



Illiam Dhone: Life and Legacy

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RESEARCH PAPER

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1. Introduction

William Christian, more popularly known by his Manx nickname Illiam Dhone, is remembered for his role on the Island during the English Civil War and his subsequent execution. Often regarded as a martyr to the Manx people, for many he symbolises Manx resistance to English oppression.

His act of surrendering the Island to Parliamentary rule has been celebrated by Members of Tynwald, including Phil Gawne MHK who argued in 2008 that:

We could go back to Illiam Dhone's day, where Illiam Dhone stood up for the rights of the Manx people to have access to their land, to stop that being taken on by the then Lord of Mann, a very deceitful way I would say. Illiam Dhone was martyred for that and, over many centuries.¹

Illiam Dhone: the very basis of that goes back to the point that one of the things he did was to safeguard our ancient rights to continue to legislate for ourselves.²

However, it is not everyone's view that Dhone was a victim of judicial murder, with others representing him as a traitor guilty of perjury.³ Records of Dhone's life are conflicting and fragmentary, creating a polarized hero or villain status depending on where someone's sympathies lie.⁴

The Man with Many Names

Born as William Christian, the Manxman was given his familiar name of Illiam Dhone, meaning Brown or Dark William in Manx Gaelic, supposedly on account of his hair colour and complexion. Other incarnations of these names include dark-haired William and Illiam Dhoan.⁵

2. Island Politics in the 1600s

James Stanley, 7th Earl of Derby (The Great Stanley)

Since 1405, the Island had been ruled by the Stanley family as [Lords of Man](#).

James Stanley was born in 1607. He was elected as an MP for Liverpool in 1625, and took his father's title as 7th Earl of Derby following his death in 1642. He married Charlotte de La Trémoille in 1626, and went on to have six sons and four daughters.⁶

In 1627, Stanley temporarily took on the role of Lord of Mann, representing his father on Island for around 15 years. This title was first given to his ancestor John Stanley in 1405 by Henry IV. In 1642, he

¹ Tynwald, Item 9 (16 Jan 2008), 495 T125,

<https://www.tynwald.org.im/business/hansard/20002020/th16012008.pdf#page=37>

² Tynwald, Item 19 (20 Feb 2008), 646 T15,

<https://www.tynwald.org.im/business/hansard/20002020/th20022008.pdf#page=56>

³ 'William Christian', Manx Worthies, A.W. Moore, 1901, S.K Broadbent & Company Limited, <http://isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/worthies/p064.htm>

⁴ See Jennifer Kewley Draskau, *Illiam Dhone: Patriot or Traitor? The Life, Death and Legacy of William Christian*, London (Profile Books Limited, 2012), passim.

⁵ 'William Christian- Illiam Dhone', Tynwald,

<https://www.tynwald.org.im/education/history/roh/Pages/Patriots/Christian-William.aspx>

⁶ J.J. Bagley, *The Earls of Derby* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985), pp.78-81

took on the role permanently, following his father's death.⁷ This meant he was the feudal Lord of the Island, known in Manx Gaelic as [Yn Stanlagh Mooar](#) (the Great Stanley).⁸

The tenure system

At the time, straw tenure meant that occupiers of a property had rights of ownership and to leave property to their heirs. They had to pay the Lord's rent, which was a fixed tax, but were free to sell the property by passing a 'straw of the land' to the new owner.

With little profit to be made off this system, the 7th Earl of Derby set about discrediting the ancestral inheritance of land to instead give full rights of all land on Island to the Lord of Mann. The public did not accept this, but agreed to a compromise of 'three lives' tenures. They voluntarily resigned their properties to the Lord on the condition of receiving back a lease for 'three lives' or 21 years. They did not have rights of ownership, were at constant risk of eviction, and could not pass the land down to their sons.⁹

An Act of Settlement passed in 1704 reversed the effect of this form of tenure.¹⁰

English Civil War

When the English Civil War broke out in 1642, Stanley and his wife followed the King's cause and therefore took the side of Royalists. The Isle of Man became one of the final 'outposts of support for the King'.¹¹

Between 1642 and 1651, three wars broke out across England. Royalists (also known as Cavaliers) who sided with the King fought against Parliamentarians (also known as Roundheads). At the centre of the conflict was opposition to the method of governance at the time and disagreements about religion, as well as economic factors.¹² The ruling King Charles I was from a Protestant background, but married a Catholic princess, causing concern that he would try to encourage Catholic values back into the Church of England.

The King believed it was his divine right to rule Britain, and therefore he dismissed Parliament in 1629 in order to self-govern. However, he was forced to reinstate Parliament in 1640 due to rising tensions with the Scottish militia, who were unhappy with the English rule of their country, underpinned by conflicting religious values. Parliament settled this conflict, but also restricted the King's powers and caused 'political upheaval' in London. Following violence in Ireland, where Catholics massacred Protestants, the King lost control of his own Parliament who now opposed him and fled to the North of England. He assembled his supporters ready for war.¹³

A North-South divide in England saw Parliamentarians retain control of the South-East, and Royalists with the King taking over the North-West. Three wars followed between 1642-46, 1648-49, and 1649-51. A New Model Parliamentarian Army commanded by Sir Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell won the

⁷ 'The Derby Papers', Manx National Heritage, 1781, <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/86706e57-5879-3490-b847-d565d79fbba9>

⁸ 'Was Charles Stanley great?', Culture Vannin – You Tube, 7 Feb 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6GHSgStEI>

⁹ Kewley Draskau, *Patriot or Traitor?*, pp.18-20

¹⁰ 'The Lord of Mann Had a Fifth Column', Isle of Man Examiner, 16th April 1954, iMuseum, <https://www.imuseum.im/Olive/APA/IsleofMan/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=IME%2F1954%2F04%2F16&id=Ar00702&sk=D0D3A99C&viewMode=image>

¹¹ 'Remembering Manx martyr Illiam Dhone', Isle of Man Today, 1st January 2022, <https://www.iomtoday.co.im/news/remembering-manx-martyrilliam-dhone-513949>

¹² See e.g. 'The English Civil Wars: Origins, Events and Legacy', English Heritage, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/the-english-civil-wars-history-and-stories/the-english-civil-wars/>

¹³ 'English Civil Wars', History.Com, 10th September 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/english-civil-wars>

Battle of Naseby in 1645, and started a spiral of decline for the Royalist cause, which ultimately ended in the execution of Charles I in 1649.¹⁴

3. Life of Illiam Dhone

Personal Life

Illiam Dhone was born on 14th April 1608 at Milntown, Ramsey. He was the third surviving son of Catherine Harrison and Ewan Christian, Deemster of the Island. Little is known about his early life, but his father was a determined opponent of the 7th Earl of Derby's endeavours to abolish old feudalism on the Island and replace it with the three lives tenures, playing a leading part in a rebellion against the Stanley family in 1651.¹⁵ For centuries, the Christians had been an extremely powerful and influential Manx family, owning many properties across the Island and holding positions of nobility. Dhone married Elizabeth Cockshutt, a Lancashire heiress, and went on to have eight sons and one daughter.¹⁶

In 1643, following pressure from the Earl, the Deemster transferred ownership of a mansion in Ronaldsway to his son in order to prevent the Earl from seizing the property indefinitely. Illiam Dhone lived in the home with his family for the majority of his life. Dhone made an agreement to hold the property from the Earl of Derby on a lease for 'three lives' instead of by the old 'straw tenure'. This put the Christian family in the Lord of Mann's favour.¹⁷



Source: [iMuseum](#)

Political Career

In 1643, Illiam Dhone was a Member of the Keys.¹⁸ By 1648, he had become Receiver-General, seating him on an early version of the [Legislative Council](#).

When the Earl left the Island in 1651 to fight for Royalist forces in Lancashire, he put Illiam in command of the Manx militia (those that manned the garrison), as well as tasking him with looking after his wife, Countess Charlotte de la Tremoille.

The Earl was captured during battle, and the Countess secretly offered to surrender the Island to Parliamentarians in return for his life. Dhone began to seek redress for grievances by staging an insurrection with the insular militia. Rising up against the Derby family, they succeeded to seize smaller

¹⁴ 'English Civil Wars', History.Com, 10th September 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/british-history/english-civil-wars>

¹⁵ J.R. Dickinson, *The Lordship of Man Under the Stanleys: Government, Economy and the Isle of Man, 1580-1704* (Carnegie Publishing Ltd., 1996), p.39

¹⁶ Kewley Draskau, *Patriot or Traitor?*, p.12-13

¹⁷ A.W. Moore, 'William Christian' in *Manx Worthies*, 1901, S.K Broadbent & Company Limited, <http://isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/worthies/p064.htm>

¹⁸ 'William Christian- Illiam Dhone', Tynwald, <https://www.tynwald.org.im/education/history/roh/Pages/Patriots/Christian-William.aspx>

forts, but failed to take Rushen and Peel. Dhone's grievances are also thought to have lain in the three lives tenure system enforced by the Earl, which had taken away his rights to his family's properties on the Island, and the quartering of troops on Island which had taken away some Manx residents' homes unjustly.¹⁹ When Parliamentarians landed on Island, and the Countess realised her husband had already been executed in Lancashire, she took her family and fled to England.

Vicious attacks that had recently occurred in Ireland and Scotland were feared to translate to the Island if the Manx people fought back. Suspecting that lives would otherwise be lost, Dhone surrendered the Isle of Man to the Parliamentarians, following a meeting at his Ronaldsway home with agreeable local people. This is where Dhone is seen by some as a traitor to the Royalist cause, switching to favour Parliamentary opposition during his rebellion.²⁰

He retained his role as Receiver-General under the control of Lord Thomas Fairfax, the new Lord of Mann, who later appointed Illiam Dhone as Governor in 1656.²¹

In Journals of the House of Commons, Dhone and his brother John, now Deemster, were described as 'two of the ablest and honestest gentlemen in the island'. They travelled to London to consult Westminster about Manx Law and other matters, and were trusted allies of the Parliamentarians.

In 1659, as the [Protectorate](#) or Interregnum was coming to an end, Dhone was accused of misappropriation of funds and financial misconduct by the then Governor James Chaloner, causing him to flee to England where he was eventually arrested the following year. This money was destined to support the poor and to enhance grammar schools on Island. After a short time in London Fleet Prison, he was released without further charge, despite supposed debts of £20,000.²²

He returned to the Island under the guise that the Act of Indemnity passed by Parliament in 1660 would ensure his safety by securing him against legal consequences for his political actions, although this was not the case. His advisors did not remember that his crimes were against the Lord of Mann, not the Crown as was written into the Act.²³

Charles Stanley, the 8th Earl of Derby and son of James, sought vengeance against Illiam Dhone for the death of his father. Dhone was subsequently [captured and imprisoned](#) at Castle Rushen, charged with treason against the Lord of Mann for his actions in 1651.

Execution

Following a trial where he refused to plead, Dhone was found guilty of treason, and condemned without trial. Sentenced to be executed by being hung, drawn and quartered, his execution date was set for 2nd January 1663 at Hango Hill, Castletown.

However, the nature of his execution did not go as originally planned. The method of his death was commuted by an order of the Deputy-Governor of the Island that he was instead to be shot to death. He

¹⁹ Kewley Draskau, *Patriot or Traitor?*, p.44

²⁰ Kewley Draskau, *Patriot or Traitor?*, p.43.

²¹ A.W. Moore, 'William Christian' in *Manx Worthies*, 1901, S.K Broadbent & Company Limited, <http://isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/worthies/p064.htm>

²² 'William Christian', *The Manx Note Book*, April 1886, <http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/manxnb/v06p049.htm>

²³ A.W. Moore, 'William Christian' in *Manx Worthies*, 1901, S.K Broadbent & Company Limited, <http://isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/worthies/p064.htm>

was shot in the heart by a soldier named William Cowell, who was rewarded for his service through being gifted land in the Island's north.²⁴

He was buried in Kirk Malew Church, close to his home and death place. Following Dhone's death, his sons George and Ewan successfully appealed to the ruling King Charles II to restore his family's property and to remove those who were responsible for his Father's death to be removed from office.²⁵ The Countess of Derby was also [heavily fined](#) for ordering Illiam Dhone to be shot.

4. Ceremony at Hango Hill

An annual ceremony to commemorate the life and service of Illiam Dhone takes place at Hango Hill at Ronaldsway every year on the day of his death: 2nd January. Wreaths are laid both at Hango Hill and also in a following ceremony at Malew Church later in the day.²⁶

The event is organised by Manx nationalist political party [Mec Vannin](#) and the [Manx Branch of the Celtic League](#). Nationalist discourses prevail within the event, with speeches in both Manx Gaelic and English.²⁷

Speakers in recent years include historian Dr John Callow, Bernie Moffatt of the Celtic League, Bill Henderson MLC, and Mark Kermodé, Chairman of Mec Vannin.²⁸

5. Illiam Dhone in Manx Culture

Literature and Song

As a Manx folk or national hero, Illiam Dhone's life and death has inspired a number of literary works and other pieces of art.²⁹

The lament 'Baase Illiam Dhone' (Brown William's Death), which describes Dhone's life and the sorrow Manx people felt regarding his untimely demise, has played a central role in forming the popular narrative of Dhone as a Manx martyr.³⁰ Thought to have been composed shortly after the execution, the lament includes such lines as:

*Is it not well known that he did not deserve death?
For who puts hand in blood, he'll never get grace;
But withered and dry, like a yellow branch;
and thy death, Illiam Dhone, 'tis that breaks our heart!*³¹

²⁴ 'Illiam Dhone', Peel City Guardian, 12th November 1898, iMuseum, <https://www.imuseum.im/Olive/APA/IsleofMan/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=PCG%2F1898%2F11%2F12&id=Ar00300&sk=3BEA9EDF&viewMode=image>

²⁵ 'Interesting Illiam Dhone Document', Isle of Man Examiner, 30th March 1934, iMuseum, <https://www.imuseum.im/Olive/APA/IsleofMan/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=IME%2F1934%2F03%2F30&id=Ar00306&sk=3ACEF5F2&viewMode=image>

²⁶ Kewley Draskau, *Patriot or Traitor?*, p.2

²⁷ 'Remembering Manx martyr Illiam Dhone', Isle of Man Today, 1st January 2022, <https://www.iomtoday.co.im/news/remembering-manx-martyrilliam-dhone-513949>

²⁸ 'Money for Foodbank from Illiam Dhone supporters', Isle of Man Today, 13th January 2019, <https://www.iomtoday.co.im/news/money-for-foodbank-from-illiam-dhone-supporters-225527>

²⁹ For more information see Kewley Draskau, *Patriot or Traitor?*, pp. 166-185.

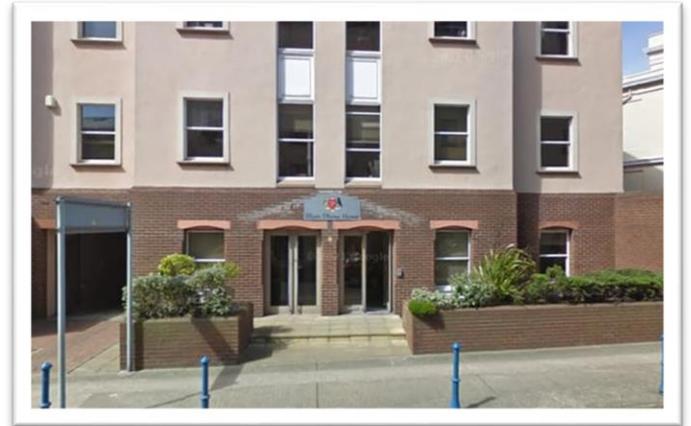
³⁰ Kewley Draskau, *Patriot or Traitor?*, p. 174.

³¹ 'Baase Illiam Dhone', Manx Ballads, 1896, <http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/mb1896/p134.htm>

As one of the oldest recorded traditional Manx songs, the lament plays an important role in Manx traditional music more generally, and continues to be performed to this day. The ballad was turned into a visual poem in 2017 by Culture Vannin.³²

Illiam Dhone House

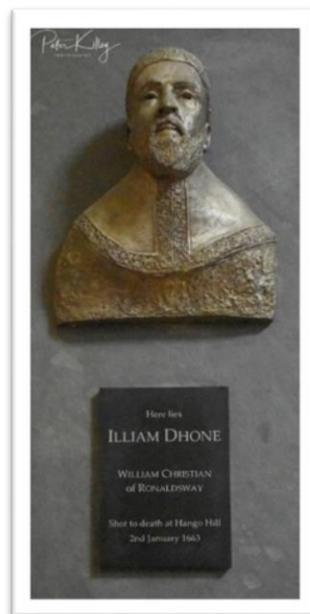
At 2 Circular Road lies Illiam Dhone house. Built in the late 1980s, the building was named in memory of the Manxman. Formerly known as [Cresta House](#), the offices were renamed following the DHPP entering a lease to rent the building in 1991. The Isle of Man Government has continued to use Illiam Dhone House to the present day, with the Office of Human Resources and other departments based in the building.



Source: [Isle of Man Today](#)

Monument at Malew Church

On 2nd January 2006, a monument created by Manx Artist, Bryan Kneale, was unveiled at Malew Church. As the burial site of Illiam Dhone, the nickel silver bust of the Manx figure was made to honour his memory, funded by the Manx Heritage Foundation.³³



Source: [Facebook](#)

³² 'Baase Illiam Dhone- Mona Douglas', Culture Vannin, 2017, <https://culturevannin.im/watchlisten/videos/baase-illiam-dhone---mona-douglas-506772/>

³³ 'Memorial unveiled to Manx patriot', BBC News, 1st January 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/isle_of_man/4573554.stm

6. Iliam Dhone and Tynwald

Proposals for a public holiday

In [2001](#) Bill Henderson MHK questioned whether the Council of Ministers would consider the day of Iliam Dhone's death as a public holiday. He reiterated this point in [2002](#), questioning the Chief Minister whether he would consider 'instituting an additional national bank holiday for forthcoming years in respect of 'Iliam Dhone Day''.

In [2005](#), former MHK Phil Gawne also argued a need for a public holiday in honour of Dhone.

In [2011](#), Mr Henderson once again suggested the creation of a National Day for the Isle of Man to celebrate a Manx Worthy such as Iliam Dhone. As it stands, there is no dedicated national holiday to celebrate Manx Worthies, but some celebrate Dhone's life on [2nd January each year](#).

Roll of Honour

In [1997](#), Mr Brown MHK moved a motion to create a committee which would consider whether there were further methods that could be used to commemorate Iliam Dhone. A lack of recognition for Manx patriots had been a longstanding debate in Tynwald, mentioned again in [1998](#) by George Waft MLC and Mr Brown on behalf of the Manx Patriots Select Committee. The Manx Patriots Committee's report concluded that the Island insufficiently memorialised its patriots, and that a roll of honour should be created.

In 2000, the first [Tynwald Honours Committee report](#) was received in Tynwald Court. Iliam Dhone was one patriot chosen to be researched by Mr Hampton Creer on the Committee's behalf. Dhone was subsequently added to the [Roll of Honour](#) in 2000. This meant that a [rolling patriot list](#) in the Legislative Buildings would feature his name, and a commemorative plaque would be placed in the vicinity of his family home at Ronaldsway.

Stained Glass Window

In [1994](#), the Tynwald Management Committee (TMC) published a report titled 'Report of the Tynwald Management Committee on the Commemoration of William Christian'. This inquiry concluded with two recommendations, [which were approved by Tynwald in December 1994](#):

- 1. There should be a permanent, tangible commemoration of William Christian.*
- 2. The form of the commemoration should be a stained glass memorial in the windows of the Keys members' room, facing the stairs leading from the Keys lobby to the Tynwald Chamber and that this memorial should be prepared and installed jointly by Mr R C Bullock and the Department of Highways, Ports and Properties at a total cost, including the necessary joinery work and so on, of £4,200.*

These recommendations led to the installation of the stained glass window which now resides in the Legislative Buildings (see section on stained glass window). This has gifted the name the 'Iliam Dhone staircase' to the staircase where the stained glass window lies.

For her presidential portrait, former President of Tynwald, Clare Christian OBE CP, stands in front of the window.



Source: Office of the Clerk of Tynwald

7. Further Reading

Isle of Man TV, Hango Hill ceremonies, YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/IsleofManTV/search?query=hango>

'William Christian – Bio', Manx History App, https://www.manxhistory.com/app/#manx_people/8

'The Civil War', UK Parliament, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/parliamentaryauthority/civilwar/>

Simon Artymuik, 'The discoveries about the Christian family at Milntown', IOM Today, 8th July 2018, <https://www.iomtoday.co.im/news/the-discoveries-about-the-christian-family-at-milntown-222304>

'William Christian', Dictionary of National Biography, Henry Bradley, 1885-1900:

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography,_1885-1900/Christian,_William

1898 Article in the Peel City Guardian surrounding Illiam Dhone and his trial:

<https://www.imuseum.im/Olive/APA/IsleofMan/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=PCG%2F1898%2F11%2F12&id=Ar00300&sk=3BEA9EDF&viewMode=image>

'Old Manx Families – The Christians of Milntown', Manx Notebook vol I, 1885, <http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/manxnb/v01p017.htm>

Records and proceedings relating to the trial and execution of William Christian, William Harrison, 1877: <https://archive.org/details/illiamdhneandma00unkngoog/page/n36/mode/2up>