

# BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Heritage has to be a core social and economic asset

With the General Election imminent, **Frank Cowin** and **Patricia Newton** of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society continue a look at whether current planning policy is really safeguarding the island as that 'Special Place to Live and Work' that the current government has pledged it will remain.

In the first part of this article, which featured in the Examiner two weeks ago, we suggested three questions that should be asked of all the candidates standing for the House of Keys in the forthcoming General Election:

- If elected, what will you do to keep the island 'A special place to live and work'?
- What will you do to look after our environment – natural and built – as once destroyed it is gone for ever?
- 'There is a danger that we allow inappropriate building development and demolition' – what are you going to do to prevent this?

To quote Alistair Ramsay again: 'Heritage has to be recognised as a core social and economic asset, not a quaint side show.'

This is something which must be stressed by all with the wellbeing of the island at heart.

This week, we would like to explain why we suggested these questions, and also explain how we can all play our part to keep the island 'A Special Place to Live and Work'.



The proposed Douglas Head Conservation Area – consultation closes September 17

David Wertheim/Charles Guard and inset Jon Wornham/islandimages.im

## INTERESTED PARTY STATUS

Interested party status will always be limited but should not be as restricted as it now is; however this does not stop anyone writing in to state their views.

Indeed, if you, as a member of the public, don't like the design of a proposed development particularly in the treatment of architecture of historic/traditional buildings, it is important to write in to say so regardless of whether or not you think you may get status in the event of an appeal.

Organisations like IoMNHAS know they are not the only ones interested in such matters, but planning officers and the planning committee don't know unless they are made aware of the greater outside interest of the general public.

Unless concerns are more widely aired, a decision favouring the applicant regardless of the quality of design proposed, is likely.

Developers should not be allowed to say 'if I don't get my way I can take my business / investment / money

elsewhere'.

Currently heritage is being made the sacrificial scapegoat by a Government that is prepared to be blackmailed by such arguments regardless of a taxation scheme which makes it easy for developers/entrepreneurs to legally avoid paying heavy taxes and contributing to the Manx coffers.

A proposed redevelopment at Meary Voar approved by planning committee is a notable case on file where such an argument was openly pursued to enable destruction of a substantial heritage building.

More recently Ministers openly favoured demolition of a Registered building in Ramsey prior to determination of the application on the 'understanding' they would get jobs in a new building, regardless of the latter's design then unknown and regardless of the fact their technical advisers including Manx National Heritage said the existing heritage building could be incorporated sensitively into a new development.

Contrary to submissions to the planning review consultation, MNH has been given the role of being the only heritage body which has the right to take a planning decision to appeal - but only if they submit a comment on the application in the first place.

MNH is limited in staff and funding to adequately carry out its role in this regard. Consequently this leaves a greater responsibility on volunteer heritage organisations such as IoMNHAS / IoM Victorian Society and the general public.

## FINANCE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

If you buy an old building you should be prepared to maintain its slate roof, stone/ rendered walls and timber windows and doors which all add to its character.

There is not a presumptive right to expect to be able to replace slates with artificial tiles, stone with pebble dash, timber with UPVC.

All this was incorporated into a Planning Policy State-

ment PPS1/01 twenty years ago.

What happened to the principles contained in this milestone document supported by the then Government? Why are developers including Government departments not being forced to comply with its policies?

Many older Manx buildings have limited foundations and damp-proof course, but this should not be allowed to be used as an excuse for demolition.

Funding is needed to aid specialist repairs and retention of historic features especially when development must be seen to be carbon neutral.

Taking heed of traditional Manx design and materials is being sold out to the perception that heritage buildings are not and cannot be made carbon friendly.

The fact that demolition of heritage assets involves emission of carbon stored in buildings, the use of carbon generating machinery to undertake the demolition and removal of resultant heap of



Properties on Douglas Head

Photo: Charles Guard



Many useful lives - best known as Colby Chapel, this was: a pub, then three houses, then a hall, latterly a Chapel, and now a house again (not Registered)



Marine Biological Station – not registered, neglected and now threatened with inappropriate and over-tall redevelopment

materials from or about the site is just ignored.

This despite the fact that both Scottish and English governments have long since produced documentation proving the value of retaining and modifying heritage buildings in being far more carbon friendly than replacing them.

To quote from a professional magazine, 'The Planner', only recently The Grosvenor Group, one of the largest privately owned in-

ternational property companies, is pressing for changes to a National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to align heritage protection with environmental sustainability.

They want to see a new NPPF clearly connect climate change policy and heritage protection, and explicit encouragement in policy for carbon reduction measures for all heritage assets.

Heritage assets are precious. The challenge is not just to do the work but do it

well - we have to apply intelligent appropriate solutions to make historic buildings energy efficient.

That also illustrates the importance of investing in skills across the entire supply chain.

The point was made that there are more than 100,000 businesses licensed to install gas boilers across England but only 1,200 qualified to install heat pumps.

In the island we desperately need to promote the building craft skills which will enable us to protect and promote our heritage assets as economic assets.

**REGISTRATION**

More than 100 reports were undertaken by consultants paid by former DOLGE on individual buildings suggested for Registration 20 years ago.

Few have seen the light of day. The recent spate of registrations, many of them 20th century structures, has only reduced the original 1984 list of over 200 outstanding sug-



Some of the slew of recent registrations/proposals by DEFA included 12 telephone kiosks, 13 war memorials and 6 lighthouses – a triumph(?) of quantity over quality/need?



gestions of largely pre-1850 buildings by five.

Suggestions for registration and/or proposals to stop a building being demolished have to go through many stages.

Whilst a building can be suggested for registration by either a member of the public or a DEFA officer, thereafter all decisions are in the hands of DEFA.

From the drafting of the criteria for selection of buildings for registration, proposing a building for registration, registering a building/structure for architectural and / or historic interest, deciding on any application to de-register a building, deciding on appeal to deregister a building, the final decision at every single stage is taken by DEFA Minister.

Something that cannot be seen to be a democratic process even more so as the

person concerned is not someone guaranteed to have any technical knowledge of the subject.

**CONSERVATION AREA STATUS**

Conservation Areas seek to protect not just individual buildings but more importantly the balance between buildings and open space in a traditional/historic area.

Currently there is a government consultation (finishing September 17) on whether some of Douglas Head should be designated a Conservation Area.

Douglas Harbour is identified in strategic policy as a strategic entry point into the island i.e. one whose background first-time visitors will get a first and possibly everlasting impression of how the island perceives itself.

Notwithstanding the current Promenade works, the Promenade is throughout a

Conservation Area. But the backdrop of Douglas Head - which is much closer - has not such a designation. It is essential that it is protected from unsympathetic changes.

**BROWNFIELD SITES**

It is essential that the development of brownfield sites takes preference over further encroachment into the countryside.

Within towns, however, a current problem is with the redevelopment of the sites of redundant and run-down buildings where the proposed development is two or more stories higher than the original, thus destroying the previous balance.

It is understandable that developers may wish to increase the available floor space by doing it but frequently in a townscape it can be highly undesirable.



Ballaghton Manor. In 2013 the Government's own report said 'This is a truly exceptional property worthy of its inclusion onto the protected buildings register' but it was lost because DEFA never got around to completing registration



New life – the former Primitive Methodist Chapel in Michael Street, Peel