then, in England and Wales, came disillusionment



(Pictured left) the palm tree planted by Pat outside 101 Clagh Vane in Ballasalla. (Centre) the demolition in progress, but spot the palm tree! (Right) the resilient palm tree still standing outside replacement sheltered housing at Clagh Vane

as the great housing experiment went sour.

We were fortunately spared the high rise excesses and geographical isolation and the social problems of the vast housing estate of the 60s and 70s in England.

In the Isle of Man, a council house is still valued. All the same, in the last few decades, many people desired to buy their own houses.

Local Government Board housing estates are unmistakable – all that pink brick. Of course, the new private housing estates are equally all the same – witness those being built now around Ballasalla – the same in a different way.

So, in the early 21st century, a new wave of public housing has begun.

**PROGRESS?**

Shortly before his death, the late and much-missed Tom Glassey wrote an article in Manx Tails in which he mourned the demolition of his father's house at Janet's Corner:

'They have knocked it down now and the site has been flattened. Sadness welled up inside me as all my

old memories came flooding back.'

He wrote of the rose bush that survived the bulldozers and which his brother dug up and replanted.

Just before Christmas a few years ago, I stood on the

road opposite my old home to take a photograph of our family house. There were yellow notices in the windows of the house where I grew up with my mother and father and sister.

It was marked for demoli-

tion and re-building. I don't think I felt sadness, more a recognition that change is inevitable. But I did wonder what would happen to the palm tree that I planted 40 years ago that's now reached roof level? Clagh Vane wasn't

the only victim of progress; Janet's Corner had been a community with its own character for the past nearly 60 years. Now, it has all gone.

Just like at Clagh Vane, the bulldozers lined up to knock old pink brick houses down, to be replaced by new houses just like all the other private housing estates in the island.

Just one 'camp' building has survived from the short-lived years of HMS Urley. The former cinema and theatre, for the Royal British Legion hall and general all-purpose meeting place for the people of Janet's Corner.

A survivor, rather battered but worth preserving as a memory to servicemen and women, and to the three generations by now of people who have lived at HMS Urley.

By the end of 2009, our old house at Clagh Vane and its neighbours had gone, to be replaced by a complex of apartments for the over-50. Only a palm tree survives and flourishes, the palm tree which I planted more than 40 years ago in the front lawn of 101 Clagh Vane.

In 1951 Cecil McFee spoke of 'building for 50 years'. He was not far wrong.



Artist's impression of the new Clagh Vane (DOI)