BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Crossing Douglas harbour

*This week's Buildings At Risk feature sees Frank Cowin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society take a look at the evolution of Douglas Harbour.*

Long harbours running inland, often at the mouth of a river, frequently cause people to try and find short routes across them rather than having to go all the way round.

This is very necessary in the case of many of the great harbours of the world, but has also happened with some of the island's harbours.

Ramsey, Peel and Castletown harbours have their bridges across them and Douglas, whose harbour side we have been looking at in recent articles in this series, is no different.

The first bridge we are aware of is that shown in a drawing by Daniel King which he produced in the 1640s.

Nothing more than a couple of planks of wood or slabs of stone, it was for foot travel only. Vehicles would have to ford the tidal river or go some distance inland to find a crossing place but which probably still would also be a ford.

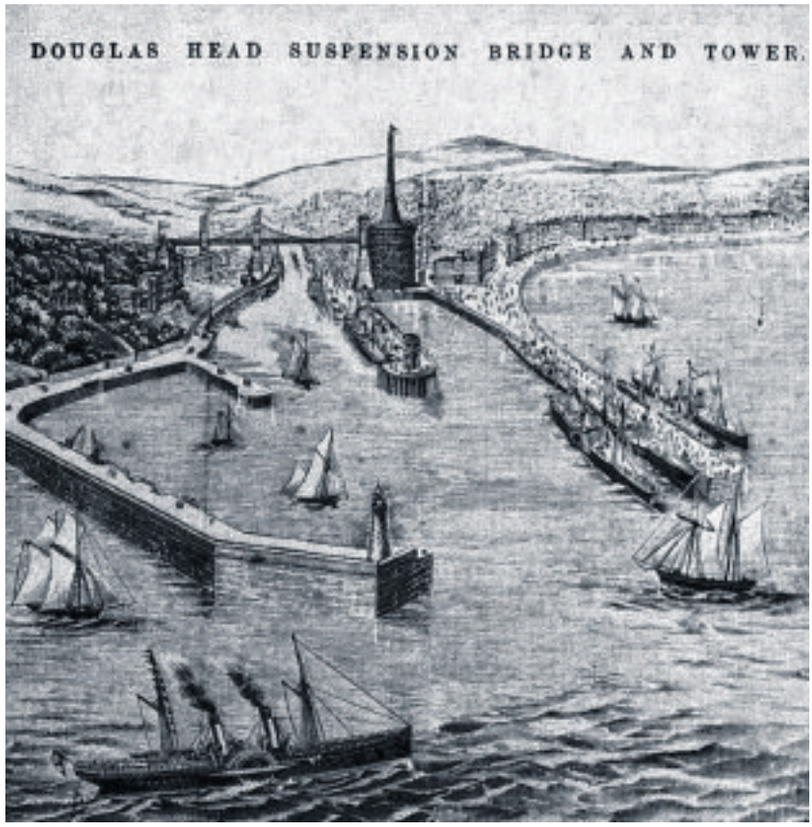
Regular complaints about the Douglas Harbour crossing can be found in the records of the time – these are usually of people falling off and drowning.

The Heywood family as owners of The Nunnery, who owned the surrounding land, built a bridge opposite Heywood's Lane (the lane inland of where Ridgeway Street was erected much later). This led, via the route now followed by 'Police Station Hill', Church Street and Westmoreland Road to form one of the main routes out of Douglas.

George Moore of Peel, who was a merchant as well as Speaker of the House of Keys (he was the first to use the title Speaker), was critical of its position saying it was too close to the sea and both closed-off the upper reaches of the harbour and would be prone to damage. He was proved correct with the bridge suffering severe damage from ships driven up the harbour by gale-force winds.

Ultimately it was replaced by 'The Stone Bridge' which continued to be known by that name even after being replaced by a concrete structure in 1937.

But a ferry service when the tide was in prospered for many years on the site of the Heywood's bridge. At low tide, the ferry was replaced by a series of wheeled platforms which could be swung across the harbour as the tide fell. A similar arrangement survived at Peel until the marina there was created.




Prospectus for the 'Douglas Head Suspension Bridge and Tower'

As tourism in the island expanded especially after the improvement of the harbour facilities and the building of the Loch Promenade and its boarding houses and hotels in the 1870s, more and more people wanted an easier route to sample the fresh air and admire 'the prospect of the Town' from Douglas Head .

A ferry service was set up from the Victoria Pier to the Battery Pier and by 1900 a new fleet of three matching ferries was obtained to meet the demands of passengers.

These were named 'Rose', 'Thistle' and 'Shamrock', although this last was later to be used to provide spares which enabled the other two to continue in service until after the Second World War. There was musical entertainment provided on board despite the short length of the trip.

The Battery Pier - now named in its extended state for Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra who opened the new works in 1983 – gained its original name from the Gun Battery which had been constructed in the early years of the 19th century. The battery site was part-way up the headland overlooking the breakwater.

A few of the Gun Battery buildings survive unfortunately in a ruinous condition and covered with weeds and rubbish. This area is fenced off at the inland end of the small parking area at the foot of the former incline railway.

As attractions on Douglas Head increased, so did the demand for an easier access route. A Manx engineer, Daniel Cregeen, who had spent most of his working life in London but had come home a few years before he died, put forward a scheme before the end of 1889 to provide for a tunnel under the harbour from a point near Double Corner.

But this would have been pedestrian only and it was thought that there would be too many problems with the geological makeup of the area.

The drawings he submitted show a tunnel with staircases at each end topped with a small building.

This looks very similar to the tunnel under the Thames which surfaces on the south side close to the Cutty Sark at Greenwich.

Cregeen then, in conjunction with another engineer called Jerram (who was part of a London partnership), put forward a scheme to create a bridge some 110 feet above water level and approached by a ramp at the base of the Victoria Pier to finish above the line of the Head Road close to the Fort Anne.

This scheme, designed to accommodate vehicles, was presented to the Harbour Commissioners in 1889 but did not find favour because of the impact of the approach ramp on the Victoria Pier, including taking up much of the site of the proposed 1891 building examined in recent Buildings at Risk articles.

Another engineer – Thomas Floyd – produced a scheme where the ramp was a spiral and provided within the circle of the ramp four large circular halls covered with a prom-


**Detail from Daniel King's c1640s drawing: 'F) The Bridge yt comes from the Nunnerie; G) The Sand that they passe over.' Was this perhaps the bridge described in Waldron's *The History and Description of the Isle of Man*, 1726: "Douglas Bridge...is lately broken down by the rapidity of the river. A woman, who was going over it, with a bottle of Brandy in her hand, just when the accident happened, was saved by the stiffness of her hoop petticoat, which kept her above water."** Manx Museum

**Looking upstream, the 'old' stone bridge with the Nunnery in the distance** Manx Museum

**1896: Jack Bell's rowing-boat resting against the wheeled-plank 'bridge' on the harbour bed; 'Double Corner' on the left, the Swing Bridge under construction on the right** Frances Frith / Manx Museum

Constructing the central concrete pier for the replacement 'Stone Bridge' in 1936

A busy scene in Douglas Harbour, note the cross-harbour ferry ticket office and shelter at the edge of the Battery Pier

Manx Museum


Double-ended harbour ferries 'Rose' (foreground) and 'Thistle', with the Warwick Tower, Douglas Head Hotel and Camera Obscura in the background

iMuseum, 1901

enade roof complete with bandstand.

Pedestrian use and access to the halls was to be provided by two lifts to the east of the circular structure. The whole was to be situated between the Peveril Hotel and the harbour.

It was to be a mainly cast iron structure and the bridge itself designed as a suspension bridge, 'landing' on the headland further inland than the Cregeen and Jerram scheme, but with a link road so as to join the Head Road at the same point behind the Fort Anne.

Alterations to the bridge schemes by the speculators backing it, including making the tower square, would have produced an Isle of Man version of the Eiffel Tower - versions of which they were already promoting in two other places.

Plans went forward for a scheme with a rectangular tower and tenders were supposedly being obtained but ultimately the only physical outcome was the laying of a foundation stone with great ceremony on October 24, 1890.

The 'Snaefell' had been chartered to bring the dignitaries and investors to the island and the day ended with a banquet at the Castle Mona Hotel.

The foundation stone was described as having been laid in a 'pit' and unsurprisingly continuous pumping was needed to keep the tidal flows down - an early example of need for such pumping as was later seen at the Clarendon Grill at the former Villiers Hotel.

Nothing else but the continuous pumping seems to have happened except claims in court for even fares to the island and food at the Castle Mona Hotel.

A massive building estate proposed for the Headland (happily) failed to materialise. This would have covered most of the land later used for the Fort Anne (or Douglas Head) Golf Course and also spread well beyond.

The Harbour Commissioners rather than speculators brought forward a scheme for a swing bridge at Double Corner and this went ahead with the bridge being completed in 1896. It was to be a toll bridge mainly for pedestrians but also for some vehicles.

The machinery to operate the bridge was very much a miniature version of that which lifts the Tower Bridge in London using a water accumulator and hydraulic rams.

In Douglas a two-inch pump – originally powered by a gas engine but later by an electric motor – pumped water into an accumulator tank to produce a 40-ton pressure to push two opposing rams to swing the bridge via cables and chains.

The tower control building needed to be tall not only to provide a clear view of the harbour but also to accommodate the equipment.

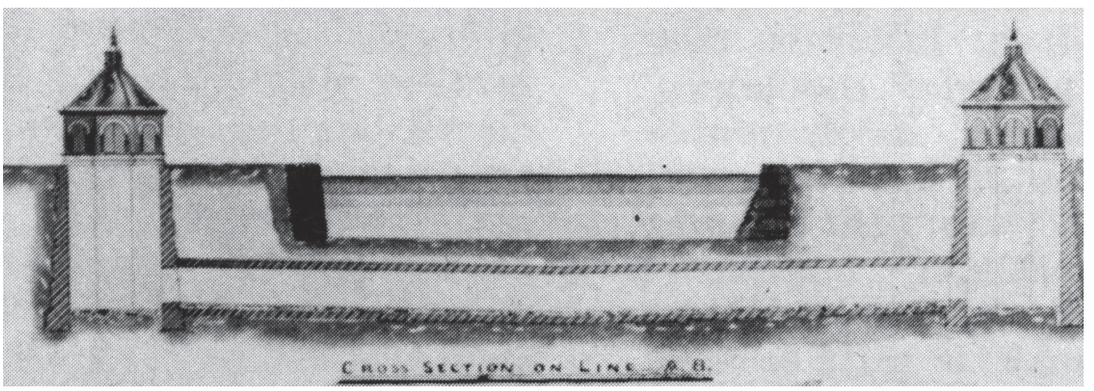
The original bridge was replaced by a slightly narrower version worked by the same machinery in 1979.

When the inner harbour was turned into a half-tide marina, the swing bridge was replaced with the present lifting bridge designed to take 'main road' traffic with the tide gates located below it.

The original machinery became redundant but remained in place and, despite a number of attempts, it has not yet proved possible to provide proper public access to see it. Its preservation is, however, of the highest priority.

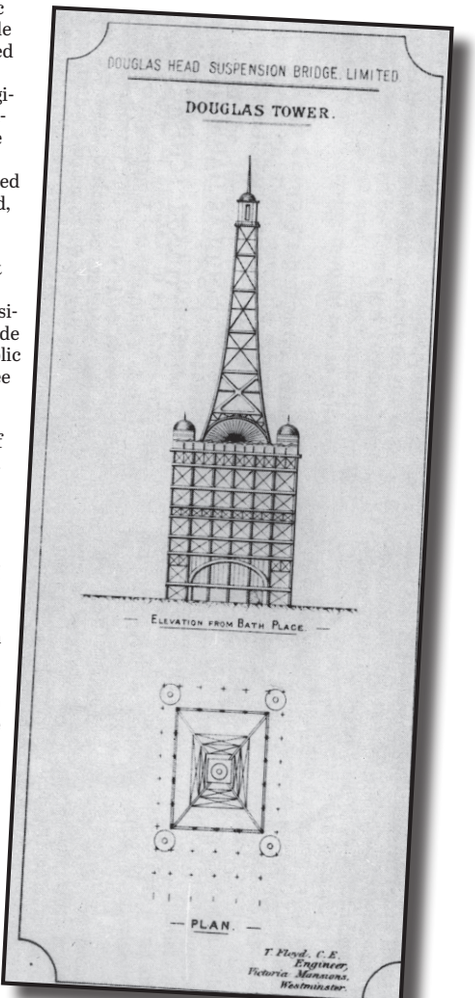
In 1963, TH Colebourn – member of the House of Keys for Castletown – got a 21-7 majority in Tynwald to explore the possibility of providing a 'chair lift' across the harbour to serve Douglas Head and open up another route to the newly-reopened Marine Drive. The means to provide it were cut from the estimates at budget time and the scheme was not taken any further.

What visitors found when they got across the harbour will be explored next time.




Cregeen's plans for a pedestrian tunnel under the harbour

Manx Museum




(Below) Floyd's planned Eiffel-style tower

Manx Museum