

Corncrake December 2014

THE CHRISTMAS NUMBER



Wishing happiness and blessings to all our readers at Christmas
greeting includes all men on earth of goodwill regardless of religious proclivity and is non gender-specific

The schoolchildren are hosting a Christmas Dinner, and have already issued their invitations – they cannot invite everybody, so those of us who are lucky enough to be going will have to enjoy it for all the rest. Even more exciting, and something for everybody, is to be a Nativity Play, the first for some years – to be enacted at the Parish Church and to be followed by a refreshment at The Colonsay.

Come to the **Christmas Fair**

A Christmas Sale in the hotel on Sunday 7th December from 3pm to 5pm.

Get in the festive mood with mulled cider and mince pies whilst doing your Christmas shopping. Lots of lovely unique gifts and stocking fillers, including felt work, knitting, books, pictures and jewellery. The hotel will also be serving a Sunday lunch between 12.00 and 1.30pm – please book with the hotel on 01951 200316.

Remember to attend **The Watchnight Service**, conducted by Alastair Scouller, at the Parish Church 11.30pm on 24th December, often followed (by kind invitation) by refreshments at The Colonsay [*have not had chance to check this – editor*].

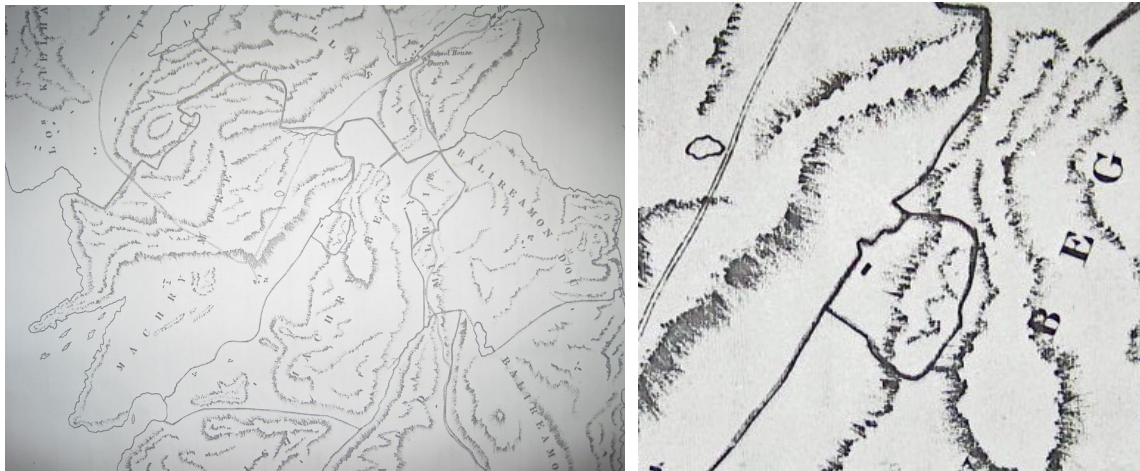
Prayer Group

This note is not just for Christmas! Church services are not held every week in the winter months and Roz wonders if any fellow-christians would be interested in meeting for prayer during that quiet time of year. It only takes two or more meeting in God's name ... please feel free to contact Roz direct if you would like to help progress this initiative.

CHRISTMAS COMPETITION

Our illustration is from a later edition of David Wilson's Colonsay Map of 1804; this particular edition includes the new Mill, so is probably dated about 1870, but the edition is not relevant. We have

reproduced a section between Scalasaig and Machrins, and it shows the new road passing An Garbh Cladaich, but does not yet show the one across the Monadh Thomach (which is, presumably, as yet undrained).



A “D” shaped enclosure is shewn to the south of the road and midway between the east and west coasts, on “Machry Beg”, and within that enclosure a building is marked. Can you find any trace of that building? A photograph and accurate GPS reference would be good, together with a description. We offer a £10 Book Token redeemable at Colonsay Bookshop for the best submission, which we hope to publish in the January edition. As far as is known, no previous attempt has been made to locate this site.

HALLOWE’EN and GUY FAWKES

There was a great party for Hallowe’en, held at the Backpackers Lodge and attended by all the children. Commemoration of Guy Fawkes’ bid for parliamentary reform took the form of a giant bonfire, tactfully relocated closer to the shoreline now that the original site has been transformed into a pleasure garden. (The garden is looking great, lots of volunteers have got it all ready for winter, nicely weeded and richly seaweeded – a credit to all concerned.)

[Apologies – photographs were taken but without wifi the editor is unable to access them.]

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Other local activities include the Scottish Country Dancing practice sessions held on Wednesday evenings, led by Seamus and Christine and supported by about a dozen folk. There is also a Badminton Group, meeting on Tuesdays (and sometimes Thursdays), there is the Quiz Night held every Friday (in the Pantry) and a new Gaelic Learners Course is about to commence. People still use cars, but there is growing trend towards horses as well – almost 10% of the winter traffic is equine! Liz, Emma, Ros, Carrie and Gill are all to be seen on horseback enjoying this incredibly mild weather, a great joy to us all and maybe an encouragement to one or two others. The former Thespian League is to be revived – a successful preliminary meeting was held on 22nd November.

Hannah has been busy getting everything ready for the new Colonsay App, and we gather that she would welcome some help in populating it with the initial content. When it is up and running it will have daily updates on local news and activities, it will list all planned events, times for crossing to Oransay, opening times and contact details of all businesses and will also have a rolling list of accommodation availability over the next 28 days (to help offer any cancellations that might arise). There will also be an inter-active map, with details about monuments, geology, natural history etc. If you are in Colonsay, this will help to ensure that you don’t miss anything; and if you are not here you’ll know what you are missing and be kept in the loop with (almost) all the local gossip.

The Local Development Officers report that the Land Purchase project has made some progress (to provide “affordable housing and self-build plots”. Draft Heads of Agreement were drawn up by Ailsa Raeburn (HIE) and Mike Russell and are under consideration / negotiation.

COME TO COLONSAY IN 2015

Holidays for 2015: If you already have your reservations made, please remember to send any outstanding deposits. If you have not yet booked, please refer to www.colonsay.org.uk to see the full range of accommodation together with availability charts, either embedded into the relevant page or accessed by a link. The situation changes daily in December/January as lots of people find they have to revise their plans; if your desired dates and place are not available, check with the owner so that they can advise you of any cancellation – or just keep coming back to check the charts. If you are badly stuck for a specific date or type of property, tell byrne@colonsay.org.uk and the details can be circulated to all accommodation providers – we are here to help.

Please note that there will be slight changes to the ferry timetable next summer; nothing dramatic but do make sure about the details. Incidentally, there are now six trains daily each way on the Glasgow to Oban line and a new operator has secured the franchise, with high hopes of making many improvements to the service. This could be your chance to go green – does your car really need to come on holiday as well?

The Book Festival is the weekend of 24th April. For the Festival of Spring come for all or any of the first three weeks in May. MacPhee-Bagging is on May 4th. The Music Festival – Ceol Colbhasa – is on 17th – 20th September; and the October Festival is in the first half of October.

GORTIN

Because it is looking so smart in our warm winter sunshine it deserves to be seen. Persons with acute vision can see that even the chimney pots have been painted – Santa will be chuffed!



COLONSAY & ORONSAY HERITAGE TRUST

COHT has secured the services of Hazel Weatherstone to assist in the professional preparation and submission of bids for funding. Your correspondent looks forward to further news, but is aware that Hazel has already made great progress in drawing together the representatives of all agencies involved – to an outside observer, things are looking very encouraging. Prof. Colin Breen, from University of Ulster, was in Colonsay last week and has assured the Primary School that he will be back again in the springtime, and there will be a chance to join him in an archaeological “dig”.

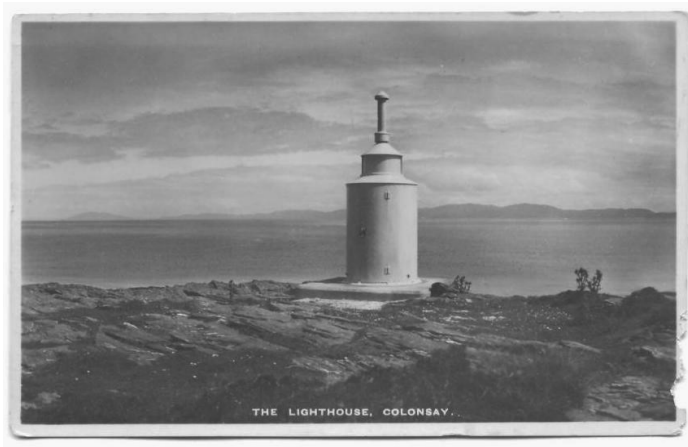
We are delighted to report that funding has been obtained by COHT for the restoration of Colonsay's Stevenson Lighthouse. This was a fairly modest affair, made of iron boilerplate and known affectionately as "An Crùisgean". Although redundant, it survived in situ for many years. Unfortunately, about 15 years ago, a workforce arrived to install a new solar-powered affair and (being unaware of its provenance) the old one was summarily demolished. It was cut into pieces and on the verge of being helicoptered away when pier staff noticed what was happening and contacted the Northern Lighthouse Board at Edinburgh. The NLB could not undo the damage, but instantly gave permission for the sections to be preserved locally in the ownership of the islanders, with a view to restoration. For years, visitors and islanders will have noticed the large heap of jagged metal plates in the corner of the Pier Shed and t here things stood until Dave Binnie adopted the project on behalf of COHT:

SCALASAIG MINOR LIGHT

This year Colonsay and Oransay Heritage Trust were awarded a grant by the Association of Industrial Archaeology to restore the original Scalasaig minor light. The light, which was oil lit, was built by David A. Stevenson on commission from the Northern Lighthouse Board in 1903. Known locally as An cruisgen it was subsequently replaced by a gas light on a square building in 1957 and when this was demolished in 2003 the original light was broken up and kept in store on the island.

The Trust have commissioned a specialised blacksmith to restore the light chamber and plan to re-erect it on the island with information about the history of the light and also of the various other lights visible from Colonsay in particular Dubh Artach to the west and the Rudh a,Mhail on Islay.

Bill Lawson recently donated the ledger from the gas light and also an old container of Sperm Whale oil which was in store and would have been used to fuel the oil lamp.



RSPB WILDLIFE NOTES – NOVEMBER 2014

An exciting arrival on the strand this month was a [little egret](#). Only the third record for Colonsay & Oransay, the egret has been seen feeding regularly in the shallow pools at low tide and has also been seen on the golf course once the tide is in. This compact, brilliantly white heron has black legs and bright yellow feet so is hard to miss. Only appearing in the UK for the first time in 1989 it has naturally begun to colonise. It has been rapidly expanding its range from Northern France in the last

two decades. More common in the South of the UK is it gradually heading North and is a very exciting and interesting species to see here.

The counts of [Greenland barnacle geese](#) have been brilliant on Oronsay with over 3000 individuals counted at times over November.



The wintering [chough](#) flock has begun to grow. Fourteen have been seen this past week, busy feeding in the kelp for insect larvae on the beaches around Oronsay.

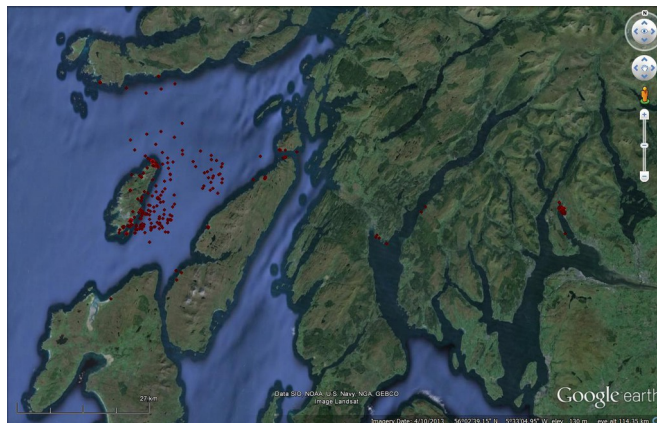


[Snow buntings](#) have also been passing through again this month. Two [blue tits](#) were also an exciting find. A flock of fourteen [chaffinches](#) have also been flitting around the farm yard. Two [woodcock](#) were flushed while we were gathering sheep this week, they look giant compared to the snipe we are used to seeing.

A male [peregrine falcon](#) has provided very rewarding views this month. This will likely be the male from their pair which breed on Oronsay. The female will have probably moved off the territory for the winter months to hunt further afield while her mate has remained behind to defend their patch.



Research by PhD student Nina O’Hanlon gave us a fascinating insight into [herring gull](#) movement. A gull tagged and ringed on Oronsay was found in Faslane! We will be checking herring gulls very closely for rings while out feeding the cattle for returning birds this season. Please do keep your eyes peeled for ringed herring gulls around Colonsay and Oronsay. The rings will have a number and letter combination unique to each individual bird. For more information on Nina’s work visit: <http://goo.gl/QklzEO>



What to look out for in the next month

Keep an eye out for Nina’s ringed herring gulls! December is a good time to look out for divers offshore all around Colonsay and Oronsay. Great Northern divers especially at this time of year can be seen around the coast. They will typically be seen ‘snorkelling’ close to shore looking for fish before diving after them.

Feel free to email or call with any wildlife observations or questions,

Morgan, Assistant warden Oronsay Reserve

morgan.vaughan@rspb.org.uk

RSPB office – 01951 200 367

A RARE BIRD

As Andrew Abrahams pointed out, lots of experts may have seen it, but he got the picture:

He/she (?) is a snow bunting. Arrived with a bunch of fieldfares and redwings and stayed for a few days. David Jardine classes it as a "rare winter visitor"



JUST FANCY THAT:

- Owing to some antediluvian anomaly (going back at least to the time of David MacBrayne) Colonsay suffers from mind-boggling freight charges – a lorry travelling from Oban to Colonsay return is **surcharged** £300 for the privilege, compared with the charge for the same lorry from Oban to Coll return. Transport Scotland has been challenged about this, says it is not interested in doing anything about it before 2116, if then (despite the fact that the surcharge is clearly illegal under EC rules).
- On Monday 24th at 10.00 a.m. a Colonsay BT telephone line developed a fault; the same line carries a vital business broadband connection so it was reported at once. A promise was made but (it being BT) this was not trusted, so the fault was reported again on Tuesday and again on Thursday, when the exasperated BT person gave an ironclad guarantee that an engineer would call between 9.00 and 11.00 on Saturday (“you have my word, please do not worry”). Saturday came, no engineer – what explanation? “There is nothing we can do, you live on an island. We will send an engineer next Saturday instead.”

“THE CORNCRAKE”

The editor’s chair is vacant still – the position is unpaid, but it is rewarding in other ways. The main purpose of the magazine is to maintain links with the island’s extended community – friends, relations, regular visitors, occasional visitors or people whose roots or hearts are in the island. If you live in Colonsay please contact any Director of Colonsay Community Development Company to let them know you might be interested. Of course, whether or not you live here, we would love to hear from you for our rather empty Letters column. (Come back Mrs. Trellis, all is forgiven).

POLITICS

This is the Season of Goodwill so there are none included; in any case we will all get quite enough of politics in the next six months. We should remember, however, that “the price of freedom is eternal vigilance”; in the past, and in many countries, people have not noticed the stealthy advance of movements of an ultimately extreme character until it is too late. “Insular” is an OK word to describe an island, not the inhabitants. Human beings are citizens of the whole world (Gen 1 v28).

On the Grapevine:

OK – this time Bill and Annie really have gone to Oz; Argyll & Bute Planners came to give their views on possible wind-turbine locations and possible low-cost housing; the Screen-Machine came – an articulated lorry that transforms into a 100-seat luxurious cinema – and was warmly supported

across four public performances plus a bonus one for the schoolchildren; beach-cleaning continues and that Balnahard eyesore really will be attacked in December; no progress yet on the two west windows in the Parish Church, estimate is still awaited; official figures show a dramatic reduction in passenger traffic to Colonsay: despite fares having been slashed by virtually half, traffic is supposedly down by 13% (hopefully simply less people staying for much longer!); Gavin is walking on air; Grace and Keir are getting married in February; Scott is spending the winter on a golf-course in Portugal; Chris Baker has taken to photography in a big way; there are over 1,000 Friends of Colonsay on FB; there is scaffolding at the Baptist Manse, major roof repairs; CalMac were down to consult about the summer timetable and thankfully agreed to bin the idea of a 7.00 a.m. departure from Oban; Phil the Hill has successfully located the burst water pipe at Uragaig Bheag – Local Hero! it had defeated all other investigators for months on end; there are rumours of more new crofters, recently at Alistair Annie's, new sub-tenants at Dugie's and imminently new owners at Donmar; lots of draining going on – a particularly fine example opposite the Black Gate, beautifully straight and a very neat 1:60 gradient.

MAGAZINE SECTION

By The Way : If you are interested in either Colonsay History or Colonsay Family History, please see www.colonsayhistory.info where you will find links to two relevant occasional newsletters. They are a private play by Kevin Byrne and contributions are very welcome.

MV “Columba” – Secret Agent

Most readers will remember the familiar side-loading car-ferry MV “Columba”; in fact she is still a regular visitor to the island in another guise. Anybody who ever travelled on her will recall the unusual layout, the extensive accommodation, and the remarkable hermetic seals surrounding all the external openings. She was one of three special vessels of a so-called “citadel” class, built during the Cold War on behalf of the Secretary of State for Scotland and chartered bareboat to David MacBrayne Ltd.

The ships were all built in 1964, and were aptly named as “citadel”, being modern versions of a mediaeval impregnable keep. They had huge hydraulic doors to isolate the main structure and high-grade spraying equipment with which to encase themselves within a veritable ball of seawater, a continuous douche. Apparently they could also be pressurised to further resist ingress of chemical, nuclear or biological contamination. Two decontamination chambers were mounted on deck, to permit suitably suited individuals to make forays from within the citadel as need arose.

The equipment was maintained in functioning order until each vessel left service. MV “Columba” was the last to be sold off, in 1988. Many of her passengers will have wondered why such a vessel had so many cabins, deployed as she was upon short passages within the Inner Hebrides; and no-one can have failed to notice the single rabbit-hole access for passengers port and starboard, or the extraordinary guillotine doors athwart the car-deck.

The idea, presumably, was that in the event of nuclear war the vessels would be withdrawn from service and redeployed as safe command posts for important functionaries, lying at sea in a cocoon of water until such time as the radiation had died down a bit. One imagines that the crews will have been expected to loyally assist in operating the vessels and one might further imagine that the ships' companies would have had to include a suitable number of females of suitable age and nubility as to assist in the necessary regeneration of the nation. Indeed, one could speculate as to whether the list of proposed female participants was refreshed from time to time, like TV presenters – and if so,

upon what criteria. The 50 years embargo on secrets is now up, so perhaps that information is available?

Vale of Leven Inquiry

It is interesting to note that the recent publicity about the death rate at Vale of Leven is a curious echo of the outrage concerning the high death rate at Scutari during the Crimean war. Famously, Florence Nightingale was sent across to introduce a very high standard of nursing care, but the death rate actually increased. Sir John McNeill was also sent across, to investigate the commissariat; he was a native and future laird of Colonsay, a qualified medical man and acclaimed diplomat, and experienced in investigating and alleviating poverty and famine in Scotland. Sir John revealed hopeless inadequacies in the distribution of food, clothing, fuel and basic necessities amongst the troops, and this seemed to provide the explanation: patients were too malnourished and weak to be capable of saving before they even reached the hospitals.

However, one Colonel Tulloch had also been sent to investigate, and he was less easily convinced of the simple "cause and effect" solution; he carefully collected facts and figures and suggested that there was an element of doubt, although he could not quite identify it. It took the unsung William Parr, a committed statistician, to reveal the truth – no less than 16,000 men had died, not from malnutrition and despite excellent nursing care, but from the basic lack of what we now call "sanitation".

There was no word for it in English before this time, since "sanidad" really means just "health", and "hygiene" just refers to the goddess of health. The medical profession had chosen to ignore the blandishments of the engineers – it transpired that the absence of proper ventilation, the absence of proper drainage, the cramped and substandard conditions in which the patients had been housed, had all contributed to the effective loss of an entire first expeditionary army. The statistics proved that anyone who had not come under the care of Florence Nightingale and her undoubtedly excellent nurses was much more likely to survive, despite inadequate food, shelter or clothing. When Miss Nightingale came to see the enormity of the situation, she became passionate in the novel cause of "sanitation" – once, in reference to 442 patients treated at a different field hospital of whom twelve had died, she made the simple but precise calculation "If these men had been sent to Scutari, there would have died not twelve but 189".

Fortunately, a Sanitary Commission had been established after the first terrible year in Scutari, and Florence Nightingale subsequently realised, in the light of the statistics, that it was due to its efforts rather than to Sir John McNeill's improved commissariat that men were saved. "Sutherland's Sanitary Commission smashed 400 panes of glass with their own hands on their second day at Scutari to improve ventilation." It does seem a shame that we are unable to learn the lessons of history, but readers may care to see "Florence Nightingale" by Hugh Small (9780957279711) and for background "Memoir of Sir John McNeill G.C.B." by F. MacAllister McNeill (available in facsimile). As for Vale of Leven, we really do not need an "Inquiry" to know that the finest medical and nursing care can be trumped by inadequate basic administrative standards.

From the Archives

The following article first appeared in *The Corncrake* about 15 years ago.

Poem by "Colonsay Exiles" June 16th 1943

We wandered up to Clark's Hotel, to meet Mine Host so True,
So when we hear "It's all Sold Out" we don't know what to do;
It dis-na maitter David Boy, some other game we'll play,
We'll sing you sangs on Lemonade, we're here in COLONSAY.

Just think "One Month" on Colonsay, in Davie Clark's Hotel,
Fishing off the Harbour Bar, some stories fresh to tell;
Then wander round to see the Waves, on Fair Kiloran Sand,
Returning just in time for bed, contented happy band.

Dear Old Dunara Castle, what Great service you have been,
Sheltered in that smoke room, Maid, Wife Mither, Grannie sen;
We like your "Great Odd Whistle" and should fortune favour me,
Some happy day, a wish complete, your whole round trip to see.

That Whistle, mostly, welcome sound, but Oh! If it could talk,
What scenes of Life, it could unfold, of Folks in every walk;
Young ones leaving home first time, Two Sweethearts newly wed,
Some Tourists "sittin oot the nicht", they couldn'a find a bed.

Success to you Good Captain Clark, come join our happy throng,
The Mates, The Purser, Engineers, let's sing one parting song;
The Boys on deck, The Cabin Boys, The Boys who tend the fires,
Cook, Steward and Stewardess, praising too, the man of many wires.

Another line for Kirsty Mae, once more before we're parted,
That Gracious Manner, kindly Smile, this Long, Long story started;
May Roses on your path be spread, each hope and wish come true,
Your favoured Lad, the Smoke Room Chums, be Steadfast, all life through.

Oh! COLONSAY, Dear COLONSAY, bright theme of this fair song,
Let's back to peace and comfort soon, those kindly folks among;
Yon Motor Chuggin' for the Beach, "Dunara" sails away,
We're more than happy on this isle, on COLONSAY we'll stay.

J.W.

The above lines were collected by the late A.S. McNeill ("Andrew Oransay"). **David Clark** and his sister, Mary, had the Colonsay hotel throughout the war years and up until 1952; David was a renowned hotelier with an enviable reputation in the trade. There are many tales - for example, a rather grand guest left a pair of shabby, well worn shoes outside his bedroom door, having retired early. By chance, a cargo ship was coming up from the Clyde that night and David telegraphed an order to Kelvin Hughes, the famous chandlers ("Everything, from a needle to an anchor"). The cargo boat was in and out of Colonsay long before breakfast and David was able to leave replacement shoes outside the bedroom door, correct in every detail. Nothing was said, and the hapless guest was suitably chastened.

Even in the war years, when the drink was rationed, guests regularly stayed a month or more. In an almost cashless society, David devised an elegant solution when he obtained a miniature printing press. Arriving guests were issued with a suitable supply of personalised Visiting Cards, and given to understand that these could be used as currency - any recipient could redeem the card against the refreshment of his choice, to be charged to the Visitor's account.

S.S."Dunara Castle" was up in years by 1943, but was one of the most beloved in the fleet of M'Callum, Orme & Co. Captain Clark was David's brother, a highly respected master who is still

remembered on the west coast; he was a gifted poet and songwriter – (examples of his work have appeared in these pages, KB 2014). The "Dunara Castle" (with her sister ship, S.S. "Hebrides") supplemented her income by Circular Tours of "About Seven or Eight Days", offering "Cabin for the Round, Board included ... £9". The above line [*"Some Tourists "sittin oot the nicht", they couldn'a find a bed."*] reflects company policy at the time: "Cruise Passengers have priority of choice of Cabins over Intermediate Passengers, the latter only being booked on board subject to there being room."

Some features of the "Dunara Castle" are missing in the modern fleet - no open fires, no Smoking Room, no "*Motor Chuggin for the Beach*", now that there is a pier and ships can lie alongside. On the other hand, the attitude of the ships' companies has changed little and we can be grateful for that.