

CHAPTER 9

THE SUMMERLAND SITE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

9.1 The re-development plans

There was a growing recognition in the late 1990s that the Summerland complex had outlived its usefulness. The building's exterior was riddled with concrete cancer, with its interior being hopelessly passé and stuck in a 1970's timewarp. In 1998, only 20 years after it re-opened after the fire, the Isle of Man Government announced that it was reviewing options for the future of Summerland and the soon to become defunct Aquadrome swimming baths, including potential demolition. With the centenary of the TT fast approaching in 2007, the Government viewed the Summerland site as being ideal for a museum to celebrate the world famous races. Mr David Cretney, the Tourism and Leisure Minister, announced in January 2001 that the Summerland site would house the museum and other leisure facilities, including potentially a multi-screen cinema. These plans would involve demolishing Summerland and the Aquadrome and erecting new buildings on the site. It was envisaged that Summerland would remain open to provide a large entertainment venue until the refurbishment of the Villa Marina (to be re-branded the National Entertainment and Arts Centre) was completed in 2004.

By the end of 2000, the Government had received approaches from several investors interested in the Summerland site. Developers were asked to submit formal proposals for the site by 23rd May 2001. The Manx Government specified that the plans must include a TT museum and a transport interchange between the Manx Electric Railway and the Douglas

Promenade House Trams. A colour brochure prepared by Ayles Heath, a London property agent, for the Manx Government said the selected developer would be required to work with the Government to create a major leisure and commercial development for a “significant town centre site”. The brochure asked developers to provide a range of “complementary uses” for the site, but kept the remit of the precise mix of facilities deliberately vague. It suggested that the site could even be used for a hotel, a casino or even housing. After drawing up a short-list of four developers from around 50 submitted applications, the Isle of Man Government announced in November 2001 that it was backing the proposals of Manchester developers **Henry Boot**. At this stage, it was envisaged the new buildings would be completed by the end of 2006. Mr Cretney said:

“[The Manx Government is] delighted that Henry Boot Developments Limited has come up with a comprehensive and exciting scheme. However, we are still at an early stage, and elements of the proposal may change as the project develops”.

Henry Boot was given six months to draw up detailed plans for the site. The developer’s plans, which included a TT Museum and a household chain 100-bedroom hotel but no casino, were shown to senior staff in the Department of Tourism and Leisure in April 2002. The proposal amounted to around £35 million of private sector investment for the site. The developers said the redevelopment could be completed in 18 months; the timetable for completion of the new buildings was thus brought forward to early 2005. The absence of a casino from the plans disappointed former

Tourism Minister Allan Bell, who argued that the Island should steal a march on Britain by using the Summerland site for a resort-style Las Vegas casino before gambling regulations were de-regulated in Britain. Mr Bell argued that the Island could not afford to wait until the refurbishment of the Villa Marina was completed before embarking on the re-development of the Summerland site. Speaking in 2001, he said:

“I really think this is a great opportunity. The online casinos will be operating by the end of [2001] and the two do dovetail quite nicely...I think there is no reason why the Island could not work alongside Blackpool...Both would be drawing business to the north west from all over and if [the Island’s casino] was of high enough quality I think there is enough business to support it...The concept of a resort hotel and the extension [of the runway] at Ronaldsway I believe would open a whole new era for Manx tourism and give the economy a greater range of diversification that it has been seeking for some time and it will also underpin, in some respects, the financial services too.”

The incorporation of mid-market and budget hotel accommodation into the scheme was seen positively by Mr Cretney as helping to reverse the declining number of hotel bed spaces in the Island. *The Isle of Man Examiner* (5th August 2002) reported that 1,261 bed spaces had been lost in the previous three years; 73% of these losses were in Douglas, and the vast majority were in the middle and lower end of the market. Mr Cretney said: “What will happen is that if we continue to lose beds in this category, we

will start to lose tourism events. People who come for tourism events, this is the category of bed that they use and these are the beds that we have been losing hand over fist”. The Council of Ministers was “generally supportive” of the Henry Boot scheme, although some ministers expressed reservations about the quality of the hotel accommodation being provided. In August 2002, the Manx Government gave Henry Boot another six months to advance the scheme further before a final decision was taken.

The developer expressed concerns about the commercial viability of the TT Museum. Accordingly, the Department of Tourism of Leisure had to accept that the Museum would be “on a more modest scale than was originally envisaged”. In December 2002, Mr Cretney disclosed the re-development was likely to include an ice rink measuring approximately 40 metres (~133 feet) by 20 metres (~67 feet). Further details of the re-development were announced in March 2003, with the plans including a health and fitness club, restaurants, bars, apartments and car parking, in addition to a TT Museum, a 100-bedroom hotel and an ice rink. Mr Roger Brady of Henry Boot said: “We are delighted to be moving forward in conjunction with the Manx Government to develop this exciting scheme and believe that we are together creating a development the Isle of Man will be proud of”. Work was scheduled to start in spring 2005. The Isle of Man Government would fund the TT Museum (Cost = £2.8 million), now dubbed “The TT Experience”. Some of the finance for this would be raised by selling off Government owned property that was surplus to requirements, such as Port St Mary railway station and Ramsey bus station.

In July 2003, the Department of Tourism and Leisure (DTL) asked Tynwald to approve spending £1,080,600 to advance the Henry Boot scheme, which was now also to include shops and office space. This finance would cover the necessary professional and legal advice, together with design and technical fees. Mr Cretney said:

“The vast majority of the £40-45 million funding for re-development of the site will come from private companies. In return for use of the site, the developer, Henry Boot, will be providing – at no cost to the Manx taxpayer – the ice rink and [the five-a-side] football facility valued at £3.5 million. It’s vital with such large sums involved that the scheme is endorsed by Tynwald before more money is spent.”

Tynwald approved the DTL’s request. However, some members were concerned that elements of the scheme were not commercially viable. Referring to the ice rink and the TT Experience, Onchan MHK Adrian Earnshaw said: “I can see a couple of large white elephants on the horizon”. Some members thought that a cinema would be more viable and benefit a larger proportion of the Island’s residents. It was intended that the final development agreement between Henry Boot and the DTL would be signed and then approved in Tynwald in early 2004. Before the agreement could be signed, much work remained to be done by the DTL, relating to the financing and operational management of the scheme. Furthermore, the landslides of October 2002 (section 9.2) had highlighted the issue of cliff instability and the complexity of the whole demolition process. Whilst there was a “whole raft of factors” that would affect the demolition and re-

development programme, Mr Mike Ball, Director of Leisure, said it was imperative that the scheme was completed for the 2007 TT.

The developer pulls out

In April 2004, Henry Boot pulled out of the re-development of the Summerland site after failing “to reach a mutually acceptable contractual position on a Development Agreement” with the Isle of Man Government. The developer, who had already spent £250,000 on developing plans for the site, blamed increasing construction costs from an estimated £25 million in September 2003 to £31 million in April 2004. This meant the scheme “wasn’t capable of producing sufficient profit to provide the firm with its agreed profit margin and the DTL with an ice rink at no cost” (*Manx Independent*, 15th April 2004). In the words of Henry Boot director Roger Brady, the commercial elements of the scheme “just didn’t stake up”. He warned the Manx Government that plans for the site need to be slimmed down. “Unless the scheme is given a good look at to see if something can be omitted from it, it may be that other developers our size would have equal difficulties”, he said.

The decision was a blow to Mr Cretney, whose plans for a TT Museum ready for the 2007 centenary were now in shreds. Whilst this was “a disappointing outcome”, he said the DTL remained committed to “a mixed use redevelopment of the Summerland site anchored by public leisure facilities”. Mr Cretney said his department would spend the next six months investigating “the feasibility of putting together a revised development project” for the site. During this review process, the combination of leisure facilities in the re-development was reconsidered. In September 2004, it was

reported in the *Isle of Man Examiner* that the re-development might include a multi-screen cinema, a facility that did not appear in Henry Boot's plans. At the time, the Government was still in negotiation with major UK hotel and cinema chains in order to secure contracts without having to bring in a development company to oversee the project. An ice rink, apartments and shops still featured in the new plans. By May 2005, plans for a hotel and cinema complex seemed to have been dissolving; Mr Cretney now said the site "could be used for anything".

9.2 The October 2002 flood

In late October 2002, four inches of rain fell in Douglas in 36 hours. The heavy rain flooded Nemo's Cave nightclub, the sports hall and the squash courts; caused structural damage to the Spa Suite area; and triggered two landslides in the cliff behind Summerland. More worryingly, the landslides dislodged two concrete blocks that supported the roof of the original Summerland but were not removed following the fire. Summerland was forced to close because there was a real risk that the blocks could fall on to the building. It was originally thought the blocks weighed up to five metric tonnes, and could either be removed or stabilised, so allowing the building to re-open quickly. However, a closer inspection revealed the blocks might weigh up to 50 tonnes. This news came as a disappointment to Harry Potter fans looking forward to a special preview of *Chamber of Secrets* in the Summerland cinema, only for the screening to be cancelled at the last minute because of safety fears. Nemo's Cave nightclub, the squash courts and the Spa Suite never re-opened after the flooding. It would simply have been uneconomical to repair these facilities, given that Summerland

was due to close 12 months later in any case. The sports hall and the Energy FM radio studio re-opened by the end of 2002, but the Piazza level housing the cinema and the Manxland children's play area remained closed. Several functions that were due to take place in the Piazza level were cancelled, resulting in the DTL losing many thousands of pounds in revenue. During the closure, Summerland staff were re-deployed to other DTL venues such as the Gaiety Theatre.

In January 2003, a geotechnical engineer arrived from mainland Britain to determine whether the concrete blocks posed a risk to people using the Piazza level. A team used ropes to scale the cliff face and extracted cores from the blocks to determine their size and their manner of construction. Mike Ball, Director of Leisure, said: "To all our customers, please be patient. We cannot let them use the building until we can persuade the health and safety executive that it is safe". The engineers found that there were ten concrete blocks in total and a concrete beam; the two troublesome blocks were adjacent to the Summerland-Aquadrome party wall. The blocks were left exposed because the roof of the original Summerland was much higher than the re-built complex. After thorough investigation, it was found that the blocks did "not pose any imminent danger to the building", but needed to be monitored regularly. The installation of a movement alarm in Summerland to identify small movements in the blocks allowed the Piazza level to re-open in late May 2003 for the final summer season. Summerland closed at the end of 2003, with an Abba-tribute band entertaining crowds on New Year's Eve. However, with the Villa Marina refurbishment still not completed, the building re-opened during the February 2004 half term. That was the last

week when members of the public were allowed inside Summerland. Within weeks, all entertainment had transferred to the Villa Marina and DANGER KEEP OUT signs appeared outside Summerland.

9.3 The demolition

As Summerland and the Aquadrome are in a conservation area, planning permission had to be obtained before the complex could be demolished. An objection was raised to the demolition by a local resident concerned about the noise from future building work. In March 2004, it was intended that the demolition would start later that year, with the re-development of the site beginning in mid 2005. With the collapse of the Development Agreement between Henry Boot and the Manx Government in April 2004 (section 9.1), there was now no need to demolish the complex as quickly. Surveys at the time showed that asbestos, which was discovered in Summerland in 1997, was more widespread than previously thought. The asbestos was removed before demolition in a process called soft strip. The removal of asbestos and other preparatory work (e.g. removing internal fittings), which started in December 2004, cost £899,290 by itself. The final demolition cost £1,876,000. At the end of 2004, the demolition of Summerland was scheduled to commence in October 2005. In July 2005, Mr Cretney said:



Figures 9.1 and 9.2: Contractor's signage and instruction for the demolition of Summerland and the Aquadrome (Photographs: Ricky Rooney and James Turpin)

“I am very anxious to get the site cleared. I recognise it is a very expensive exercise but the site could lie for years with the old buildings unless we get on with the job...Some people believe we should sell the site as it is to developers and I think that would be a real risk of nothing happening. We inherited this **monstrosity** from Douglas Corporation and we should sort it out rather than trying to walk away.”

Planning conditions for demolition dictated that a photographic record of the buildings be made. The demolition of Summerland started in January 2006, and was carried out by Manx contractor JCK and UK contractor DSM. Six specially imported machines from Britain, each with an 85-foot grab, were used to demolish most of the complex. Derek Clarkson of JCK said: “We are using demolition rigs equipped with hydraulic breakers to split the concrete from the reinforced steel and then using the pulveriser to crush it up. We will recycle as much as we can”. Although the majority of the complex had been demolished by March 2006, a small section of the Aquadrome (and the diving board) that was grafted into the cliff face remains today (March 2012). This is because engineers are uncertain whether the remains of the Aquadrome are supporting the cliff face behind. To investigate this, a survey is required of the cliff face. Unfortunately, this cannot commence at present because the owners of four houses on Strathallan Road at the top of the cliff have refused access to their gardens to do a survey. Some of the residents of Strathallan Road have been in a long running dispute with the authorities since the original Summerland was built in the late 1960s. They objected to the height of the building’s Oroglas roof, which was lowered as a result. They also felt that grafting the building into

the cliff face by means of concrete blocks was a bad idea that would undermine the cliff's stability. A Strathallan Road resident objected to the demolition of Summerland and the Aquadrome – citing noise, a frequent complaint that the residents made when Summerland was in operation. Some residents even complained about the method of demolition and wanted the complex to be demolished from the top downwards. It is expected that stabilising and restoring the cliff face will cost £1.5-2.5 million.

In 2008, the Isle of Man Government was no further forward at advancing plans for the re-development of the site. In fact, Tourism and Leisure Minister Adrian Earnshaw admitted in February 2008 that the Manx Government “no longer had a compelling need” to retain the site for public entertainment facilities. He said that plans for a private company to re-develop the site for leisure use had “sadly come to nothing”. Letter writers to the *Isle of Man Examiner* criticised the Government's inaction over the site, and argued that it should be redeveloped for the good of the whole community as opposed to being sold off for apartments. One said: “When are they going to realise that people are binge drinking and there are no tourists because of the severe lack of entertainment on the Island?” Another reader suggested: “Summerland is an ideal place to build a cinema, bowling alley or ice rink”. Emma Cash commented: “We do not need more apartments or offices; we need entertainment. Government - buck your ideas up!”



Figure 7.3: The demolition of the Aquadrome



Figure 9.4: The demolition of Summerland. This photograph was taken in the Sports Hall. The remains of the Carousel staircase that descends from the Piazza floor to the Derby Bar can be seen on the right-hand side of the photograph (Photographs: Ricky Rooney and James Turpin)



**Figure 9.5: The demolition nears completion. The only parts of Summerland left remaining in this photograph are the NE corner of the Piazza floor and part of the concrete wall fronting King Edward Road.
(Photograph: Ricky Rooney and James Turpin)**

9.4 The Wave

With no Manx Government department interested in acquiring the Summerland site, the Department of Tourism and Leisure decided to re-advertise the site to developers in August 2008. Interested developers were asked to come up with plans that would improve the Island's leisure facilities. Four companies expressed an interest in the site. In March 2009, the Manx Government announced that the **Sefton Group's** proposal, known as *The Wave*, had been chosen. The Sefton Group was granted a temporary licence on the site to allow them to undertake detailed investigations before a formal 99-year lease was agreed. These surveys involved drilling boreholes and trial pits, and ascending the cliff face in a hydraulic lift to assess its stability. The plans for *The Wave* were debated by Tynwald before the 2009 summer recess and were featured on the BBC's regional news magazine programme *Northwest Tonight*.

The Sefton Group was founded in 1892 as a public company and has an extensive property and investment portfolio on the Isle of Man. It owns several Douglas hotels (Sefton, Castle Mona and Palace Hilton) and the new Sefton Express Hotel at Ronaldsway Airport. It also owns the largest Manx building contractors (Parkinsons), as well as the HSBC building in Douglas and some entertainment venues (e.g. Colours Nightclub). The architects of *The Wave* would have been Manx firm Ellis Brown. They would have been assisted by Unick, a Glasgow based architect that specialises in leisure and entertainment buildings, whose previous commissions include the cinema at the O₂ arena in London.

The Wave would have had four floors. The first floor would have contained a car park with 177 spaces. The developers did not intend to excavate an extensive basement area because of the abnormal foundations. The second level – which would have been slightly above street level – was designed for the family. This floor would definitely have contained a five-screen cinema, an 18 lane ten-pin bowling hall and a food court. It was the intention to make some of the space on this floor as flexible as possible so it can be used for exhibitions, rollerskating and possibly ice-skating. The third and fourth floors were aimed more for adults, and would have contained a casino, bingo area, slot machines, conference and function facilities for 500 people, an A La Carte restaurant and champagne bar.

The Wave takes its name from the shape of its roof, which may contain solar panels and a wind turbine for electricity generation. The building would have been erected around 17ft from the cliff to facilitate adequate fire escapes from the building's rear, a clear difference from the original Summerland. There would not, however, have been a rear service road. *The Wave* would have had a large glass frontage overlooking Douglas Bay and would certainly have looked better than the enclosed and bland white glass-reinforced plastic (GRP) units that formed the upper floors of the rebuilt Summerland complex. Whilst “moving beyond Summerland”, Mr Mark Lewin, the Chief Operating Officer of the Sefton Group, assured me that the disaster would have been commemorated in the new development. It was not known at the building's planning stage whether the memorial stone in the Kaye Gardens, which is a few hundred yards from Summerland (**figure 1.1**), would have been moved to a new memorial garden at the entrance to *The Wave*. Mr Lewin believes that it is important that any new

memorial actually states the number and the names of the people that died in the fire. These are notable omissions from the existing stone (section 1.3). If everything goes to plan, *The Wave* would have opened to the public in 2011 and would have become the fourth building to occupy the site in the last 50 years.

Unfortunately, the plans for *The Wave* fell through in October 2009. This was because the Sefton Group and the Manx Government were unable to reach an agreement over the terms for the site's lease. Hence, more than six years after Summerland was demolished, there are still no firm plans for the site's redevelopment.

9.5 The asbestos exposure case

Summerland was back in the news in March 2011, when the *Manx Independent* reported that a man had been diagnosed with mesothelioma – a lung cancer linked to asbestos. Eddie Bedford, who is from Port Erin in the Isle of Man, believes his illness was caused when he worked as a bricklayer on the lavatory block of the original Summerland in 1970. Mr Bedford said (quoted in the *Manx Independent*, 4th March 2011, page 1): "...the only time I had contact with asbestos was when I was at Summerland in 1970". He remembered seeing men with protective equipment spraying fire-retardant asbestos on to the steel columns. "Nobody told us to wear goggles. They told us to stay out of their way. You could see the dust," he told the newspaper. Mr Bedford (who was 63 in 2011) had always been in good health until he started to get out of breath in 2009. Doctors initially thought he had pneumonia and he spent three weeks in Noble's Hospital in Douglas. It was only when he was referred to a hospital with Liverpool that he was

diagnosed with terminal mesothelioma in April 2010. Mr Bedford said (quoted in the *Manx Independent*, 4th March 2011, page 1): “It’s in the lining of your lungs. I’m in pain and I have sleepless nights from the worry”. Mr Bedford died in July 2011.

Douglas man Ronnie Shimmin was part of the team that sprayed asbestos at Summerland in 1970. He told the *Manx Independent* (11th March, 2011, page 5):

“There were two gangs of three with one feeding the machine and two doing the spraying. I fed the machine. Sometimes you couldn’t see the two with the spraygun 20 feet away. At first we were not wearing masks but after a day or two the foreman said we had better wear them as we might get asbestosis. We wore suits supplied by the firm [Turners Asbestos Company, Manchester]. Once the machine stopped, the stuff was still in the air. I would come home spitting it out.”

Fortunately, Mr Shimmin (who was 65 in 2011) has not fallen ill from his exposure to asbestos more than 40 years ago.

9.6 Remembering the Summerland disaster today

Thanks to the efforts of Douglas resident Tina Brennen, the Summerland fire was remembered formally in 2014 and 2015 (**figures 9.6 and 9.7**). Mrs Brennen told me (personal communication):

“[At 7.30pm on Sunday, August 2nd, 2015], there were about 40 to 45 people gathered on the promenade walkway opposite [Summerland] and I spoke about this being an appropriate place to hold the commemoration until we can hold it in a garden of remembrance on the now derelict site...It was [here] under cover of darkness [that] the bodies [of] some of the victims remaining in the Summerland site were brought out and laid before being taken to St George's Hall to await identification.

We placed tea lights next to the beautiful floral tribute...and among the stones with the names of the victims on them. We stood in silence and Richard Barks then played Ellan Vannin on the pipes. You can imagine it was an emotional event. The Book of Remembrance was signed. Some had travelled from the UK to remember their families - Graeme and Elaine Bennett from Galashiels [Scottish Borders] who lost step-mum and dad; Barry and Linda Ongill from Warrington who had come to remember their pals Allen Barker and Sean Kelly; also many survivors; those who had given

assistance, and lovely people who had come to pay their respects.”



Figure 9.6: Remembering the Summerland dead in August 2015 (Photograph supplied by Tina Brennen, who is standing on the right-hand side of the photograph in a pink coat)

At a concert held in memory of the 50 people killed in the Summerland fire in August 2015, £475 was raised for Alder Hey Children's Burns Unit in Liverpool.



**Figure 9.7: The tea lights for the 50 victims
(Photograph supplied by Tina Brennen)**