The Castles and Forts of the Isle of Man

General Introduction by Bob Carswell

PROMONTORY FORTS

A **promontory** is a prominent piece of higher land which juts out into a lower surrounding area. It sometimes stands out from a hillside above lower-lying land. But you'll find them particularly in the Island as a headland jutting out from the coast. The Island's coast has many headlands with steep cliffs on three sides, with the fourth side connected to the land. Sometimes the landward side has become quite a narrow neck.

The cliffs are natural defences and mean that the promontory can't easily be approached on those sides. By building defences on the side facing the land, the promontory can be made into a fort. **Promontory forts** were built mainly for defence or refuge – shelter from attack – rather than as places to live. There are more than 15 **promontory forts** round the Island's coast. There were also at least four forts on inland promontories as well. Promontory forts are thought to date from the Bronze Age.

The landward side was protected by a deep ditch and a high rampart – a big wall. The ramparts were strengthened with large stones, sometimes just on the front facing attackers, and sometimes on both sides. There'd be a gateway in for the people taking shelter there, but this would have been heavily defended by building the ramparts up on each side of it.

From the promontory fort, a look-out could be kept of activity on the coast, and the alarm raised if necessary. The Island's promontory forts are generally quite small, so there wouldn't have been much room for livestock in them. If there was a sudden attack, there wouldn't have been much time to round up livestock and drive them into a promontory fort, anyway.

Some of the promontory forts were also used by later people. At Cronk ny Merriu in Santon, for example, a Viking house was built behind the rampart inside the promontory fort.

OTHER ANCIENT FORTS AND ROUND HOUSES

The Brogh Fort in Santon is possibly a castle mound surrounded by still impressive ditches and banks. But it's quite small, not very large across, so perhaps more of a fortified round house than what we might think of as a castle.

Cronk Howe Mooar near Port Erin is a man made gravel mound about 10 metres high in the middle of what is now a wet, boggy area. A ditch was dug round it, and on top of the mound would have been a small wooden castle, possibly with a palisade – a wooden fence or wall.

Steep slopes could provide natural defences, and so could areas of curragh, such as round the inland promontory fort at Ballanicholas in Marown.

Port y Candas near St John's is surrounded by curragh, so that would have provided a natural defence to what was probably a round house on the site.

Castleward in Braddan is on a rocky outcrop in the marshy valley of the River Glass. It has three walled embankments. The site is also known as Knock y Troddan, 'Hill of the Combat' and also 'the Sod Castle'. But it may be just coincidence that the Manx for Sod Castle, Cashtal yn Oaid, is not too dissimilar to the English name, Castle Ward.

The Cashtal in Lonan is another inland promontory fort. It's on a rocky ridge or spur of higher land above Glen Gawne. Its exposed side is protected by a ditch and rampart. The Cashtal is also pretty well hidden away, and it's thought that a large building on it was a store for grain.

The Island people would have known about Cronk Howe Mooar or The Cashtal, but raiders from the sea perhaps wouldn't find the hidden places, but, if they did, they could be defended. The building at The Cashtal would've held far more grain that could be grown in the area, so it may have been a hidden stockpile for the people who lived here in case they were attacked by raiders.

HILL FORTS

A **hill fort** is a site on high ground with a rampart, or several ramparts, made of earth, stone or wood with a ditch on the outside of that. The fortification usually follows the contours of the hill, and a good example is at South Barrule. The hilltop provides a good look-out point, and is hard for attackers to approach uphill. Hill forts thought to date from the late Bronze Age, which came to an end about 600 BC, or from the Iron Age (600 BC – 500 AD in the Isle of Man).

Hill forts were used as places of refuge and defence, though there are sometimes houses or smaller huts within their ramparts. It would have been a bleak, exposed spot in bad weather. At South Barrule there were over 70 huts, but perhaps not all built and in use at the same time. The ones on the slightly more sheltered eastern side are generally larger.

Hill forts probably developed because of fighting over livestock, crops and territory between different groups of people. By the Iron Age, the climate was cooler, so people would need more land to produce the same amount of food for themselves. Perhaps the people of South Barrule hill fort were in competition with the people who developed Cronk Sumark in Sulby as a hill fort. Cronk Sumark may have been in use even before South Barrule. Other possible rivals may have been based at St Patrick's Isle in Peel or Castleward in Braddan.

PEEL CASTLE

St Patrick's Isle stands at the mouth of the River Neb in Peel, separated from Peel Hill by about 35 metres of sea. The Manx name of the town of Peel is Purt ny h-Inshey, the Port of the Island. But there wasn't always an Island here. About 8,000 years ago the sea level was lower, so what is now St Patrick's Isle would have been a continuation of the spur of land that makes up Peel Hill, though probably the River Neb flowed out between the two of them at that time.

Earliest traces of flint tools show that St Patrick's Isle was used by hunter/gatherers about 8,000 years ago. These people of the Mesolithic (The Middle Stone Age) would have looked for food and other necessities according to the season, so probably didn't live here throughout the year. Similar traces have been found on the Peel Hill side, round the present Fenella Beach car park.

By the time that agriculture developed, the sea level had come up. But the little isle would have been of little interest to farmers. Archaeologists haven't found anything to suggest that it was used by the agricultural people of the Neolithic (The New Stone Age). It would have been too small for farming, difficult to get to and exposed to the weather. It may have been used as a defensive or religious site, though there's no positive evidence.

Though there's no trace from the Neolithic on St Patrick's Isle, archaeologists have found evidence that people occupied it in the late Bronze Age, which ended about 600 BC. They were probably making use of it because of its natural defences. By the Iron Age, from about 600 BC onwards, through to about 500 AD, there was a large grain store there, similar to grain stores found in British hillforts. It looks as though St Patrick's Isle had become an important defensive site for people in competition, perhaps, with those of the South Barrule and Cronk Sumark hill forts.

We know that Christians often took over places and festivals already associated with earlier, pagan religious customs, and made them Christian. The pagan midwinter celebration became the Christian Christmas, for example. While there's no evidence that this small isle had been used as a centre of pagan religion in the very early period, a link between St Patrick and the isle was traditionally established in 444 AD when he's said to have landed in the Isle of Man. St Patrick's Isle became a centre of the Celtic Christian Church, perhaps because it had already been a centre for pre-Christian, pagan religion. Christian burials may have begun from as early as 450, and a large cemetery developed over the next two hundred years. As St Patrick's Isle was difficult to get to, its use as a place of burial must have had a ritual significance. There may have been an early monastery on the site. Buildings at that time would have been built of clay, sod and timber.

From 798, the Vikings started raiding coasts in the Irish Sea. The first building on St Patrick's Isle that can be dated is for defence. The Round Tower was built of Creg Malin sandstone in the 900s on the highest point of St Patrick's Isle. It's about 15 metres high, so a good look-out point against raids.. Its door is over 2 metres from the ground, and faces the west door of the nearby St Patrick's Church. The priests – perhaps monks – carrying the church treasures would have gone up into the tower by a ladder, the ladder pulled up into the tower and the door barred, to provide refuge against attack.

The oldest parts of St Patrick's Church are from the same time as the Round Tower, but a lot of it was rebuilt later. There was also a smaller chapel nearby. The Round Tower itself originally would have had a cone-shaped roof which was later replaced with a flat platform with crenellations – that's the sort of up-and-down shape we associate with the top of castle walls. The Round Tower shows that St Patrick's Isle had become an important religious centre to have such expensive defences, similar to large monastic settlements in Ireland. The tower would have been for warning and defence against Viking raiders.

The arrival and settlement of the Vikings on St Patrick's Isle is shown by the remains of Norse houses on the lower, landward side facing Peel Bay, and by pagan burials in the 900s

within the existing Christian cemetery. These include 'The Pagan Lady' who must have been a woman of high rank, judging from things buried with her, including her beautiful necklace. She wasn't necessarily Scandinavian herself, because Viking incomers intermarried with the local population. The pagan, though, changed quite quickly to Christian, and another keeill was built on the isle within 100 years of the Vikings' arrival. The Vikings' name for the place was Holm Patrick – Holm is the Viking word for an island. The nearby settlement of houses became known as Holmtown.

The Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles say that the Norwegian king Magnus Barefoot landed at St Patrick's Isle in 1098. He liked what he saw, decided to stay and built forts. These included ramparts and ditches which were altered several times over the years. But the Chronicles also tell us that Magnus used his military power to have large timbers brought over from Galloway in Southern Scotland to build forts with. The name given to a very large timber post is a pile. From this, a fort built of large timbers was called a *peel*. The isle was protected by its jutting, rocky coast against attack from the sea. On the sides facing Peel Hill and Peel Bay, it originally sloped more gradually down. It was probably on these sides that there were ramparts and a palisade,but the sea has worn away parts overlooking the present Fenella Beach and the roadway later cut into it on the Peel Bay side, so there's now no trace of them.

Although King Magnus was killed just five years later in 1103, his peel remained on St Patrick's Isle. After about 150 or 200 years, the wooden fortifications began to be replaced by stone, but the name remained. For many years it was known as *The Peel*, and in the seventeenth century *Castle Peel*. The settlement was still often known as Holmtown, but was also called Peeltown, later becoming just Peel.

Use of St Patrick's Isle remained mixed between the religious and military, though the military use and administrative duties connected with running the Isle of Man usually took priority over the religious. In addition to the early St Patrick's Church and chapel and the keeill built in Viking times, Bishop Simon began building the nave of St German's Cathedral – the main part for the congregation – about 1230. Bishop Simon was buried there, together with his pet dog. The cathedral took about 200 years to complete. It would have been inside the rampart and palisade of Magnus Barefoot's peel.

In the early 1300s, the rampart and palisade was rebuilt. The area alongside where St German's Cathedral was being built was important for defence. In 1363, Bishop William Russell complained that services couldn't be held in St German's because the area was being used as a fortress. In 1392, William le Scrope got permission to build a castle on what was called 'Patrikyholm' because the church was said to have been destroyed by Scottish attacks and services were no longer held there.

Le Scrope probably added battlements to St German's Cathedral. He also had five stone towers built of Creg Malin sandstone at intervals along the earth rampart and timber palisade. Each one had its own living quarters. The biggest of these was the Gatehouse. He also replaced the earth and timber works with stone walls between the towers, but the unstable ground and erosion on that side of St Patrick's Isle meant that the walls later collapsed and were lost.

After Sir John Stanley became King of Man in 1405, other buildings were developed as living quarters, and a slate **curtain wall** was built round St Patrick's Isle about 1460. An

armoury was built in the 1500s, and the round fort at the north end was built about 1550. A barracks was built in the 1600s. Alongside Fenella's Tower there is a **sally port** from the Civil War period (1641-1651) – a fortified gate to allow soldiers inside a castle to make *sallies* or quick attacks on an enemy before retreating back into the castle. The Civil War period also saw the building of a fort within a fort, when the central mound and its double-ditched enclosure were built in the centre of St Patrick's Isle. This was probably to protect the garrison from artillery fire from Peel Hill.

The curtain wall would originally have gone round the east end of St German's Cathedral, but unstable foundations and erosion later led to its collapse in this area. The cathedral building was again modified so that guard patrols could get through to the section of wall on the other side, but the east gable of St German's with its windows would have been a weak spot defensively.

St German's became the Cathedral of Sodor. 'Sodor' means the southern Isles, as seen from the Viking point of view, coming round the tip of Scotland from Norway, and refers to the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. From about 1200, though, Manx kings held only Skye, Lewis and Harris in the north, with the rest of the Hebrides being held by what later became known as the Lord of the Isles. Later, the name Sodor was thought to apply to the Hebridean islands only, so the Bishop was – and still is - appointed to 'Sodor and Man'. Another Bishop of Sodor and Man buried in the nave of St German's is Samuel Rutter. He wrote words for his own memorial which says that he shares his grave with his brothers the worms – "Stop, reader, and laugh at the Palace of a Bishop".

Until 1780, the crypt – a cellar – underneath St German's Cathedral was used as a prison for people who'd behaved in a way that the church didn't approve of. The church had its own courts, the ecclesiastical courts, which punished people for actions such as swearing, living together when not married, playing music on the Sabbath, missing church, and so on. Conditions were cold, damp and very unpleasant, so the general run of wrong-doers were rarely kept there for more than a week. But in the 1650s and 60s, and through almost to 1700, the church dealt very harshly with Quakers, or members of the Society of Friends, who saw religion as a private, individual matter, and wanted nothing to do with the established church.

Some Quakers were imprisoned in St German's Crypt several times, but particulary William Callow of Ballafayle in Maughold. In May 1664 he was again taken by the ecclesiastical courts, and he wrote later that he'd been imprisoned for three months. He was later banished from the Isle of Man, having to leave his wife and family. His wife was exiled about 18 months later, and she too was forced to leave her family, even her very young baby. The Church's aggressive attitude to the Quakers didn't change until after 1698 with the appointment as Bishop of Thomas Wilson, whom the Quakers came to look on as a friend.

In 1728, Bishop Wilson wanted to repair St German's, because the roof had fallen in in 1710, but the Earl of Derby ordered Governor Horton to refuse his request. In the 1730s, the Governor ordered the roof to be stripped off the most part of St German's Cathedral to use for building stables in Castletown. As there was still a roof on the chancel, St German's Cathedral was used for the enthronement of Bishop Mark Hildesley in 1755. In the 1760s, Hildesley also asked for permission to repair St German's, but that was also refused. For all that, Bishop Richard Richmond was enthroned in St German's in 1773, but he was the last one to be enthroned there. By 1791 it was roofless, and doors and windows and anything else

worth taking had been stripped out of it. The remaining part of the roof was finally blown down in 1824. There was talk of restoring St German's Cathedral for many years, but the cost was too great. Eventually, in 1982 St German's Church in Peel was made the Island's cathedral.

At low tide, it had been possible to wade the 20 metres between the town and the Gatehouse. In 1750, George Moore, a rich merchant, protected the harbour by having a wall built joining Peel Hill to St Patrick's Isle, forming what is known as the Fenella Beach, and probably cutting off the old course of the River Neb, which now ran out of the harbour mouth into Peel Bay. The wall was later developed to form the West Quay.

In 1758, the Duke of Atholl ordered the castle to be dismantled, except for the armoury and store. In 1765, its guns were removed and the small remaining garrison stood down. But the American War of Independence had brought raids in the Irish Sea by John Paul Jones in 1778, including on Whitehaven and St Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, so in 1781 a battery – a place from which large guns could be fired – was installed on St Patrick's Isle, with four 18-pounders. In 1793 another battery was installed part way round Peel Bay rather than in the castle to provide better defensive coverage against Napoleonic attack. In 1793, too, the Duke of Atholl was made Governor of the Isle of Man. He was attracted to Peel Castle as a place to live, but realised that it would not be practical and too expensive to repair. Despite the poor condition of the castle, the curtain walls still stood, and a further battery was built in 1816 to protect Peel Bay and Harbour, and remained in place until 1822.

CASTLE RUSHEN

Castle Rushen stands at the mouth of the Silver Burn overlooking a natural harbour and the coast. The town grew up round the castle. It may have been one of the places where Magnus Barefoot built a peel, but no trace has been found of a mound or earlier structure. The earliest work is from about 1150 to 1190 when a square tower was built. It's thought that the keep was surrounded by a bailey – a protective palisade or fence – surrounded by a ditch. Two towers were added to the south and to the west wall about 1200. This would have been the building damaged by King Robert the Bruce of Scotland in a siege in 1313. The fact that Bruce attacked Castle Rushen rather than Peel Castle may show that it was already more important in the Island's administration.

The original square tower is the basis of the **keep** – the central stronghold of the castle, providing the ground floor and about half of the first floor. Between 1333 and about 1350 repairs were made and the keep built up to the second floor. Another tower was built on the east side with a north side tower built as a gatehouse with a portcullis and drawbridge over a deep ditch.

In a second period of building in the late 1300s, the keep and gatehouse were extended up to the fourth floor. A curtain wall was also built round, including an outer gatehouse and barbican – a narrow and crooked corridor between high walls so that attackers couldn't approach with a battering ram or in large numbers, and defenders could easily fire down at them.

From the south side (facing what is now the market square) and running down the east side along Castle Street to the gate is the remains of feature which once would have surrounded about two-thirds of the castle on its open sides from about 1550. This is called a glacis. It's a

steep slope up to the walls which prevented early cannon from being able to fire against the walls and also enabled defenders to fire on approaching attackers.

Backing on to the barbican and next to the Outer Gatehouse was a two-storey building from the late 1500s. Between 1643 and 1651, James Stanley, *Yn Stanlagh Mooar* (The Great Stanley), 7th Earl of Derby, lived in Castle Rushen. Two more storeys facing out over the curtain wall were added to make Derby House. With many alterations since then, including removal of the fourth floor, nothing remains of his apartments other than the walls themselves.

Castle Rushen had largely fallen into disrepair by 1800. Between the curtain wall and the keep buildings had been provided for the garrison – a body of soldiers stationed in a place. In building work of the early 1800s, a hall, kitchen and other garrison buildings were built, using the original buildings as a base. By 1897, the garrison was a half a company of infantry (fewer than 100), and was withdrawn that year.

The Castle had been used to keep the mentally ill (though the criminally insane were sent to the United Kingdom), but conditions were very poor. It was used until a lunatic asylum was built at Ballamona in Braddan in the 1860s.

Prisoners had long been held in Castle Rushen's keep. Conditions were very poor, with all prisoners, male and female, being kept in a single room, and it was not very secure. There are reports of prisoners either climbing out, or pushing their way out through rotten parts of the gates. Between 1813 and 1827 new prison buildings were built in the courtyard between the curtain wall and the keep, but without proper maintenance their condition got steadily worse. A prison inspector severely criticised the conditions in Castle Rushen in 1885, and as a result a purpose-built prison was opened instead in Victoria Road in Douglas in 1891.

Castle Rushen has been used for the ceremonial swearing in of successive Lieutenant-Governors of the Island. The castle was restored in 1910 by Armitage Rigby, who had the prison buildings removed. A court house remained in use for trials until 2009, and the Registrar for Births, Marriages and Deaths still has rooms in the former Derby House.

DOUGLAS FORT, DERBY FORT, THE CALF BATTERY AND BALLACHURRY

About 1540, there was a scheme under King Henry VIII to protect the coasts of the British Isles from invasion by Spain. A round fort was built on the Pollock Rocks at Douglas. It was a castellated tower with emplacements for four guns. There was a small garrison attached to it, and was also used as a gaol, though its condition was described as ruinous by 1792. A woodcut image of it appeared in a book by John Feltham in 1794. Although it was demolished in 1818, there are still traces of it to be seen in some old photographs.

In the 1640s, the whole of the British Isles was in turmoil because of the Civil War between the Royalists and the Parliamentarians. James Stanley staunchly supported King Charles and the Royalist cause. In 1644, he bought the Calf of Man because he wanted to fortify it against the Parliamentarians. A battery was set up on The Burroo, a rock separated from the Calf by Gull y Burroo. Coastal batteries elsewhere included Gob ny Rona in Kirk Maughold, south of Ramsey, which would have commanded the approach to Ramsey Bay. There were also gun emplacements in Ramsey itself, on the shore near the present Church of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, and St Maughold, though no trace of them now survives.

The growth in importance of Castle Rushen as the power base of the Stanley family, the Earls of Derby, had come at the expense of Peel Castle. Safe anchorage near Castletown was provided by the natural harbour of what became known as Derbyhaven. And protecting Derbyhaven is the Derby Fort, which stands on St Michael's Isle, but which is often called Fort Island.

The fort was brought into good repair again by James Stanley, the Seventh Earl of Derby, in the 1640s, The Stanleys had a palace called Latham House in Lancashire. When James Stanley's wife Charlotte the Countess of Derby and her family were there in 1644, but James Stanley was here in the Island, Latham House was attacked and besieged for a month by the Roundheads - the Parliamentary army. The siege ended with the arrival of Prince Rupert with a force of Cavaliers, the Royalist supporters. James Stanley named this building Derby Fort in honour of his wife's brave resistance. His initials and a date from the 1640s can be seen in a stone above the entrance.

Not far from the Derby Fort on St Michael's Isle, Fort Island, are the faint remains of another fort built by James Stanley about the same time. This is a rectangular fort with built up earth banks. This shows a change in military technology because of the development of cannon, from the round, stone-built Derby Fort to a rectangular earthern fort. The traces here are faint. But we can see a much more dramatic example of this sort of fort.

At Ballachurry in Kirk Andreas, James Stanley ordered a new fort to be developed in 1645. It has a moat, and at the corners of the rectangular fort are bastions, which jut outward from the main enclosure. They allow the fort's defenders to fire at people attacking the other walls and bastions. Ballachurry Fort is an imposing site, but it doesn't look as though it ever saw use. It's also difficult to know why it was built here. Perhaps it was intended to be a hidden stronghold with supplies of food and ammunition for the defenders.

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