

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Ramsey Salt – expansion, and demolition

Buildings at Risk covers buildings and structures in our island, domestic and industrial - those currently at risk, those lost, and those which have survived. This week, Dave Martin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society looks at the problems that beset the Manx Salt and Alkali Company and its attempts at diversification.

In recent Buildings at Risk articles in the Examiner, we have seen how brine was accidentally discovered under the north of the Isle of Man and how the salt production started.

When the Manx Salt and Alkali Company Limited was incorporated in 1902, as the name suggests their main intention was production of salt and its derivative, soda.

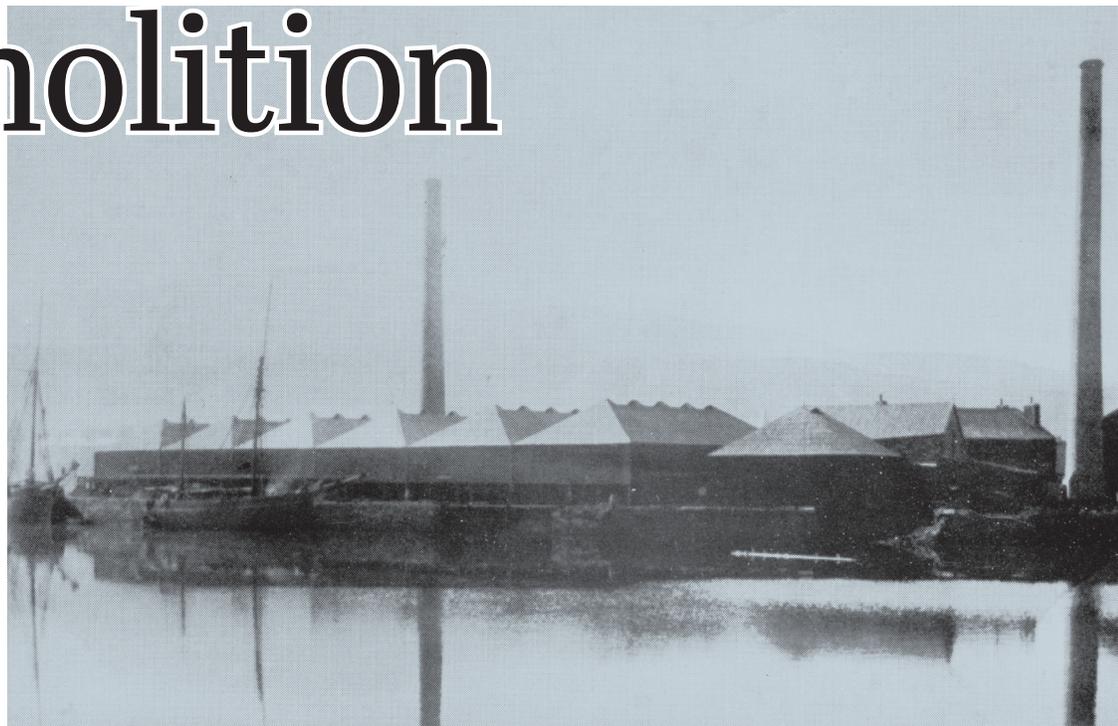
The directors though crafted a wide-ranging set of Articles of Association, which included not only salt-related business, and coal, but which also left the door open for wider projects as well.

The brine was discovered as a result of a coal exploration project, and at first that was ostensibly abandoned.

But the fact that a very thin coal seam – only some inches thick – had been discovered below Ballaghennie, and the conclusion that the geometry dipped as you went further east, left the possibility that coal might be found at deeper levels under the Point of Ayre.

It would appear that John ‘Sandy’ Todd, the Scots colliery manager and mining engineer whom Caine Bros had brought to the island to prospect for coal in the early 1890s and who had initially been somewhat sceptical, hung onto hopes of discovering coal.

Even if not to export, maybe there could be enough to fire the Saltworks?



All now demolished – the Saltworks with the six main salt pan house gables facing and drying shed to the right facing across the old harbour towards Old River Road, with the ‘New Leader’ and ‘Lively’ alongside
Ballahane collection

However, in 1894, Sandy Todd’s friend Ralph Moore of Glasgow, who had been HM Inspector Mines in East Scotland for 25 years, counselled Todd: ‘Do one thing at a time. The coal can be looked into afterwards.’

But even in the early days of Saltworks production, there was another party still interested in continuing the search for coal, or maybe tempted by the possibility of income from coal licenses and royalties.

Early Manx Salt and Alkali Company annual reports record the tantalising promise of £500 from ‘The Crown’ to continue the exploration deeper at the Point of Ayre.

There are no reports found so far from that deeper campaign and scrutiny of the existing accounts records hasn’t disclosed receipt of that sum from the Crown Commissioners, so it is unclear if they ever continued the deeper search for coal at the Crown’s expense.

The acquisitions of land at the Shipyard, Balladoole and the Point of Ayre, plus associated wayleaves and licenses, all contributed directly to the salt project.

One land acquisition of the Manx Salt and Alkali Company, right at the start, is as yet unexplained.

They purchased a narrow strip of land in the upper Sulby valley, running down from

Slieau Managh on the eastern side of the valley and up towards Killabrega on the other side, including the intervening section of the bed of the Sulby river.

The author is yet to find any convincing explanation for this: it is unlikely to have

been for salt or coal, and there are no other indications that they were pursuing any other prospects such as minerals or metals.

Production started at the Shipyard site with only one then two and eventually four pans whose furnace flues con-

verged on the first, southern, chimney.

Each pan had a furnace and snaking horizontal masonry flues which ducted the heat beneath the actual iron evaporating pan. In order to provide sufficient draw to pull the hot gases round the sinuous flues beneath the pans, the chimneys were more than 100 feet high.

The plant eventually grew to seven pans, each with masonry walls and lightweight wooden covers and a second northern chimney.

While requiring the usual maintenance, it is a tribute to the designs of architect George Kay of Parliament Street, Ramsey – no doubt with input from Sandy Todd – that the fundamental pan and chimney designs did not require modification during their over half-a-century of operation.

Modest quantities of the Saltworks output were sold locally, but the majority was exported.

The principal markets were coarse fish salt to Scotland, flaked salt to Dublin for hide curing in tanneries and fine-grained butter/table salt for both local and the Scottish markets.

The fish-packing market demanded hard, big salt crystals that wouldn’t immediately dissolve when laid in layers in the fish barrels.

PROSPECTUS.

THIS COMPANY has been formed for the purpose of developing the Salt Field at the Point of Ayre, in the Isle of Man, by manufacturing SALT and various ALKALIS, and the Company by its Memorandum of Association has taken power to extend their operations, if however thought desirable, to various businesses connected with salt and coal fields, but for the present the Directors propose only to manufacture Salt and supply Brine for brine in or near the town of Ramsey, and to sink a bore hole, as hereinafter stated, to fully test the presence of coal under the salt field.

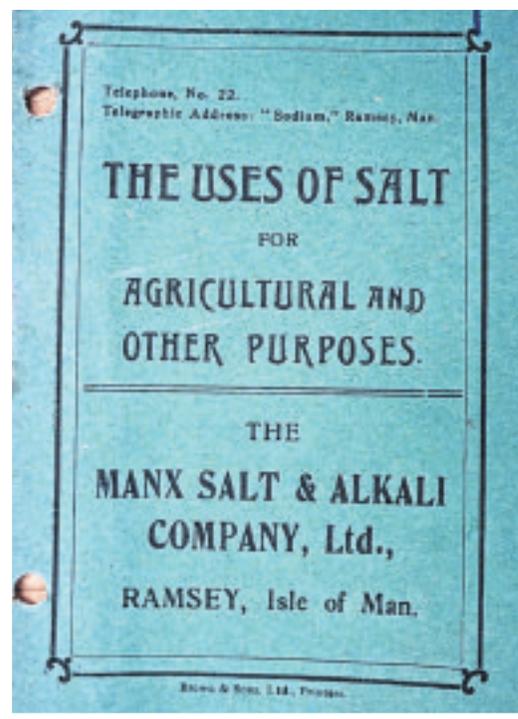
The being operations, carried on with the Diamond being process, show that a very large Salt deposit, with natural Brine, exists at and near the Point of Ayre; the Brine or runs from SALT amounting to 76 feet in thickness and 31 feet of Salt mingled with Mud, making a total thickness of 107 feet. Professor Wm. Boyd Dawson, M.A., F.R.S., F.G.S., Professor of Geology, Victoria University, Manchester, who has been consulted by the Vendors from time to time since the commencement of their operations, and who is intimately acquainted with the geological formation of the district, and has examined the cores procured by the being operations, has reported upon the same. [A copy of his report, dated 21st January, 1891, herewith.]

The salt cores obtained from the bore-holes (of which samples may be seen at the office of the Company, at Ramsey, Isle of Man) show the Rock Salt to be of the highest quality and especially well suited for use as fishery salt, and for all other purposes for which the best and purest Salt is required, as verified by the analyses (herewith) made by Messrs. A. Norman Tate and Company, the well-known analytical chemists, of Liverpool, and Mr. Thos. J. Birchmann, F.I.C., Public Analyst to the County Council, Bury.

The quality of the Brine is quite equal to that found in any part of the world, and the White Salt produced from it is chemically pure and of excellent quality, as verified by the analysis and confirmed by comparison with the tables of comparative analyses of British and Commercial White Salt from well-known localities in England (copy herewith).

The Salt Lease is for 31 years, commencing July 1st, 1895, from the Commissioners of His Majesty's Woods and Forests, of about 2,400 statute acres of the moorland under the head near the Point of Ayre, subject to a royalty of 3d per ton for Salt manufactured from Brine, and 1½d per ton (about 107 gallons) for Brine used for other purposes than the manufacture of Salt, the minimum rent to be 25s per annum.

The most suitable place for the manufacture of White Salt was considered by the Vendors to be a site adjoining Ramsey Harbour, as delineated on Plan No. 1, attached hereto, and they have acquired about 25,000 square yards of land, or thereabouts, in Ramsey, part of which is known as “the Skipped property.” The quantity of land is quite sufficient for the purposes of the Company—18,314 acres.



diversification, decline

As anyone who remembers growing crystals in a school science lab will recall, growing big crystals requires time and minimal disturbance; so making fish salt required pans to be run at modest temperatures and for some days between each fill.

By contrast, butter salt was to be as fine as possible therefore it was produced with a hard rolling boil to ensure the new crystals that formed on the surface didn't stick together and grow too big.

As the butter salt pan was run hard and fast at a high heat, the actual dedicated butter salt pan was only half the size of the other six pans at the saltworks.

Production ebbed and flowed like the tide over the life of the Saltworks.

Initially, the main factors were supplies of brine and coal, before market forces and plant exhaustion later put

increasing pressure on the company.

Maintenance of the salt pans in Ramsey was a mixture of routine prevention, sweeping the flues under the pans (shades of Victorian chimney boys!) and chipping off accreted salt; and repairing wastage when the riveted iron plates became too corroded.

The biggest problem was keeping the brine flowing from the Point of Ayre to Ramsey.

The first section south from the pumping station at the Point was buried in the fields as far as the Phurt, but then for expediency the pipeline was laid along the top of the beach all the way to the Volla (via a short detour up and then back down the brooghs at Balladoole).

The line was assembled from more than 3,000 lengths of iron pipe, which meant a similar number of joints. These weren't screwed, or welded, or clamped – they were in effect just push-fit.



Saltworks chimney demolition, 15 March 1957

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Each joint was packed with oakum – the packing they use to caulk wooden ship planks – and then sealed with six pounds of molten lead – for each joint! Even when it was 'working' it was said that anything up to 20 per cent of the brine sent into the line at the Point of Ayre leaked out before Ramsey.

Small leaks if the pipeline was just disturbed could be hard to locate if the brine simply soaked down; major disruptions caused by wave action would usually be easier to spot.

After a leak or break, the repair kit – including the lead-melting crucible – would have to be carried along the beach to effect repairs. If the line had been broken, they would have to try and clear any sand or gravel or seaweed etc which had been washed into the exposed ends of the pipe segments.

The problem was that there was no other way to get the brine to Ramsey and, while in the case of a small leak the header tank at Balladoole might tide them over for a pan or two, damage to the pipeline often meant shutting down production at the Saltworks.

Major pipeline damage could shut everything down for months and repairs became an increasing drain on the company.

On one occasion they tried to claim against the Crown Commissioners, saying that if they were paying rent for a

route along the beach, it was up to the 'landlord' to pay for any damage – that claim failed!

After a major pipeline damage incident post-World War Two, the company did investigate rerouting the pipeline inland along the line of the road from Cranstal to Bride and hence to the Balladoole tank.

The company couldn't afford it by itself and sought assistance from the insular government.

After considering this, the government declined to offer major investment as they felt the actual Saltworks and pans had not received adequate investment from the shareholders and had a very finite life.

But insular government did indicate that they wanted to keep the possibility of 'Brine to Ramsey' going in view of nascent plans to build new brine bathing facilities in the town.

The next instalment will look at brine bathing and various 'hydropathic' establishments.

Sandy Todd retired in 1938 and died shortly afterwards.

The Manx Salt and Alkali Company had never diversified into coal mining or soda production, but they did explore other avenues for their salt products, including selling coarse salt to farmers to be spread on fields with lime.

The company tried set-

ting up their own fish-curing/packing operation and investigating the possibility of setting up an in-house bacon-curing plant.

Sales to Peel fish-packers had slumped and it was discovered that the company in Scotland from whom the Peel men bought their barrels were, for a nominal sum – far less than the cost of Ramsey salt – supplying the barrels each with sufficient salt already in them.

Therefore, the Ramsey company investigated setting up a cooerage locally, but concluded they still could not be competitive.

As the 1950s dawned, when the Ramsey plant was aging (only two pans were fit to run by then) and losing efficiency, a new and far more efficient vacuum-aided plant was being installed by ICI in Cheshire. This was probably the final nail in the coffin of Ramsey Saltworks.

As things came to a head, the directors of the Manx Salt and Alkali Company approached ICI to see if they were interested in taking over the Manx operation.

ICI came to the island but concluded that, while the quality was at least as good if not better than they had in Cheshire, the capital investment needed to bring the Ramsey plant up-to-date plus the ongoing overhead of shipping fuel into the island and

exporting salt, meant they could not justify making an offer.

The Saltworks had been situated on most of the former shipyard site for ease of access to harbour wharfage and had taken over and also erected/improved existing sections of quayside, but in December 1955 a significant portion of that quayside collapsed into the harbour.

The Harbour Board declined to repair a private wharf, but did indicate they were interested in purchasing the site to reinstate the shipyard and erect industrial units. Eventually, on October 8, 1956, the directors recommended to shareholders that the company be wound-up and the site sold to the Harbour Board.

Any scrap metal that could be recovered was removed from the Saltworks and the pumping station, and the sites were gradually cleared, including demolition of the two landmark chimneys.

Interest in what lay under the island's northern plain didn't cease with the demise of the Manx Salt and Alkali Company though.

In the 1960s, even larger-scale industrial salt processing was considered and in 1985 there was once again prospecting for coal.

TO BE CONCLUDED...

Statement by the Board of Directors to be presented to the Shareholders at the Extraordinary General Meeting to be held at the Company's Registered Office, Ramsey, on Monday, the 8th day of October, 1956, at 11 a.m.

THE COMPANY'S PRESENT POSITION

1. TRADING.

The pattern of trade for salt has been changing over the last 20 or so years with the result that our sales have become fewer and less remunerative culminating four years ago in the loss of the bulk of our Irish trade. Hard competition and bulk buying drove us out of this market. The impact of Vacuum Salt on the Open Pan trade has been steadily growing for many years, and during the last four years has almost crippled our export trade.

The gap in prices between "Open-Pan" and "Vacuum" Salt is continually widening owing to the heavy increases in coal prices, freight and labour costs. For the last three years we have been selling our export salt at cost of production without appreciable increase of tonnage. This has left no resources for rebuilding worn out plant so that our equipment is in a run-down condition and has largely worn out.

INSULAR MARKET.

The Insular Market for our Open Pan trade does not exceed 300 tons per year, and at this figure the overheads are prohibitive to make the product competitive.

2. HARBOUR WALL.

During December, 1955, a lengthy portion of the harbour wall (which bounds our property on three sides) fell into the harbour. The wall is 25 feet high and is subject all round to the scour of the tides. The estimated cost of clearing the harbour of the debris and rebuilding the wall is £1,000 and we have no funds to do this. The Harbour Board would not help in sharing this expenditure. Detailed inspection all round the property show that in general the walling is in a bad condition and that further collapses can be expected at any time. All the walls are the responsibility of the Company. We obtained an estimate from the Harbour Board for the cost of complete rebuilding of all our sea walls which amounted to a total of £39,000—spread over say 8 years.

3. BRINE WELL.

After hearing of the falling in of the 2 Brine Wells in Carrick Fergus (Northern Ireland and in the same strata as ourselves) we called in a leading authority on Brine Wells to give us advice and estimates.—For over 25 years we have been dependent on one brine well which has been in operation for over 54 years. From inquiries and from our personal knowledge, the longest life that has been previously known for our type of Brine well is 40 years. Our consultants say that the

Report to shareholders advising the Company's parlous state and advising liquidation

BIG LOSS TO SALT CO. Two Miles of Pipeline Washed Away

SEVERE DAMAGE IN RECENT STORMS

Severe damage has been caused in recent storms to the pipeline belonging to the Manx Salt and Alkali Co., Ltd., which conveys the brine from the Point of Ayre to the salt works at Ramsey. In all, about two miles of the pipeline has been washed away, some of it out to sea, and other sections buried deeply in the sand and gravel. To replace this will cost the Company a considerable sum of money, and in the meantime the production of salt is suspended and a local industry temporarily put out of action.

The south-easterly gales last week also caused considerable erosion of the brows overlooking the shore between Ramsey and the Point of Ayre. The worst damage to the brine pipeline has occurred between Balladoole and the works of the Bride Sand and Gravel Co. at the Point. It is understood that the pumping plant belonging to the Manx Salt and Alkali Co., at the Point of Ayre, where brine is pumped from the terrific depth of 9,000 feet, has not been damaged.

We are informed by a director of the Company that the question of restoring the pipeline is complicated by the fact that the Company's lease from the Crown expires next July, and this lease has not yet been renewed. This question will probably have to be settled before the Company would feel justified in embarking on the costly restoration work that will be involved.

'Big Loss to Salt Co', Ramsey Courier, December 1946 – an extra nought giving and exaggerated pumping depth!

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