

BUILDINGS AT RISK

A Bob the builder: Robert Cain, architect and valuer

The Buildings at Risk series covers buildings and structures at risk, lost, and saved – including the lives of the buildings and those who built them.

This week **Sarah L. Christian** of the Isle of Man Family History Society and Ballaugh Heritage Trust looks to see what evidence of the history of Douglas builders can be found in the Manx Museum archives.

The study of the growth of Douglas from a small port with a huddle of ramshackle cottages to the grand Victorian tourist centre it became is a fascinating business.

Who were the people who used their skills and energy to create the capital?

As Douglas grew to facilitate holiday-makers, lots of the architects were English. I had assumed that the rapid expansion of the town would cause a skill shortage needing to be filled by tradesmen from across the water – there being no work permit system in place in those days – but it seems this was not the case.

An examination by Alan Lawson of resident tradesmen listed in the 1881 census shows that the vast majority of workers were Manx-born (Manx Museum archives reference MS 08764.MD 1103).

Not surprising perhaps for masons and joiners whose skills would have been in demand all over the island, but as the author describes: 'A person viewing the internal décor of Victorian properties in Douglas cannot help being impressed by the many fine examples of the plasterer's decorative art.'

Only 14% of Douglas plasterers moved to the island to work, so it seems many were trained in the Isle of Man. But there was a shortage of plumbers, with 27% of the total moving to the island to work.

During this period though, great advances were



The Trafalgar Hotel stands alone on South Quay - recently registered but now at risk from adjoining development

being made in municipal water supplies. The new hotels being built in Douglas included 'all mod cons' such as flushing toilets, although not as many as are required by people today.

An example from my own family is Thomas William Killip married in Douglas in 1893. His father John Killip was a joiner and his new father-in-law, James Joseph Christian, was a builder.

None of these individuals are listed in the 1894 Brown's Trade Directory which leads me to believe that they were either employed by other people or had no need to advertise their trade.

Presumably, word of mouth carried weight as it does today. TW Killip went on to open a shop on Windsor Road, running it alongside his plumbing business.

At the Manx Museum

archive there is a record (MNH reference MS 06197 MD01962) of a more cosmopolitan builder, but some detective work was required to work out who it belonged to.

Nigel Crowe helped me identify the owner as Robert Cain. The company appears to be Douglas-based and is interesting, listing works carried out for Colonel Charlton at Ballabrooie House just off Peel Road near Quarterbridge between September 1877 and April 1878.

The final bill was for £1,370 worth of work. This would equate to £90,662 today and was probably for a new conservatory and other renovations. Charlton had purchased the property for £2,200 earlier that year.

The house had been built

in the 1830s for Thomas McGuffog who was the Collector of Customs. A newspaper article describes its style as castellated and pretentious but not as imposing as Burleigh or Mount Vernon which were nearby.

There is an elaborate gateway still in existence which leads to the stables, located behind number 138 Ballabrooie Drive.

Ballabrooie House suffered a gas leak in 1895 and a plumber was called. He failed to find its source and the resulting violent explosion caused a huge fire.

The fire brigade drained two wells and a cistern trying to put the fire out – not helped by the fact that it was half an hour after they got there that someone turned off the gas!

By morning the roof had fallen in and the whole top

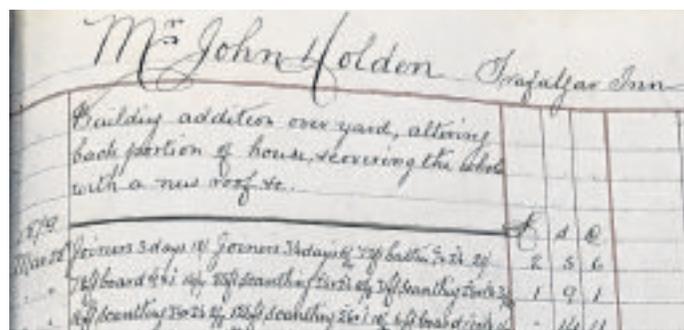
storey had been destroyed. The brigade did manage to save the drawing room and the conservatory – built by Cain (Mona's Herald 18.12.1895 page 5).

Happily the tenant, Mr Wyville, escaped with some

minor injury to his arm and his wife and children were fine. It then came to light he had been using an alias and was a dodgy character called Alfred John Monson – subsequently arrested for perjury (see Buildings at Risk: 'The



The peculiar little roof at the rear of the Trafalgar Hotel. Is this Cain's 1879 work: 'Building addition over yard, altering back portion of house & recovering the whole with a new roof &c'?



Cain's ledger recording works carried out for John Holden at the Trafalgar Inn (Hotel) in 1879



Builder's ledger in the archives at the Manx Museum (MS 06197 MD01962)



Industrial buildings on the South Quay in Douglas - which is the possible site of the Patent Preserved Potato Works - now a rather large hole in the ground (PG/2349 iMuseum with thanks to MNH)

Fiery Fate of Ballabrooie and Mount Vernon', Isle of Man Examiner, March 24, 2020).

The house was remodelled and re-advertised for rent by 1902. It is still in existence but renamed Peregrine House and looks to be well cared for and not in the least 'at risk'.

Our builder also worked for Messrs King and Son at the Patent Preserved Potato Works in 1877. Bills were carried over from a previous ledger but the job involved: 'Making, fitting on roof, & slating ventilator; fitting lead, repairing roof about do. Repairing furnaces & sundry times. Making potato washer, altering & repairing roof on potato shed. Making case makers frame, & two circular sieves.'

Despite King's claims of the powers of dried potato against scurvy and the winning of various awards, the Manx side of the business failed with debts of £11,000 and the factory was auctioned off by the coroner in 1882.

It seems that the King family decamped to their London base and continued producing desiccated soup. I can't be totally sure of the factory's location but the pictured (former) derelict buildings on Douglas Quay immediately adjacent to the Trafalgar Hotel is my best guess for now.

Cain also worked for GW Dumbell Esquire at properties called Woodville in 1881, Belmont, Ballaskeig, Ballakewish for the Banking Company (1877), Ballaughton Mill (1877), Ballaughton House (1879), St George's Street (1878) and Eaglehurst.

A number of smaller clients are listed including Miss Kewley - a confectioner of Duke Street (1877) - and putting up a hoarding for Brown & Sons of The Isle of Man Times newspaper office.

More sombre duties were the making of coffins for in-

dividual clients which was a surprise as directories had many professional undertakers in Douglas at this time.

'Polished and upholstered oak coffin for the late Master E Stocker including attendance to house & steamer, Carriage to Liverpool & empty case returned (Jan 1879).'

They also worked for a John Holden at the Trafalgar Inn in 1879. This building has recently (2021) been added to the Protected Buildings Register and is currently on the market for £475,000.

It would be so interesting to know if the unusual shape of the roof at the back of the building was the work done by Cains for publican John Holden in 1879 described as 'Building addition over yard, altering back portion of house & recovering the whole with a new roof &c'.

The total cost was £195/5 shillings/3 pence which equates to just shy of £13,000

today which would seem to be rather a bargain - that's if you could find a builder as everyone seems to be so busy at present.

The ledger is also interesting because the first portion records work done in 1877 through to 1887 and then be-

gins to be used again in 1918. I'm assuming that the ledger stayed in the family as Cains the builders was very much a family concern.

There were various Robert Cains around the island who were builders. Our Bob (1826-1912) was the son of Robert Cain, builder, who in 1841 was living at Big Garden in Douglas.

This area was described by author Stuart Slack as 'That area between Castle Street and the banks below Finch Road.

It formed one of the earliest concentrated housing developments in the town, being sold off for building plots from 1810'.

He is described in his son's obituary as being 'in control of what in those days was the most extensive building business in Douglas and he was associated with the erection of many of the finest residential and business premises in the town and island'.

Robert had four daughters and one son, so our Bob appears to have joined the business.

Bob carried out the works listed in the ledger but there is no sign of him carrying out big developments in this book. He had six daughters and three sons, one of whom



TW Killip, a plumber of Windsor Road who died of lead poisoning



Peregrine House, formerly Ballabrooie House, which was nearly destroyed in a gas explosion

was John Christian Cain who followed his father into building. Son Harold became a London pharmacist, while his daughters married Kay, Clegg and Fenton-Jones.

The second part of the ledger describes mainte-

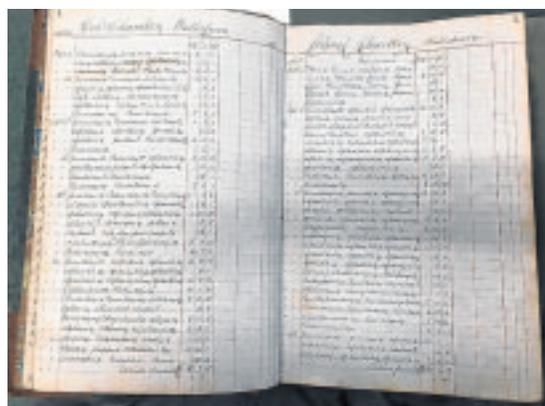
nance done on the property Bob left in his estate, which included his property at West View Terrace (which forms the earliest side of Woodbourne Square now being Woodbourne Road), plus property all over Douglas.

The back of the 762-page ledger had plenty of space, so was later used by a butcher to record animals purchased between 1951 and 1954, which is a much less interesting addition to me, at least, but I like the element of reuse.

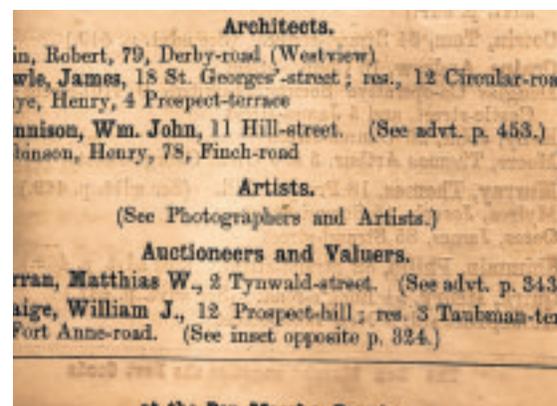
Bob's obituary in 1912 describes him as 'Besides being a most practical joiner, Mr Cain was a most capable architect, with a shrewd eye to combining the artistic with the useful in his designs.'

'He was also an artist of no mean order, and but for his unconquerable aversion to publicity, might have gained fame by the exercise of his talent for drawing and painting.'

Perhaps it is the modesty of the man that makes it difficult to discover what buildings he designed, but I'll be keeping my eyes peeled for examples of his work.



Cain's ledger records extensive improvements to Ballabrooie House for Colonel Charlton, from masonry to decorating materials



Brown's Directory 1882 when Bob's skills were advertised as an architect