

# 125th Anniversary of the Tynwald Chamber

RESEARCH PAPER

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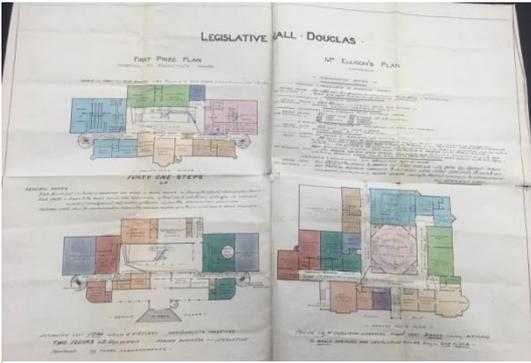
*The first sitting of Tynwald Court in the current Tynwald Chamber was held on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1894. The Chamber provided members of Tynwald for the first time with a purpose-built Chamber in a central location in Douglas.*

*This paper gives an overview of the meeting places of Tynwald and its Branches since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the history of the Wedding Cake and Tynwald buildings, and recent developments of the complex now known as Legislative Buildings.*

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## FROM CASTLETOWN TO DOUGLAS: THE SEARCH FOR BETTER ACCOMMODATION



Plans for a Legislative Hall in Douglas.  
Source: Manx Museum Library, Douglas,  
Isle of Man.

From at least the fifteenth century, Tynwald and its Branches would usually meet at Castle Rushen for legislative business.<sup>1</sup> The earliest recorded use of a specific legislative chamber by the Keys dates back to 1709, when they began meeting on the lower floor of Bishop Wilson's Library in Castletown. When the Library fell into disrepair in 1818, the Keys found a temporary home at the George Inn, while the building now known as the [Old House of Keys](#) was erected on the site of the Library. The Keys met there from 1821 onwards.<sup>2</sup>

From 1860 onwards, the seat of Government began to move to Douglas from Castletown. This was partly because both Governor Pigott (1860-1863) and Governor Loch (1863-1882) had decided to live in the area, and partly because Douglas, with its wide harbour, was increasingly important to the Island's economy.<sup>3</sup> During this period the Courthouse on Atholl Street in Douglas was used as the venue for sittings of the Keys, Council, and Tynwald in Douglas, though they continued to meet in Castletown as well. In 1869, designs were commissioned, and land bought in Douglas, for a purpose-built legislative building which would house all three Chambers as well as other Government offices; the plans were eventually abandoned after a series of delays.<sup>4</sup>

The final Keys sitting in Castletown was held on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1874, marking a permanent move to the capital for the lower house.<sup>5</sup> Eventually in 1879, a permanent home for the House of Keys and Legislative Council was found when the Bank of Mona building on Prospect Hill came up for sale.

### THE 'WEDDING CAKE'

The 'Wedding Cake' building has stood on Prospect Hill since 1855. Originally a bank, the building has been the home of the House of Keys and the Legislative Council since 1881. On account of its tiered shape and white colour, the building is known locally as the 'Wedding Cake'.

The original owner of the 'Wedding Cake' building was the Bank of Mona, a subsidiary of the City of Glasgow Bank which had set up business on the Island in 1849. Following the success of the bank, the Bank of Mona hired local Manx architect [John Robinson](#) to design a grander building. Its construction was finished in 1855.

The building remained the property of the Bank of Mona until late 1878, when the collapse of the parent bank forced the Bank of Mona to close and the 'Wedding Cake' building was put up for sale.<sup>6</sup> It was purchased by the Government in December 1879 for a sum of £3,700.<sup>7</sup>



The building originally had a red exterior. Source: Manx National Heritage ([PG/13607/2/30](#))

<sup>1</sup> The location of meetings is recorded in the [Statute Books](#), which date back to 1417.

<sup>2</sup> *A Centenary of the Tynwald Chamber*, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Belchem, 'The Onset of Modernity', pp. 90-93; Winterbottom, 'Economic History', p. 220; Winterbottom, *Governors of the Isle of Man*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Brown, 'Movement of Courts and Tynwald to Douglas'.

<sup>5</sup> *A Centenary of the Tynwald Chamber*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Winterbottom, 'Economic History, 1830-1996', p. 229.

<sup>7</sup> *Tynwald Guidebook*, p. 22.

## A NEW HOME FOR KEYS AND COUNCIL

Soon after the purchase of the 'Wedding Cake', the building was refurbished to create chambers for both the House of Keys and the Legislative Council.

The main banking hall of the Bank of Mona was adapted for use by the House of Keys, and the first sitting took place in the new Chamber in 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1881. Designing suitable seating arrangements in the Chamber proved to be a challenge, and a number of different formations were trialled, including a horseshoe table in 1891.<sup>8</sup> In 1908 a Committee was appointed to consider the accommodation in the Keys' chamber.<sup>9</sup> The Committee's work resulted in a number of alterations to the Chamber in 1909 which remain in place today. A 15ft extension to create space for a larger public gallery and a press gallery was created, and the seating arrangements were changed to the opposing rows of school-type desks still in use today. The public gallery was updated in 1932 with the addition of green leather benches.<sup>10</sup>

The Legislative Council Chamber is situated on the first floor of the former bank building, directly above the House of Keys Chamber. The Legislative Chamber has not changed significantly in appearance since 1894. The Members still sit in a horseshoe configuration, though the President's chair is a more recent addition, having been gifted to Tynwald by Australia in 1982 in recognition of the Millennium of Tynwald. Save for the addition of carpet and general cosmetic upkeep, the most significant alteration has been the addition of oak panelling in 1911.<sup>11</sup>

## FROM THE COURTHOUSE TO A NEW TYNWALD CHAMBER

Although the Keys and the Council now had their own chambers in which to meet as separate bodies, they continued to meet together as Tynwald in the Douglas Courthouse. In 1885, the Courthouse was declared not suitable for this purpose and, after much debate, an extension to the Wedding Cake was approved. The necessary land was purchased in 1891, and on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1892, an initial sum of £3,500 was approved by Tynwald for work to begin.<sup>12</sup>

Designed by Manx architect James Cowle, the changes included an extension to the Wedding Cake building to create the Tynwald Court Chamber, a robing room for the Speaker of the House of Keys, and an entrance lobby. The exterior of the extension was finished with North Wales red facing brick and Bath stone fenestrations, with a section featuring the armorial bearings of the Kings of Man. Construction was finished in 1894, at an eventual cost of £5,000.<sup>13</sup> The Chamber was first used by Tynwald on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1894.<sup>14</sup>

The layout of the chamber maintained the separation of the Legislative Council and House of Keys, with 24 seats for the Keys and a bench for the Legislative Council. The elevated position of the Council in the Chamber reflects the seniority of the Legislative

### TYNWALD COURT.

DOUGLAS, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20, 1894.

#### THE NEW BUILDINGS.

The GOVERNOR said : My Lord Bishop, gentlemen of the Council, Mr Speaker, and gentlemen of the House of Keys, as this is the first time that we have assembled in this hall, I may, perhaps, be allowed to congratulate the Court upon the possession of such a handsome building, and to express my appreciation of the skill and ability shown by the architect and of the efficiency shown by the builder. (Hear, hear). This Legislature has at length been furnished with an habitation worthy of its ancient lineage, and I am sure that the dignity of debate which has always characterised its proceedings will remain unimpaired in the future.

<sup>8</sup> [Hansard, House of Keys Debate \(9 Jul 1891\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Hansard, House of Keys Debate \(21 Jul 1908\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> *Tynwald Guidebook*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Tynwald Guidebook*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Tynwald Guidebook*, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> *Tynwald Guidebook*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> [Hansard, Tynwald Court \(20 Dec 1894\)](#).

Council in Tynwald at the time the Chamber was completed.<sup>15</sup>

The stained glass windows are a distinctive feature of the Chamber. Each portrays a figure representing a different period in the history of the Island, including Queen Victoria who was head of state at the time the Chamber was built.<sup>16</sup> Originally uncarpeted until the 1960s, the present Millennium Carpet was laid in the Chamber in the early 1980s during refurbishments. It was manufactured for the occasion of the Millennium of Tynwald in 1979 by Quayles Carpets Ltd of Kidderminster out of Manx wool.<sup>17</sup>

## A CENTENARY OF THE TYNWALD CHAMBER

On 20<sup>th</sup> December 1994, Tynwald celebrated the centenary of the first sitting in the Tynwald Chamber. The occasion was marked with a special sitting of Tynwald, at which Mr Peter Kelly, then Chairman of the Victorian Society, gave a lecture on the history of the buildings and of the Tynwald Chamber.<sup>18</sup> A booklet outlining the history of the Chamber was also published.<sup>19</sup>

## LEGISLATIVE BUILDINGS TODAY

Today, the same Chambers are still being used by Tynwald and its Branches to conduct parliamentary business.

There have been several modern upgrades and refurbishments to the buildings over the past two decades. Most significantly, between 2003 and February 2006 the buildings and the adjoining General Registry were refurbished and remodelled to provide accommodation for members of Tynwald and the Clerk of Tynwald's Office, which had been located on the top floor of Central Government Offices since 1975. Proceedings of Tynwald and the Branches were held in St George's Court, Douglas, during the refurbishments. The new Legislative Buildings complex cost £11 million in total and re-opened to the public in 2006.



The refurbished Tynwald Chamber

Among the many changes made to the buildings, the Legislative Council area in the Tynwald Chamber was remodelled into a horseshoe shape, reflecting the seating in its own Chamber, and an additional viewing gallery accessible by lift was also installed above the Legislative Council area. All of the chambers were rewired for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, enabling audio from all sittings and committee public oral hearings to be streamed live on the Tynwald website and for electronic voting to take place. During the refurbishment, consideration was given to restoring the 'Wedding Cake' to its original red brick.<sup>20</sup>

Artwork and craftsmanship features prominently throughout the building. The large spiral staircase accessible from the entrance of Legislative Buildings features the work of students at the Isle of Man College, telling the story of Tynwald in pictorial form from the Vikings to today. On the ground floor on

<sup>15</sup> For more on the history of the Legislative Council, see the [resources on the constitutional reforms of 1919](#).

<sup>16</sup> See Kermeen, *Figures of Manx History*.

<sup>17</sup> *Tynwald Guidebook*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> [Hansard, Tynwald Court \(20 Dec 1994\)](#).

<sup>19</sup> *A Centenary of the Tynwald Chamber*.

<sup>20</sup> [Hansard, Tynwald Court \(14 Dec 2005\), 495 T123](#).



The spiral staircase.

public display is the Millennium Wall Hanging which was gifted to Tynwald in 1979. It was originally on display in the Tynwald Chamber but was moved to the foyer during the renovations.

As a public building, Legislative Building is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Free tours of Tynwald are held every week starting in the foyer. A [virtual tour of the modern day Chambers](#) is also available through the Tynwald website.

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## CONTACT

Author: Jared Holden; Francisca Gale

The research team in the Chamber and Information Service can be contacted by emailing [research@tyrwald.org.im](mailto:research@tyrwald.org.im).

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