

The importance of old buildings in the Manx environment

ABC: Alliance for Building Conservation

What is special about the Manx built environment?

- The built environment tells the story of the Isle of Man
- Quarterland farms with barns, dairies and yards emphasise the vital role of agriculture: the best examples of Manx architectural difference¹
- Rural architecture vernacular was pragmatically constructed with materials sourced nearby, often recycled
- The Manx cottage was usually two rooms and often extended upward to make two stories with a loft as a sleeping place for children²
- Sod hedges and drystone walls help us interpret the landscape³
- The colour of our stone buildings reflects our islands interesting geology⁴
Some types are becoming rare. i.e. sandstone Farmsteads ⁵
- Net lofts and warehouses remind us of Man's role as nation of seafarers
- We have fine Georgian squares and Victorian streets
- Promenades of hotels remind us of our history – and future, as a holiday destination
- Our iron railings are exceptional -much of Britain's were melted down⁶
- Manx people may not value the Island's architecture but there is much of interest⁷
- The TT races have influenced Manx architecture too⁸



Longevity?

- The demolition of post war social housing illustrates how building techniques have not stood the test of time. Government homes for older people suffer the same issues. Eg: Reayrt ny Baie, Glenside and Cummal Mooar (opened in 1981 and reaching the end of its life⁹)
- Failure to prioritise maintenance leads to demolition, replacement and the loss of embodied carbon.
- In England, the number of pre-1919 dwellings have increased by more than 60,000 in 8 years due to the conversion of old buildings¹⁰
Demolition is not the only solution.
- Wood used in old houses is slow-grown timber¹¹ better quality than modern fast grown timber which is why older buildings can be better quality and last longer
- Conservation is 'inherently sustainable' due to embodied carbon¹²

New versus old ?

- New builds are viewed more environmentally friendly and energy efficient due to new technology like air source heat pumps and superior methods of insulation¹³
- Traditional methods utilising airflow, natural and local materials and terracing illustrate sustainable and efficient construction
- Current building regulations can result in insulation and glazing that then requires expensive air conditioning to keep cool¹⁴
- Historic buildings and places cannot always accommodate all forms of renewable energy sources, but there is scope to retrofit without causing material harm to heritage significance¹⁵ (ibid)
- Heritage England are keen that all training in the building sector includes heritage construction skills¹⁶ An NVQ 3 course is already available¹⁷



ABC
Made up of representatives from the
Isle of Man's Heritage Trusts

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Buildings at Risk



Renovation is more expensive than demolition and rebuilding

- Tax and government fees disincentivise renovation
- Value Added Tax (VAT) is charged at 20% for building materials- 0% for the construction of new dwellings.¹⁸ Some activities can be subject to 5%- but only if using a VAT registered builder
- Self-renovators suffer a perverse incentive when applying for building control¹⁹
- Building are being lost- especially quarterland farms as the interpretation of planning rules are inconsistent and proper assessment of importance are lacking²⁰
- The Manx Development Corporation aims to renovate and develop Brownfield sites. Can government make economic sense from sustainable development²¹ ?

What do people think about old buildings?

- Civic pride is negatively affected by dilapidated buildings
- Local industries are represented contribute to a sense of place²³
- Younger people care less and it's the façade of buildings and the streetscape is the priority ²⁴

Further research:

- Conduct a study on the value of old buildings to the Manx public
- Analyze how VAT changes impact planning in the building trade and property development
- Review the activities and finances of the Manx Development Corporation



Endnotes:

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2. Cannell, S. (2001)
3. Planning and building control-case 24/00055
4. Kewley (2023)
5. Richardson (2018)
6. IOM Government website (2023)
7. Valuation Office Agency (2018)
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9. Dandara (2025)
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15. IOM Today
16. Public First
17. Elefante, C

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