

## BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Accomplished architect – but not one of his buildings is registered

*Armitage Rigby designed many important buildings around the island and his work is worth protecting*

### Feature

BY PETER KELLY  
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**W**hen Marlene Hendy was appointed the island's first conservation officer in May 1995, she had her work cut out. Not only did she have to advise the planning committee and the public on conservation matters, and deal with financial applications for assistance with registered buildings or those in conservation areas, but she had the task of registering more buildings from a draft list of more than 400 that had been prepared years before.

The first building to be registered was Bishops Court, with the decision to register it being made on May 13, 1983. The purpose of registration was to provide protection to buildings entered on the registered building list because of their 'special architectural or historical interest'.

Prior to Marlene's appointment, registration was undertaken by different planning officers, but in what has to be described as a haphazard manner.

A notice would be served on an owner of a property to say that on a certain date their property had been 'registered'.

Virtually every notice said 'for reasons of architectural or historic interest', but no details were given as to why these buildings were 'special'.

Attached to some notices was a copy of an Ordnance Survey map outlining the boundaries of what was registered, but not in every case. Douglas Railway Station is registered, but without a plan, so is it just the station building or does registration extend out to the railway workshops? Or indeed does it mean the relatively new bus workshops are registered as they are within the curtilage of the Douglas Railway Station?

So poor was the

introduction of the system that nobody can give a definitive answer.

Conservation areas didn't formally come into being until 1990 and therefore in Castletown we find building after building being registered, including the modern Liverpool Trustees Savings Bank (now Lloyds) for reason of its 'architectural or historic interest'. A total of 47 buildings were registered in the centre of Castletown during the month of February 1984.

Marlene set about ensuring all new registrations

contained an appraisal of the building, highlighting its architectural or historic importance, its rarity, age,

**'At his Ballamona Mansion, the once-thatched gate lodge is now just an empty space...'**

group value and so on. She set herself the target of adding to the list all known Baillie Scott-designed buildings. She then planned to work on the buildings of Scott's main rival in the design of 'Arts and Crafts' buildings, Armitage Rigby.

She worked on the correct principle of judging buildings in the Isle of Man against others in the island and not against buildings in the UK, where budgets of clients were usually far greater and the architects had a greater freedom in doing what they wanted, compared to here.

Rigby's importance was also recognised by Pat Tutt in her book on the architecture of the Isle of Man, published in 2013. She described Rigby as '... one of the more significant architects working on the island ...'.

Unfortunately, by the time Marlene left her role as conservation officer in May 2003, none of Rigby's buildings had been registered.

In December 2004, however, a local amenity group requested the registration of iconic Royal Buildings at the top of Royal Avenue, Onchan. This had been designed by Rigby as a house with integral butcher's shop for Alex Nivison.

Nothing was heard in reply and so reminders were sent periodically. It was not until January 2007 that a reply was received advising that the government department



Billown Mansion, Malew, Rigby's largest commission, designed for the Moore family. In addition to the mansion house his brief included a model farm, lodges, motor garage and estate houses. The mansion replaced an older house called Crescent Cottage. The scheme was so great by local standards that two Castletown builders had to combine forces to complete it, Coopers and Corrins



Rigby used red sandstone in his design for a bank using local materials in Market Place, Peel. The building was later the town's Post Office and is now home to a vet's surgery



The British Hotel under construction in 1897. Rigby designed it so it was a proper half-timbered construction of heavy oak timbers with brick infill which was then plastered and painted. His design incorporated a large assembly room on the first floor for special events. This is now known as 'The Embassy'

**'[Rigby was] one of the more significant architects working on the island...'**

**Pat Tutt**

Author, An introduction to the architecture of the Isle of Man (2013)

was near to completing the research. In May 2007 the department advised in a press notice their intention to register the building. Several societies wrote in support, as did the great nieces of Alex Nivison and then ... nothing.

In July 2008, contractors started work on the building, in conjunction with a new block of apartments next door. Further letters were sent to enquire about the registration that was being considered a whole year before. The reply came from the then conservation officer to say that he 'agreed with

the developer to postpone registration until after the alterations were complete'.

Was this in contradiction of the committee's decision? We may never know, but what came to light was the department is not governed by any time constraints in deciding whether to register a building or not under the present legislation. The 'alterations' were complete several years ago but the building still does not appear on the list of registered buildings.

Some Rigby-designed buildings have been

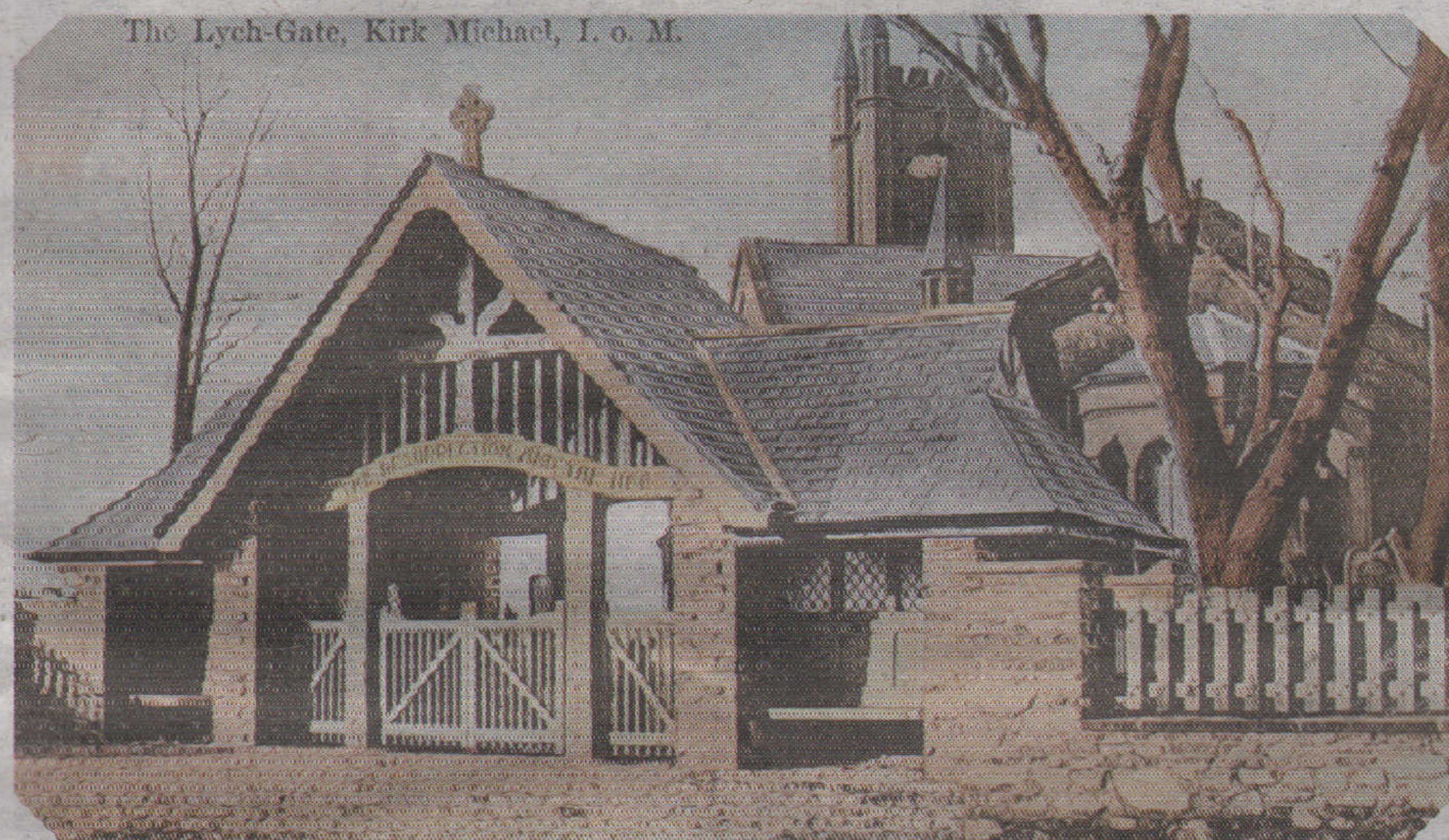
demolished – the printing works he created for the Isle of Man Examiner was swept away to provide a site for the HSBC bank.

At his Ballamona Mansion, the once-thatched gate lodge is now just an empty space.

Nearby, at the top of Quine's Hill, a thatched bungalow called 'Gowan' has been replaced by a new house. Across the road, what was once a pair of cottage-style semi-detached houses have been extended in all directions and now look more like a terrace.



A pair of Rigby-designed cottage-style houses built at Little Switzerland by Mark Carine, a local builder who worked closely with Rigby. Later with his partner, Frank Heslop, Rigby incorporated this house type in a scheme for St George's Crescent, Port Erin, and another at Ramsey but this was the only pair built



Rigby's lych gate and cross shelter created an imposing entrance to Kirk Michael churchyard, so much so that it featured on postcards



One of a number of houses designed at St George's Crescent, Port Erin, by Rigby and his partner Frank Heslop. Each house was different but they didn't design every house in the road. They produced plans for other dwellings in the south from their Port Erin office, which was run by Heslop



Ballahowin, near St Mark's was built for the gentleman farmer. It has lost the two chimney stacks on the left-hand side, but is generally more intact than its twin at Oatlands Farm in Santon



Alex Nivison's butcher shop and house designed by Rigby. This came so close to being registered and yet still could be. The canopy and shop windows were removed in the 1930s when the shop became Martin's Bank and metal window frames were fitted. During recent works Hartford Homes reinstated them at the request of the Friends of Onchan's Heritage and the property looks much like this

Biography

# An architect who came to be in great demand

Armitage Rigby was born in 1864, the same year as Archibald Knox and the year before Baillie Scott.

His parents were John and Sarah Rigby of Altrincham, Cheshire.

His father was co-founder of the cotton manufacturing business of Armitage and Rigby of Ancoats, Manchester and Warrington.

At the age of 17, he became articled to J. Medland Taylor, an architect in Manchester.

He attended construction classes at Manchester Technical School and later spent two weeks in New York 'studying local methods of construction'. He continued as an assistant to Taylor for another year before spending eight weeks study touring Germany, Holland and Belgium.

Returning to England, he worked for a year in the London office of Milne and Hall.

Joseph Hall had been educated at King William's College and was articled to Medland Taylor a year before Rigby. In 1887, Rigby returned to Altrincham to work as drawing office manager for his cousin Faulkner Armitage who had a well-established architectural practice.

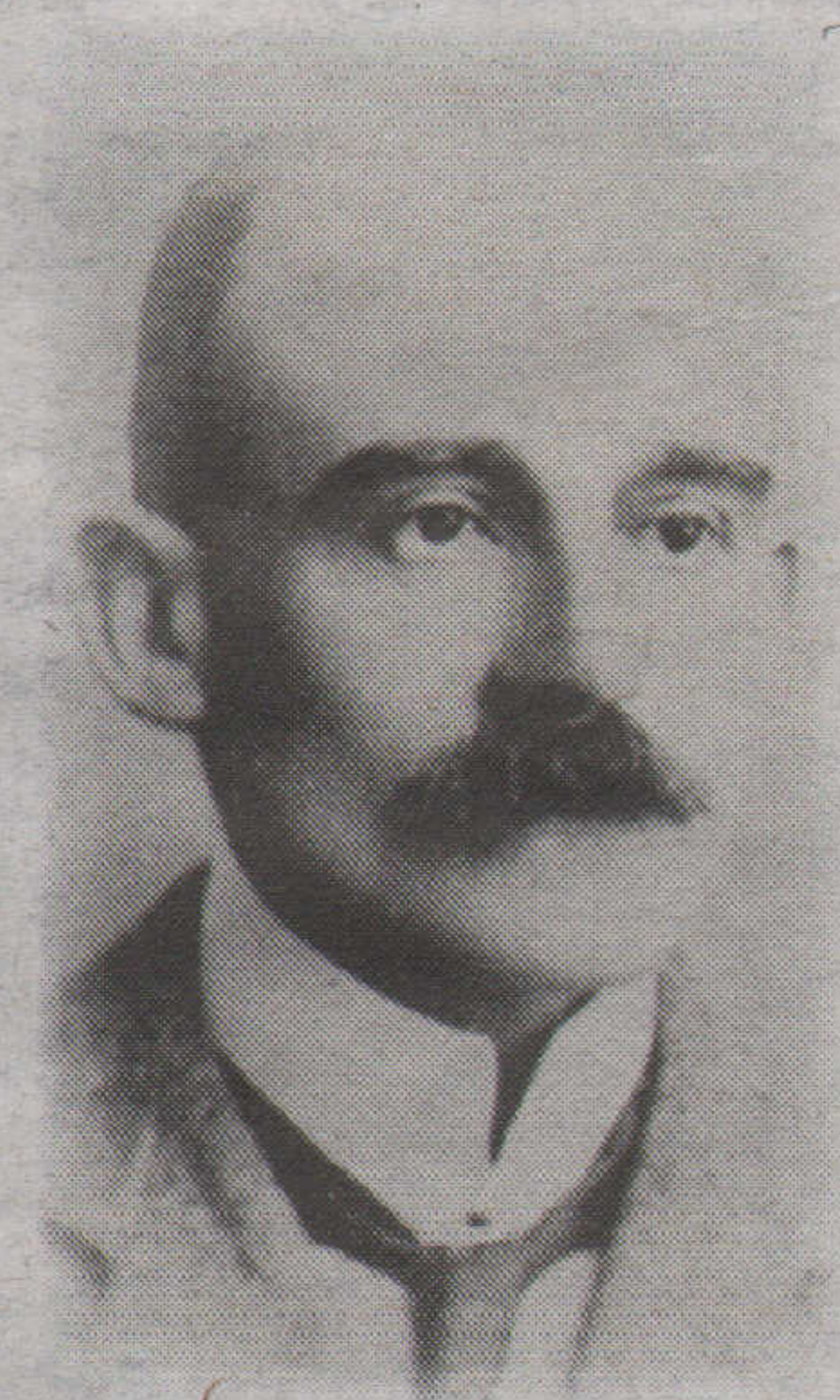
When Rigby applied for membership of the RIBA in 1905, he stated that he was obliged to give up practice in 1889 due to ill-health.

However, he had in fact come to the Isle of Man and was farming at Annacur, The Cooil, at some time during 1888. He was on the committee of the Manx Agricultural Society from January 1889.

He produced an elaborate deed plan of Ballapaddag Farm in 1890, the same year as he produced a report for Deemster Drinkwater on ways of improving sanitary arrangements and ventilation in Douglas Court House.

In December 1890 he purchased the 116-acre Ballamona Farm, Port Soderick, from Mary Leece and her son Rev Charles Leece of Port St Mary.

Mrs Leece moved to West Kensington, London, and it was there Rigby married her daughter Edith in January 1891. They were married by Rev TW Dury who, in 1907,



Armitage Rigby

became Bishop of Sodor and Man.

They returned to Ballamona, where Armitage Rigby undertook several methods of improved farming.

He became involved with Oakhill Chapel and was a Licensed Reader at Braddan Church.

He became vice-president of Braddan Football Club and in 1908 was elected MHK for North Douglas.

His return to architecture came in 1896 when Woolfs Brewery held an architectural competition for a new public house/hotel on North Quay, Douglas. Rigby entered - and won. His 'New Antique' design appealed to the judges and so 'The British' was born.

Suddenly he was in great demand, designing hotel alterations, printing works, places of entertainment, holiday camps, houses, banks, warehouses, building estates, a mansion, a large stable block, church alterations, church hall and the much under-appreciated cross shelters at Maughold and Kirk Michael.

Under the patronage of Lieutenant Governor, Lord Raglan, he restored Castle Rushen by the removal of Victorian 'add-ons' and even recycled stone from the castle in alterations at Great Meadow.

He was a Senior Lieutenant in the Isle of Man Volunteers and in August 1910, while at camp in St John's, he suffered with an abscess of the jaw which resulted in blood poisoning from which he died on August 31, aged 46.

Near to the road leading to Port Soderick Railway Station, 'Ballaveare', a two-storey 'Arts and Crafts' house was demolished to make way for a new dwelling currently under construction.

Fortunately, others are still with us and the process of consideration for registration should be started before they, too, are gone.

Most of the houses at Little Switzerland in Douglas are Rigby and not Baillie Scott-designed. There are a number at St George's Crescent in Port Erin and at Baldrine.

The bank he designed in the Market Place at Peel uses red sandstone and painted roughcast for the exterior walls. No Chinese granite here - he respected local materials.

In the south of the island, he gave us the mansion, model farm and gate lodges at Billown and the half-timbered stable block next door at Great Meadow. At Ballasalla came the village hall which still serves the same purpose.

Through the patronage of Lord Raglan for his restoration of Castle Rushen,

he was asked to design shelters for the collection of Norse crosses at Maughold and Kirk Michael. It was a bit like asking an architect to design the first ever railway station, power station or crematorium. There was nothing that had gone before to give guidelines.

At Maughold, he used local stone, the same as the church, but he kept it in its natural state without roughcast. The roof was of slate and the building was open-fronted like a typical cart shed on Manx farms. Traditional shore stone cobbles were

similarly used for the flooring. At Kirk Michael, because of the location, the building doubled-up as a lych gate and shelter. The only other lych gate up to this time was a small one at Kirk Braddan. Rigby's design provided a dignified entrance to the churchyard where a number of Manx Bishops lie.

All of his buildings are important in their own way, but how long will it take the guardians of our architectural heritage to realise it?

Until they are registered, they remain at risk.