

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Looking back at the buildings and attractions on Douglas Head

Following the previous Buildings at Risk instalment on ways to cross Douglas harbour, this week **Frank Cowin** of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society looks at what visitors found when they got there – some of which remain, others have come and gone.

Those crossing the harbour to visit the attractions of Douglas Head often arrived under the shadow of the huge Harbour Commissioners steam crane used to handle heavy loads arriving at or departing from the Battery Pier.

Earlier there had been two smaller versions, all of them running on 'railway' lines leading into the Harbour Commissioners' yard.

Whilst crossing they would have seen the 1896 Lifeboat Station within the inland end of the Harbour Commissioners' yard, with its slipway across the roadway.

Later when the present lifeboat house (now due to be updated again) was built they would have a better view of it, built out as it is now over the water with the boat sitting on its slipway making for a much speedier launch and easier recovery.

Those making their way on foot, using one or other of the bridges, would have had the opportunity to inspect the lifeboat and hopefully left a



A 'Rest Cure on Douglas Head'

donation for this very important voluntary organisation on their way.

A memorial to the founder was first placed on the original Lifeboat House on Douglas Promenade (see Buildings at Risk, Examiner September 22, 2020) and rescued when it was demolished in 1912.

Years later it was found in the basement of the Town Hall and re-erected on the wall below what was then the Fort Anne Hotel, but had in the early 1800s been the home of

Sir William Hilary, founder of what is now the RNLI.

When containerisation became prevalent, but before the marshalling yard was constructed at what had been Circus Beach, containers were often 'parked' alongside this section of wall blocking any view of the memorial plaque. Consequently it was moved yet again, this time to the Lifeboat Station itself.

Once at the foot of the Battery Pier there is a narrow roadway leading up the headland. This was lined all the way up on its right-hand side with stalls – amusements, food, fortune tellers, souvenir sellers and the like, which extended onto the platform area at the Gun Battery level.

One which survived for many years both on site, and in peoples' memories, had a giant set of scales with a gleaming ornate beam fitted with a seat at one end and a pan for weights at the other.

The amusement lay in the proprietor's banter as he attempted to guess the weight of his customer/victim, which included at different times the customer paying or not paying depending on whether his guess was right or wrong.

Straight ahead as the 'platform' is reached is the path and steps which led to the open air swimming pool and the lighthouse.

Immediately to the right of the path was the lower terminus of the incline railway which could take you up the

next part of the climb and next to that was the set of steps and paths which were the alternative – but are now the only way up!

Adjacent to the landward side of the pathway, perhaps a quarter of the way up, are the remains of an open-backed rectangular earthwork at one time used as a gun battery.

There were more stalls along the seaward side of the platform and backing onto the roadway, which returned partway at the end so forming an 'L'.

Behind the return of the 'L' and through the gap out at



Steam crane on the Battery Pier, still at work in the 1960s

Manx Museum

the end of it lay the ignored remains of the gun battery which gave the breakwater its name.

Now that the breakwater has been extended, land reclaimed from the sea behind it forms the dangerous goods (gas and petroleum products) area for Douglas Harbour.

The Port Skillion baths were set up by Mr Archer and were for men only, but as one local newspaper commented 'Modest nymphs with powerful field glasses' lined the walls above.

By 1907 there were additional changing facilities and a rock outside the containing wall of the pool had been turned into an island with diving facilities. The pool wa-

ter was refreshed by the sea at almost each high tide. The outlines of the structures can still be seen.

The original lighthouse had been built in 1857 but was replaced by the present tower, designed by David and Thomas Stevenson, in 1892. For a very short time the two towers stood side-by-side.

The lighthouse keepers' housing clustered around the light tower, but since the light was automated in 1986 the housing became redundant and was sold off.

The Douglas Head lighthouse along with those at Maughold, Point of Ayre, Langness and Chicken Rock all come under the Northern Lights Board along with the Scottish lighthouse, rather than Trinity House like the English and Welsh lights.

It was said that for many years Douglas was the most-visited lighthouse in the British Isles – an opportunity which ended with automation.

The incline railway was a private venture set up in 1900 which survived, despite not operating during the two World Wars, until 1953. In its last years it was supposedly maintained by the engineers from Clucas' Laundry with the help of Gellings Foundry casting any replacement parts needed.

At one point on its route, the footway alongside crossed under the railway and continued up on the other side. Both footway and railway took



The Warwick Tower, with platform which rotated as it rose



The Trafalgar Memorial





Port Skillion bathing pool and diving-rock platform, with spectators (left) and changing rooms (right)

visitors up to a point alongside what for many years was an amusements hall and shop, then a restaurant, and now apartments.

Close by the Great Union Camera Obscura welcomed, and still does, visitors to walk around and see projected onto 11 screens (originally 12) the surrounding views with anyone outside largely unaware they were being scrutinised!

Run for many years by the Heaton family it was eventually purchased by the Manx Government who repaired it and it is now run by the Isle of Man Victorian Society during the summer months.

Recent additions to the landscape below the Head Road and turning circle are the giant British Legion Poppy and near to it a useful barbecue/picnic area with tables and benches.

Alongside stands a statue of Sir William Hilary looking out at the Tower of Refuge for which he was responsible following his near-death experience of being washed overboard whilst leading the rescue attempt of the passengers and crew of the packet boat St George.

Below on the Approach Road, but out of sight from the statue, is the Lifeboat Station mentioned earlier which claims to be the RNLI's num-

ber one station because of Sir William's work in founding the Institution.

Further down the slope is a viewing area complete with telescope and a pictorial key explaining the view.

A little way along the path to the seaward of this is a memorial to Horatio Nelson and naming all those from the island known to have served with him at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Above the road is the site of the former Stanley House demolished some years ago and the site somewhat untidily abandoned.

**N**earby on the other side of the road leading up to Manx Radio and the apartments stands a memorial cross; the original, made of sandstone for the Goldie-Taubman family of the Nuntery, became so weathered it was replaced relatively soon after being erected.

Manx Radio headquarters rather dominates the area. The lower floors were built during the Second World War as a classroom block for the Naval personnel of HMS Valkyrie, the Royal Naval Radio and Radar School who also requisitioned the then hotel further up the slope. The bil-

let blocks for Valkyrie were the two terraces of boarding houses on the Loch Promenade between Regent Street and Granville Street. German propaganda broadcasts at one stage claimed to have sunk HMS Valkyrie!

After Manx Radio acquired the classroom block, an extra storey was added. The hotel returned to its original use but in 1999 was demolished and the present apartments replaced it.

For a short time whilst the work was underway, the 1813 daymark tower (built at the same time as the Herring Tower on Langness) was left standing alone allowing it to be seen in its original form.

The area of land that the hotel had been built on had been retained by the Nuntery Estate when much of the surrounding land was deeded to be open land for the benefit of the people of Douglas.

Between the Manx Radio site and the Douglas Head Hotel, the short-lived 'Warwick Tower' was built in 1899.

This was a slim lattice tower some 150 feet high with a circular platform around it which it is said could seat 200 people.

This platform could be raised to the full height of the tower, revolving as it went.

It was damaged by fire in



(Above) A minstrel show and (below) the hotel and its attractions



1900 and again caught fire in 1906 which meant it needed to be demolished. This was carried out before the next visitor season. It is difficult to understand the building of such a tower on this site with its already elevated viewpoint.

The similar tower at Great Yarmouth with its relatively flat surroundings is much more understandable.

Nearby was the 'Gypsy Field' occupied by two families claiming to be 'the long-established Manx Gypsies'. This was outside the area of land controlled by the Douglas Town Council with whom they had a long-running battle over their claims to be able to tell people's fortunes.

There were other funfair attractions surrounding the hotel including a roller coaster, and the hotel itself had a dance hall and bar.

**O**n the seaward slope below the hotel, various entertainers had pitches until Charles Dare of Greenwich rented an area of land where he erected, at his own cost, an amphitheatre and built a stage and changing rooms (early artists had used tents).

He could put on his Minstrel shows six days a week but not on Sundays. He could not charge his patrons, but relied on the sale of song sheets and

donations. These shows finally came to an end in 1977.

The area was used on Sundays for afternoon services, these having been started by Bishop Rowley Hill in the 1880s and continued by his successors.

After the Second World War the Church of England concentrated on the morning services at Kirk Braddan; and Victoria Street Methodist Church under the Rev Joe Wilson led the afternoon worship on Douglas Head.

Across the road from the turning circle was the Douglas terminus for the Douglas Southern Electric Tramway Ltd.

To be continued.



This roller coaster featured as part of the various funfair attractions



The HMS Valkyrie whose Naval personnel used the facilities on Douglas Head