

JOHN KNEEN  
THE GAARU

SOME REMINSICENCES



CHIOLLAGH BOOKS  
FOR  
CULTURE VANNIN  
2018

## INTRODUCTION



In 1952, the *Mona's Herald* started the run a series of extracts from a notebook compiled by John Kneen over the winter of 1949–50 for the recently-founded Manx Museum Folk-Life Survey, some ten articles in all appearing running on into 1953. Kneen had worked all his life as a blacksmith, learning the trade from his father, who ran a smithy in Jurby, which he was later to take over. Towards the end of his working days, he had the smithy at the Lhen in Andreas. After retiring he lived first at Ballachristie in Jurby, but by now he was living at Ballamona Cottage in the Ballaugh Currags, and at this date had been discovered by those enthusiasts for the Manx language who had learnt that he was a native speaker of the language.

The reason for publication was connected with him celebrating his centenary in 1952, when by turning 100, he was now the oldest living person in the Island. Each year, the newspapers reported the increment in his age and carried details of his life and his continuing good health, and this carried on remarkably until 1958, when he died on 6 June with a reported age of 105.

In 1948, he had attributed his longevity to “eating all sorts of common food, plenty of hard work, taking good care of myself, and having a drop of ale and a *smook*.” That year, he had appeared on Wilfred Pickle’s radio show, “Have a Go,” and said that “I am about 95 years of age.” He is known to have been christened on 22 February 1860 in Andreas, and the 1861 census records his age as being one year old. In 1871, he was aged 10, then 21 (1881), 31 (1891), 42 (1901), 49 (1911); by 1948, his age, as remembered, had drifted upwards. Without a family bible, for instance, to record family details, those born in the middle of the nineteenth century could only have a vague idea of their true age. Compulsory registration of births and deaths in the Island started only in 1878. Kneen’s death certificate gave his age as being 100, but 98 is the true age.

Nevertheless, he enjoyed a long life, and fortunately wrote about it as well (and at length). The first extract is rather alarming, titled “Bare Knuckle Fistic Battles,” and deals with the settling of disputes in a formalised pugilistic manner. The rendezvous would inevitably be the *thie oast*, one of the many cottage ale-houses that peppered the Manx countryside, such as the one mentioned by Kneen at the Lhen, known as “Juan Robin.” This is detail that is not found elsewhere and certainly not from someone born in the Island in the 1860s. The following extracts in the *Mona's Herald* deal variously with “Beggars Houses,” the work of tailors and dressmakers, schooling in Jurby, thatchers and thatching, bee hive ovens, ghosts, superstitions, the phynnodderie, making carranes, saddlers, the Manx pony, “buring the butch,” charms, haunted places, the first sewing machine, the fairy folk, the loaghtan sheep, going to Peel for the stock of herrings, the coming of the steam mill, the first

## INTRODUCTION

bicycles, cutting hay, the police, the church, and, finally, playing cammag. What is reproduced here is just the surface of the material that lies in the notebook.

“I have been smoking ever since I can remember. I was smoking at the age of about seven.” So said the Gaau in 1952. “I want to hear more of the Manx spoken,” he declared in 1953. “They have made a start with the teaching of it again, and I hope that in the New Year they will be doing more of it. It is a grand language, and it would be a scandalous shame if it was to die out.” Despite living to the age of 98, dying in 1958 after having smoked since 1867, learning Manx is the healthier option to take these days.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2018



JOHN KNEEN  
(1860–1958)

OFFICIAL RECORDS

BAPTISMS REGISTER, PARISH OF ANDREAS

Baptised 22 February 1860.

[*FamilySearch.org*]

CENSUS RETURNS 1861–1911

1861 CENSUS

Aged 1 year old, and living at Cross Four Ways in Andreas.

[*Census Enumerators' Book* for Andreas 1861, RG 9/4410, fol. 45, sch. 91]

1871 CENSUS

Aged 10, and living at Lheaney Voar House, Jurby.

[*Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1871, RG 10/5772, fol. 138, sch. 49]

1881 CENSUS

Aged 21, Lheaney Voar House, Jurby. Working as a blacksmith.

[*Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1881, RG 11/4684, fol. 49, sch. 12]

1891 CENSUS

Aged 31, Lheaney Voar House, Jurby. Blacksmith.

[*Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1891, RG 12/4684, fol. 49, sch. 12]

1901 CENSUS

Aged 42, Lheaney Voar House, Jurby. Blacksmith. Married to Esther (26), born Andreas, with children, Ethel Mary (2), born in Jurby, John Francis (9 months old), [place of birth not stated; Jurby (1911)]. Also present, John A. Pooley (15), nephew, blacksmith's apprentice, born Liverpool, England. John Kneen returned as a Manx speaker, his wife not, as was John Pooley.

[*Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1901, RG 13/5302, fol. 67, sch. 12]

1911 CENSUS

Aged 49, Lheaney Voar House, Jurby. Blacksmith. Children born since 1901 are Edward (9), Esther Mildred (6), Emily Florence (2). All born in Jurby.

[*Census Enumerators' Book* for Jurby 1911, RG14 PN34694 RD635 SDI ED3/3 SNI3]

ISLE OF MAN CIVIL REGISTRY OF BIRTHS, MARRIAGES, AND DEATHS

1958, aged 100. Ballaugh, Vol. 343, page 380.

[*ManxBMD.com*]

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JOHN KNEEN  
(1948)



*Isle of Man Weekly Times, 16 October 1948*

JOHN KNEEN  
(1952)



*Isle of Man Times*, 15 November 1952

JOHN KNEEN  
(1954)



*Ramsey Courier*, 12 November 1954

# JOHN KNEEN'S NOTEBOOK

## (1)

During the winter nights of 1949–50, the Island's robust centenarian, John Kneen, retired blacksmith, of Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh, dictated to his daughter, Millie, recollections of the dim and distant past, to be recorded for posterity.

This record of the Manx way of life nearly a century ago forms part of the material gathered together for the Manx [Museum] Folk-Life Survey, and is known as "John Kneen's Note Book." The original is stored away among the treasures of the survey in the Manx Museum, but a copy has been passed to us for our editorial use, and we propose to publish extracts from it week by week as items of interest for those of our readers who would like to know something of old Manx customs.

One of these customs was known as "the Fights," and is described in the "Note Book" as follows:

### BARE KNUCKLE FISTIC BATTLES

Disputes were settled by both parties fighting each other with the bare fists, I have heard my fairer and grandfather tell of these fights, how young men fell out—perhaps from St Jude's and the Lhane, or the Lhen as it is now called.

A day would be fixed for the right, and before the day came word would be passed on from one to another, and thus to all the young men in the district. St Jude's would stretch from Bern-a-Hara to Summerhill, and the Lhane as far as Smeale. When the big day arrived all would set off at the Lhane to a pub called "Juan Robin," situated right by the Lhen Mill.

After drinking a few pints of ale, each would begin to challenge each other one by one. Somebody from St Jude's would challenge a Lhen fellow. Then they went outside, and fought with their bare fists, two by two. Some youths from each side took no part in the fight at all; they were just called upon to act as sort of referees, making sure each man got fair play.

It didn't finish there, because after the big day was over the Lhane chaps made a day to have a return fight at St Jude's. This time all would meet at a pub, situated at Ballacleator, which consisted of a long low thatched house, and the same thing happened again and this finished the dispute.

## (2)

This week's extract from the Notebook of the Islands centenarian, John Kneen, retired blacksmith, of Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh, relates to what were known as the "Beggars Houses," which were situate in the remote parts of the Island in the early part of last century:

### THE BEGGAR'S HOUSES

There was a "Beggars House" in each district, and a great thing it was in those days. It would often be only a very common house, and kept by a person in humble circumstances. It was commonly called the "Beggars Lodging," and the lodging meant a bed and a meal.

The beggar would always have his own food—stuff he had begged from people as he journeyed along. There was no law against begging then. At some places they would be given some bread, herrings, a piece of pork, and egg or two, or a penny. The people at all the houses nearly always gave the beggar something.

The beggars were men and women who wouldn't work for their living: they simply went round begging, and it was always unlucky to turn the beggar away from the door as some evil might befall someone in the household. In the summer evenings they would be seen sitting outside the lodging place on chairs, stools or perhaps on a low bench, smoking their pipes. The charge was commonly sixpence a night, and any one who hadn't the money would have to give part of the stuff he had collected during the day.

The most important thing in these houses would be the beds and a good-sized table: there wouldn't really be much room for furniture besides these. If it happened now and again that the house wouldn't accommodate all, then a farmer nearby would put an old bed in a corner of his barn to house the beggar for the night.

People kind of lived in fear of these people because of the superstition connected with them; they were supposed to put curses on people who treated them unkindly. They nearly always travelled alone, and would be seen trudging along—the man carrying a sack and the woman carrying a basket which they called a "ready-cule" basket, and they liked to smoke a pipe as it was a nice excuse to get in by the fire.

### (3)

From the Notebook of the Island's centenarian, John Kneen, the retired blacksmith, of Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh, we this week, publish details of the men and women who made clothes for the people of the Island generations ago.

### HOW THE TAILORS WORKED

There were many tailors in each district. They went to work from house to house, spinning three or four days at the one house. They sat at work at a low table with their knees crossed, and used ordinary needles and thread.

The garments they made were men's and boys' suits, overcoats, singlets and underpants, and caps for boys and youths because the men wore top hats. Quilts were also made, putting in double cloth with a fine coating of wool in between for extra warmth in the winter.

To process the garments in the making and when finished, the tailor used what he called "the Duck and the Drake." The duck was the flat board which he placed

between the cloth, and the drake was the iron which he used. It resembled very much an ordinary flat iron only it was square in shape, and this he heated by the fire. There were no machines and the work was all done by hand. The iron weighed about four pounds and was called the goose.

#### AND DRESSMAKERS

Dressmakers, like the tailors, were indeed plentiful. They worked on similar lines, travelling from house to house, spending days at the one house if necessary, and taking the work to their own homes if necessary.

They much preferred to work at people's houses because the mistress would be generous, especially in the way of food, there being always a few extras in at those times.

They, too, did all the work by hand and carried their own flat irons to press the work. They made all the men's shirts, boy's shirts girls and women's dresses, pinafores, which they called "pinnies," clothing for small children, a kind of frock, as in those times boys and girls all wore the one kind of clothing until they went to school, and then a small boy would always remember his first suit, which would be given on the day he started school. Apart from the dressmakers there were the bonnet-makers.

#### (4)

What was life like in this Island nearly a century ago? In his Notebook, John Kneen, retired blacksmith, of Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh, tells of many things which are proving of absorbing interest to young and old throughout the country.

This week he gives some details of schools and those rapidly vanishing experts, the thatchers.

#### SCHOOLS AND THATCHERS OF LAST CENTURY

There was one school at Jurby East and situated near the chapel. It was kept by an old man named Caley, and he had two club feet.

About forty scholars attended, and he must indeed have been a clever man as he taught the boys navigation and land surveying. The smaller children paid twopence a week and the elder ones five-pence or six-pence, and this was all the master had to live on. this being the same all over the place.

Another school was situated at Sandy-Gate and kept, by a man named Abner Kerruish, who it is interesting to learn had one club foot.

The third school was at Jurby West, and kept by a man named Cowley, who had one poor arm, which makes it appear as if the job of schoolmaster was given to people who were crippled and couldn't do manual labour.

The scholars sat on forms which they called "firms," and they went to school five days a week, never going on a Saturday.

THE THATCHERS

There were men in each district who did nothing but thatching for a living. By this I mean they did quite a lot of it throughout the country, and were looked on as kind of professional; at the trade, as also was the hedger and the ditcher at their jobs.

They went round thatching houses for people and they charged a shilling a day and their food. They did not pull the bent, the people having thatching done provided this. They bought it from people who made a practice of pulling it and sold it at one shilling a stood or a penny a sheaf.

These were people who lived near the shore, right by the bent. The people from any distance just carted it home after buying it. The rope used by the thatcher when the bent was laid on to rope the house was made of straw.

It was made by a man who went round the country making a trade of making this straw rope. He let the rope while often a youngster or somebody used the twister. The rope was tied in position on each side to stone pegs which were on the walls near the roof of all thatched houses.

The rope was also laid on the length of the house and called length ropes (which were the first laid on) and the others were called the cross ropes. In this manner they were woven in the form of a net and this completed the thatching.

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BEE HIVE OVEN

This was a big iron pot with an oval shaped lid and was used in every house and acted as an oven. It was heated in a turf fire on the hearth. A big bonnag was generally put into this pot and left to bake overnight for the family's use the next day. The pots used in the farmhouses the biggest, those used by the cottagers being much smaller, they varied in size.

THE GHOSTS

People lived in a great fear of these in olden times. Ghosts could take the form of anything—a white lady, headless man, dogs, coaches going along without horses, a light etc. In those days the hedges and did not get much attention. Lots of water lay on the roads and the gorse was allowed to grow just as it liked and the biggest "ghosts" if looked at closely were stray animals, courting couples, big gorse bushes on the hedges swaying in the wind, the moon throwing shadows on the dubs of water on the roads, or perhaps a piece of white paper lying by the roadside. We still hear of the Morthy Dhoo, the black dog of Peel Castle, and The Buggane of St Trinians.

SUPERSTITIONS

A cockerel crowing at night was the sign of a death in the family.

It was never right to burn bread (wilful waste meant woeful want).

To spill stilt was an omen of bad luck: it had to be taken and a pinch flung over the left shoulder to get rid of the bad luck.

To see a number of magpies together 1, 2, 3, 4 etc. it meant a christening, wedding, death or a birth.

It was unlucky to see the new moon for the first time through glass, but very lucky indeed to be standing on grass.

It wasn't wise to be on the road from the time a person died until after the funeral. The funeral procession was supposed to travel from the house to the Church and if you got caught in it you would be carried along with the procession to the churchyard.

To cut nails on Sunday the devil would be with you all the week.

To break a looking glass meant bad luck for 7 years and it was right to cover the looking glass if it was lightning.

It was unlucky to walk under a ladder.

It was never right to turn the beggar away empty handed.

It was very unlucky to lend salt.

To borrow something for the wedding was very lucky.

Mayflowers were gathered on the 11th day of May and placed over doors and gates to bring good luck for the whole year.

When seeing a new baby for the first time they "crossed its hand with silver."

#### MAKING BROTH FOR THE "PHON-ORD-OREE"

The phon-ord-oree was a kind of fairy man who was supposed to live on the mountains. When the farmer wanted to thresh he filled the barn of corn and at night the housewife made a big pot of broth and put the ladle in it and placed it in the barn. The phon-ord-oree was supposed to thresh the corn by himself in the night while the farmer slept. The broth was for a good feed for him when he had finished the work. In the morning all would be gone, just the empty pot and ladle left, then they knew the "phon-ord-oree" had been and gone and all was right.

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#### MAKING THE "CRANES"

[6g] In old times people made their own shoes out of sheep skin and these they called "cranes." The sheep was killed, the hide was then pickled in this manner the outside, the part with the wool on was covered with hot lime to take the wool off. Then the inside was coated with saltpetre to tan it. It was then left for about a week then then the wool was stripped off it and cut with knife into shapes to make the cranes. They turned the edges up and made lace holes Then they were laced up from the toe to the top with a lace which was a narrow strip of hide. It was then worn on the foot as a shoe. They were worn by all. As time went on lumpers (that is children) knew of no other shoe than the crane until they could earn their own, this means among the poorer classes.

## SADDLERS

The saddlers made cart saddles, neck collars and winkers for the farmers for the horses. In fact they did all kinds of harness, such as trap harness etc. They worked from early morning till late at night. Their work was heavy and much in demand, like the blacksmiths, as there were so many horses used the land and then lots of ponies were kept by the gentry. In fact nearly everybody kept a pony: pie-bald ponies and Shetland ponies being often seen. The saddler made riding saddles as most of the travelling was done by horse back and the saddlers worked with nothing but the leather.

## THE OLD MANX PONY

These were mostly black in colour, they were only fairly small from 13 to 14 hands high but they were heavily built and very strong. They were short on the back and could bring a heavy load. They were used to bring the turf from the mountains and the currags and nearly every crofter had two. Farmers also had them and they were most prized because of their toughness.

*Shanks Pony*—this means a person's own legs and when they said to use "Use shank's pony" it meant you had to walk.

*A Bell Shiner*—this was the common name for a man's top-hat.

*Drawin' the Taffee*. A toffee spree was a great thing in those those olden times and caused much amusement among the younger people. They drew the toffee and pulled it into sticks before it got hard.

## BURNING THE BUTCH

People in olden times believed a lot in witchcraft which they called "butchcraft." If people quarrelled or had any grudge against each other, then they believed each could butch, that is cause bad luck. For instance if a farmer suffered loss to his animals or crops they said "he's butched." People did all sorts of things to keep this evil away from their dwellings. They tied curns on the outhouse doors, these were ferns which they gathered and made into crosses, they tied a horse shoe to the latch of the dwelling house door and if a person met a woman who they thought might be able to a harm, the person just said to themselves [6f] (not loud of course) 3 times "God bless her eyes" and then took 3 pinches of salt and flung them over the left shoulder. This would apply to a woman coming into another's house.

Then the 11th day of May every year was called "Burn the Butch night." Fires (gorse) were lit in every field and all hands turned out to burn the butch, or to rid the place of this great evil, as all misfortunes were blamed on the butch. They called it "the evil eye." Another common practice was to brush the house out after another had been visiting, to brush the bad luck away with them, which they brought in by the dust on their feet. Any sickness amongst animals, then they would have to go to the four roads, that is on the corner where four roads would meet, just as the sun was

rising, taking a "beson" or brush with them and swept the dust off the road and carried it home and shook it over the sick animal and saying a silent prayer to themselves whilst doing it. The women carried this precious dust home in their aprons, whilst the men often carried it home in a handkerchief. This was supposed to bring good luck for the sick animals recovery (for animals they would say "craythur").

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#### CHARMS

People and animals were supposed to be cured by these charms without the aid of a doctor or vet. They were many and varied e.g. the sprinkling of dust from the four roads over a sick animal: perhaps only a few words spoken over a sick person: blowing the breath and mumbling a few words over anyone who had been scalded, had sores on or cuts on them. In later years people who used these were said to practice witchcraft and eyed suspiciously and so the practice of charms or the charmers meaning healers died out.

#### PLACES WHICH WERE HAUNTED

Many places were supposed to be haunted that means something would be seen there at night time, something peculiar. Sometimes it would be in the form of a white lady, a dog, as the black dog of Peel Castle, a child, or a man, a rattling of chains, a coach coming up the drive, a bright light, those were what they called ghosts and could take the form of any animal, or human being, in fact, anything.

In those olden times people feared death more, and when people died they were supposed to haunt the house at night any time after 11 o'clock. These ghosts were seen or heard and people told each other great stories of the ghosts they had seen. People were afraid being out alone at night because of all these weird stories. Fear was put into the children when they were very young through older people going to each others houses telling about the ghosts they had seen and after a good yarn or two the children of the house would be too scared to go to bed, let alone go outside the door. This was one way of "keeping a birra rick" on the youngsters, in other words, keeping a bit of rule on them.

#### THE FIRST SEWING MACHINE

This came into this island about 50 years ago. It was something similar to those of the present time, only not so up to date. It was worked by hand and manufactured in England. All the sewing was worked by hand so it was a real boon to the dressmaker. In later years a treadle was used and this made the work be done more easier and quicker still.

## FAIRIES

These were called the little folk or the little people. They were spoken of as belonging to groups, *eg*, the fairies of Ballaugh Currags, or the Fairies of Ballaugh Bridge. People who went out in the early morning before the dew was off the ground said they saw the rings where the fairies had been holding a dance or party. For instance people who went gathering mushrooms, and people who went to market would often see these fairy rings. For dress these little men wore red coats and green trousers. If a person had a fit of the shivers or came out in a rash then the old people would say "Oh he's been took by the fairies," meaning that the person had been in meadows and had got mixed up with the little folk, and "mind the fairies don't get you" is a phrase which we still hear, when a person goes out alone at night. These fairies were often to be seen sitting on mushrooms, on the top bar of gates, or sitting on a flower, and they were generally looked on as harmless, timid little creatures, and some old people thought it very lucky and wise to throw a few crumbs outside at night just in case the fairies were around. Little fairy lights seen in the meadows at night time were called "willow-the-wisps."

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## THE LOAGHTAN SHEEP

This was a very old brand of sheep in the Island. It was only small in size and had four horns, two on each side, one underneath the other. In colour they were a kind of dark brown and the wool was in great demand and was 2d. a pound dearer than ordinary wool. This was the wool used to make "russet" cloth. They derived their name from the colour of the wool, this dark brown being called loaghtan and were mostly kept not because they were good breeders, but chiefly for the quality of the wool. Tobacco steeped in boiling water was used to deep the sheep and also soot, buttermilk and sulphur all mixed together, this was another sheep dip used by the people in olden days. There was no "dipping" they simply sprinkled the animal all over.

## GOING TO PEEL FOR THE STOCK OF HERRING

At the end of the summer the farmers went over to Peel in stiff carts to get the stock of herrings. This meant a big day for herring was greatly used through the long winter months. When the farmers reached Ballaugh they shouted to each other "We wont bother with no ale to-day boys" and then when they would be 200 or 300 yards over the bridge the fairies would be supposed to be there with a long stick with a crook on it and lead the farmers back to the pub and these fairies shouted "We want some ale, we want some ale" and kept knocking on the door. After the ale was served and drank they would then be allowed to continue the journey and when they were safely over the bridge the farmers shouted "We didn't think much of the ale because the fairies had all the good taken out of it there's nothing but water left for us." This

custom of trying to go past a pub and couldn't was just blamed on the fairies. When they reached Peel they bought the herring from the fisherman—anything from 1 maze to 10 maze. A maze was about 600 herrings. It was very cheap in those days from 2s. and 2s. 6d. a 100. Then they went to Juan Nicky's pub for ale and after a few pints set off back for home again. They set off from home about 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and arrived home fairly late that night as the stiff cart took a long lime as the horses walked (never trotted) every step of the way.

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## THE FIRST STEAM MILL

Great was the excitement when the first steam mill came land about eighty years ago. It was drawn along by four good strong horses, so for many years only the bigger farmers used it, as the little crofters of which there were many had no horse power to draw it along, so they had to be content with the old horse mills. It travelled very slowly along the roads as they were only in a bad state and it was heavy for the horses. Crowds chased it up everywhere to see this new wonder. It was just the engine and mill. The press came into existence much later. It took twenty-five men to work it. It worked about ten hours a day and it was about ten years before it got its own power, that is, its own steam power and it was only then that everybody could have the advantage of it.

“Work and No Table”—this meant working for pay and on your own expense, in other words, pay for work done but no food.

“The Sporrán”—was the name for the money bag or purse. It was an old custom amongst farmers to carry their gold and silver and coppers in three separate sporrans. It was a bag made of tanned sheepskin.

## THE FIRST BICYCLES

The first bicycles which came out had two small wheels of the same size made by the joiner and hooped by the blacksmith with iron hoops. The pedals were fastened on the front wheel and it was drove on this wheel only. The seat was in between the two wheels. It can be well imagined it was very heavy and only could be driven slowly. This type of bicycle did not last long. People began to realise alterations were needed. Then someone patented the penny farthing. This was a bicycle with a large wheel in front and a very small one behind. The difference in the size of the wheels differed as much as the penny and the farthing and more, hence it derived its name. The seat was set on top of the big wheel right in the centre. This was a big improvement is this bicycle was lighter and went faster. The pedals were on the big wheel so it was still like the first, driven on the one wheel. A short time later solid rubber tyres were used instead of iron hoops, this being a great improvement. This type of bicycle was commonly called the spider.

HOW THE HAY WAS CUT

All the hay in olden times was cut by scythe. Each cut their own and there were men who went round the country cutting by the day for the day farmers. The pay was four shillings an acre. The hay was then left about two days lying on the swathe meaning sway. They continued in this manner on side till what they called a "Nollan" or row was formed. They then formed the bottom of a ruck, now called a rick and they continued in this manner till the field was finished. The whole job was done entirely by the scythe, fork and handrake.

THE POLICE IN OLDEN TIMES

There was one Policeman in each Parish and they were commonly called "the bobbies." In these it was the height that counted most, education did not matter. The bigger and coarser looking and uglier the better bobbie he was looked on, so that even the sight of him put fear in the people. He was paid by the week and only wore his uniform on special occasions, fair days, and tea party nights and it consisted of a big long coat almost to his knees, a too hat and he always carried a stick to "lay on" anybody if required. The rest of the men in these times wore swallow tail coats, but the Policeman's was called a "hammer-tail coat."

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The following are extracts from the Notebook of John Kneen, the Manx centenarian:

THE CHURCH

The Church, of which there was one in each parish, was looked on as the leading power and acted as a kind of Courthouse as well. To each there was attached a "Sumner"—a sort of Coroner, and it was his job to summons anyone in the parish who had been doing wrong. For instance, if a man stayed away from church for more than four Sundays in succession he was made to come and sit before the whole congregation wearing a white gown; this was his punishment.

In the case of an illegitimate child, the punishment was to sit for six weeks in the white gown, and they hung a man for stealing a sheep in those days; and for witchcraft a person was taken to Creg-Willys Hill at St John's, put in a barrel with spikes or nails driven through it, and rolled down the hill.

The churches were well attended. The parson, Captain of the Parish, the four churchwardens, the dogman, the "shafe" man, and the Sumner attended every Sunday. The dogman was a man who came with a whip on his shoulder to keep the dogs out of the church. The "shafe" man was the man who went round in the parson's cart taking a stock of every ten, or one sheaf out of every stock. This corn was given as a sort of tithe. It went to help the parson's living. The sumner, as mentioned before, summoned the people to church. These men would be in attendance every Sunday and made their own bye-laws. They also had to do with the

pin-pound; they took all the pay and just paid the pinner a penny a head for each animal. In the summer, if the animals were more than twelve hours before being claimed they were turned out on pasture and in winter they had to be housed and fed. This was the punishment administered by the Church.

PLAYING CAMMAG

This was a favourite game played by youth; and men about ninety years ago. A stick similar to a hockey stick was used and a small ball about the size of a hen egg. When a right game took place a team or side was picked and the game played in a grass field. The course across the field would be marked out with sticks about forty yards apart, set in the ground. A referee was then chosen to see that the ball did not go outside his own distance. The player had to knock the ball along with the cammag-stick to the next player. It would be knocked along in this manner through the whole length of the field. Those who got the most runs and finished first were the winners. A certain number of runs through the field would be fixed before the start, and so they continued in this manner till the number of runs would be finished. The referee then would have to keep count on the points lost or won.

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“JOHN KNEEN'S NOTE BOOK,” *MONA'S HERALD* (1952-53)

“John Kneen's Note Book (1).” *Mona's Herald* 25 November 1952: 3b.

—— (2).” *Mona's Herald* 2 December 1952: 6f.

—— (3).” *Mona's Herald* 16 December 1952: 7e.

—— (4).” *Mona's Herald* 30 December 1952: 7d.

—— (5).” *Mona's Herald* 6 January 1953: 6f.

—— (6).” *Mona's Herald* 13 January 1953: 6g & 6f.

—— (7).” *Mona's Herald* 20 January 1953: 6c.

—— (8).” *Mona's Herald* 27 January 1953: 4f.

—— (9).” *Mona's Herald* 3 February 1953: 4f.

—— (10).” *Mona's Herald* 3 March 1953: 2d.



“HAVE A GO”  
BALLAUGH  
(1948)



*Isle of Man Weekly Times*, 16 October 1948

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“WILFRED PICKLE AT BALLAUGH—GREAT ‘HAVE A GO’ NIGHT—RADIO PERSONALITY  
CHARMS MANX AUDIENCE.” *RAMSEY COURIER* (9 SEPTEMBER 1948)

NINETY-FIVE-TEAR-OLD PARISHIONER

[5e] A tremendous reception was accorded the next member of the team. He was a bent and bearded figure [5f] who was assisted to his place before the mike and told us his name was John Kneen, retired blacksmith, living in Ballaugh Curragh. Asked his age he amazed the audience with his answer—“I am about 95 years of age.” He said he had lived on the Island all his life at Andreas and Ballaugh. He started work when he was eleven or twelve years of age. Wilfred persuaded the veteran to give some more information about his early life and when he was asked how much money he earned when he began work he replied amidst laughter, “Oh I got nothing for practising.” The audience marvelled when he said he had never been attended by a doctor and attributed his long life to “eating all sorts of common food, plenty of hard work, taking good care of myself, and having a drop of ale and a *smook*.” He said he was fond sometimes of a drop of whisky. He also remembered using the Manx language a good deal and said he only talked Manx now when “just odd fellows come to learn from me.” The only time he was ever off the Island was when

“HAVE A GO” BALLAUGH (1948)

he was in Belfast. He liked this very well, liked the people and got on all right with them.

A flash of unexpected humour came when Mr Kneen was questioned as to what was the happiest day of his life. He said it was the day he got christened and went on to explain the kind of clothes that children wore in the old days and said that his first boy's suit was given him when he was christened. Asked if there was anything he didn't like Mr Kneen replied he didn't like seeing young women drinking in public houses.

Mr Kneen of course had no difficulty in answering the questions put to him by Wilfred and it was a foregone conclusion that he would be given the money.

“Wilfred Pickle at Ballaugh—Great ‘Have a Go’ Night—Radio Personality Charms Manx Audience.” *Ramsey Courier* 9 September 1948: 5e–f. [Extract]

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“‘HAVE A GO’ AT BALLAUGH: MR JOHN KNEEN OF THE CURRAGHS.” *ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES* (16 OCTOBER 1948)

“HAVE A GO” AT BALLAUGH

MR JOHN KNEEN OF THE CURRAGHS

“He is not like other men. He's got a sharp wit about him.”

This was the comment of someone who knows Mr John Kneen, who lives in a cottage at the Curraghs, over two miles from Ballaugh. On Wednesday that wit and intelligence was displayed to thousands of radio listeners all over the world, and especially Manx people. For his voice was heard in the famous programme, Wilfred Pickles' “Have a Go.”

Mr Kneen, 95 years of age, is a retired blacksmith, and lives with his daughter Millie. He has a son who works on a farm. His smithy was at Andreas.

Recently Mr Kneen, who speaks fluent Manx, made a record of a Manx conversation with Mr Kaighin, of Bride. An Irish professor visited them with a recording van. The record is to be used for language instructional purposes.

Only once in his long life has he left his native Isle.

He told friends that he was very keen to listen to himself on the radio. We are sure he will be proud of his performance.

“‘Have a Go’ at Ballaugh: Mr John Kneen of the Curraghs.” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 16 October 1948: 6h.



JOHN KNEEN

THE BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

1952

1. "Oldest Manxman celebrates 100th Birthday." *Isle of Man Times* 15 November 1952: 1b–d.

1953

2. "The Island in 1952." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 3 January 1953: 1b–d.
3. "100 Years Old—Still Looking Forward." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 3 January 1953: 1e–f.
4. "101st Birthday." *Isle of Man Examiner* 13 November 1953: 1e.
5. "101 Yesterday." *Ramsey Courier* 13 November 1953: 4f.
6. "They Say ...." *Mona's Herald* 17 November 1953: 5d.

1954

7. "102 To-Day." *Ramsey Courier* 12 November 1954: 4e.
8. "He is 102 now!" *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 13 November 1954: 1d–e.
9. "Grand Old Manxman." *Mona's Herald* 16 November 1954: 6e.
10. "Mr John Kneen's Great Day." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 20 November 1954: 1e.

1955

11. "103 To-Morrow." *Isle of Man Examiner* 11 November 1955: 1h.
12. "He is 103 To-morrow." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 11 November 1955: 1d–e.
13. "[News Gossip] Hearty congratulations to ...." *Mona's Herald* 15 November 1955: 4f.
14. "[News Gossip] Personality of the Week." *Mona's Herald* 15 November 1955: 4f.

1956

15. "He's 104 on Monday." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 9 November 1956: 1d–e.
16. "[News in Brief] Believed to be ..." *Ramsey Courier* 9 November 1956: 4e.
17. "104 Yesterday." *Mona's Herald* 13 November 1956: 1g.
18. "Congratulations to the ..." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 16 November 1956: 6b.

1957

19. "105 Next Tuesday: Ballaugh Centenarian's Birthday." *Ramsey Courier* 8 November 1957: 5b.
20. "Oldest Manxman is 105 today." *Mona's Herald* 12 November 1957: 1e.
21. "105 Years Old! Mr John Kneen's Birthday." *Isle of Man Examiner* 15 November 1957: 1e.
22. "[News in Brief] Mr David Craine ...." *Ramsey Courier* 15 November 1957: 4d.

THE PASSING OF JOHN KNEEN

1958

23. "Last of the Manx Native Speakers: Death of Mr John Kneen at 105." *Ramsey Courier* 13 June 1958: 5b.

OBITUARY AND OTHER NOTICES

24. "Births, Marriages and Deaths." *Ramsey Courier* 5 June 1959: 1g-h.
25. "Births, Marriages and Deaths." *Ramsey Courier* 13 June 1958: 1f-g.
26. "Births, Marriages and Deaths." *Ramsey Courier* 20 June 1958: 1f.

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## THE BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

1952

### I. "OLDEST MANXMAN CELEBRATES IOOTH BIRTHDAY." ISLE OF MAN TIMES (15 NOVEMBER 1952)

OLDEST MANXMAN CELEBRATES IOOTH BIRTHDAY

"I HAVE SMOKED SINCE I WAS SEVEN"

NEVER BEEN IN BED WITH SICKNESS

ONLY ONE DAY OFF THE ISLAND

[1b–c] The Island's oldest and most remarkable man, Mr John Kneen, retired blacksmith, of Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh Curragh, celebrated his 100th birthday on Wednesday. He is one of the best speakers of the Manx language, and he still remembers the day he was christened at the age of seven.

He lives with his daughter, Miss Millie Kneen, and on Wednesday a few friends came along to congratulate him. He received several presents, including a check cap, some pairs of socks, and several packets of tobacco for his pipe.

"I am doing a lot of smoking," he told a *Times* reporter. "I have been smoking ever since I can remember. I was smoking at the age of about seven."

[1c] He was born at St Jude's, and his family moved to Jurby East when he was about seven.

"I went to St Jude's school for a year or two; then I was taught by a man named Dan Caley at Jurby. I went to Jurby Parochial School when it first started," he said. "I was about ten when I left school, and started in my farther's smithy straight away. His name was John, too. I have worked hard, and in those days we worked from about seven o'clock in the morning till eight or nine at night, repairing ploughs, shoeing horses, and hooping wheels.

"I have had good health all my days. I have never been in bed with any sickness."

Mr Kneen is a wonderful man, and his conversation proved what an extraordinarily retentive memory he has. He contentedly pulled at his pipe, and his weather-beaten face, fine head of grey hair, and a beard of which any man would be proud make him a picturesque character.

While he lived at the Loughin, Jurby, he was married to Miss Esther Kennish, of Andreas, and they had four daughters, three of whom—Mrs Ethel Oates, Ramsey, Mrs Florence Kneale, Jurby, and Miss Kneen—are still living, and three sons—Frank, who is married and lives at Andreas, and Tom, who is single and lives in Ballaugh.

After spending some 57 years at Jurby, Mr Kneen moved to the Lhen, where he had a smithy until he retired 16 years ago. He lived at Ballachristie, Jurby, for about three years, and moved to his present home about 13 years ago.

He had four sisters and two brothers, one of whom emigrated to New Zealand, and the other became a policeman in Liverpool. He has outlived them all. His father was 78 when he died.

Mr Kneen has left the Island only once—to go on a day trip to Belfast when he was a young man. Now he derives pleasure from his pipe and from talking to his friends in Manx. For he is one of the few people able to speak that language, and he is one of the most fluent. His ability to speak it has brought him fame and many visitors, some from as far away as America and Switzerland.

Surprisingly, no one realised he could speak Manx so well until four-and-a-half years ago, when an Irish professor named Captain Danahar came to see him. Then he made recordings for an Irish folk lore society. Since, he has made recordings for the Manx Society, the Manx Museum, and he has broadcast in Manx for the B.B.C.

About four years ago he appeared in a Wilfred Pickles show and broadcast in Ballaugh, and he told Wilfred that he liked a drop of whisky! He also caused a stir when he declared that he could remember the day he was christened.

“I can remember my christening [ɪd] day quite well,” he says. “I was about seven years old, and I remember my mother and the women telling me that I could never get a wife if I was not christened. I was christened in St Jude’s by the vicar, whose name was Strickett.”

Referring to the fact that he had not spoken Manx for so long till recently, he said, “I could get no one to talk to. The language died out, and if you spoke it in front of the ladies, they thought you were very rude. When I was young, my father and mother spoke nothing else but Manx, although they could speak English.”

Now he looks forward to visits from his friends, who include Messrs Charles Craine, who works in the Isle of Man Bank in Douglas; Mark and Tom Braid, of Douglas; Leslie and Walter Quirk, of Peel; Joe Woods and Douglas Fargher, of Douglas; Willie Radcliffe and Walter Clarke, of Ramsey, and Mr John Gell, of Port St Mary.

They have given him a new interest in life, and he enjoys conversing with them.

He has had visits from Professor Carmodie, a professor of Gaelic languages in California, about three years ago, a Mr Perry from America, who had carried his photograph with him for a year before meeting him, and who could speak 17 languages, and a Swiss who had been at a college in Ireland and wished to learn Manx.

Mr Kneen seldom ventures out of the house, but he has been to Ramsey three times during the year to make recordings at friends’ houses.

One great disadvantage is that his home has no electricity, which means that he cannot usually make recordings there. Many people are anxious for him to make recordings. He has been very co-operative, and he says he will still go out to make other recordings.

At present he is making an important contribution to posterity by recording his recollections of life in the Isle of Man in his younger days.

He dictates to his daughter, Miss Kneen, in the winter evenings, and she records his recollections in a book. They started the task about three years ago, and Mrs Grace Quilliam, of the Manx Museum, says that Miss Kneen has written some 25,000 words, and the record has been placed in the Manx Museum as part of a folk-life survey record, to which other old Manx people have contributed.

Normally Mr Kneen gets up at about noon and goes to bed at 9-30 p.m. He has three meals a day, and is able to eat all types of food.

On Wednesday he received a telegram in Manx signed "Chalse Craine" conveying a message which said, "God bless you and may you be spared for a long time to help with the Manx."

Manx people will wish to join us in congratulating him and wishing him good health and happiness.

"Oldest Manxman celebrates 100th Birthday." *Isle of Man Times* 15 November 1952: 1b-d.

### 1953

#### 2. "THE ISLAND IN 1952." ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (3 JANUARY 1953)

[1c] Everyone congratulated the three ladies who in and around March became a hundred years old, but unhappily only one, Mrs Graves from Peel, is alive now. But that racy old Manxman, Mr John Kneen of Ballaugh, full of stories of the old life and "full of beans," has become a centenarian since that time.

"The Island in 1952." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 3 January 1953: 1b-d.

#### 3. "100 YEARS OLD—STILL LOOKING FORWARD." ISLE OF MAN TIMES (3 JANUARY 1953)

##### 100 YEARS OLD—STILL LOOKING FORWARD

[1e] What does the dawn of a new year mean to a man who has seen 100 of them? Does it hold the promise of a fulfilment of a dream? Is it still a period of resolutions for the future, or is it a matter of supreme indifference?

To find out we went deep into the maze of the Ballaugh Curraghs this week to find Ballamona Cottage, where in November Mr John Kneen celebrated his 100th birthday.

He sat erect in a chair by the fire, a pipe clenched firmly between teeth that were still strong. A sturdy, heavily-built man, his shoulders still bulky from his work over the forge at the Lhen smithy. He gripped our hand firmly; "Blein vie noa" he said.

On the mantelpiece, mixed with apples and oranges, were the Christmas cards. They had come from all parts of the Island as well as from Manxmen in other lands who take pride in this grand old man who speaks his native language so fluently.

One of the cards was from Mr H. Mylechreest (president of the North American Manx Association) and Mrs Mylechreest. It read: "To a fine old Manx gentleman. It is an honour, sir, to send you greetings." It was signed "Harry and Carrie."

Many of the cards were in Manx. Some of them had the English translation as well, but most of them had the greeting and the verse in Manx, and they were the home-made ones, cleverly and effectively done.

Perhaps it was the cards that inspired Mr Kneen's hopes for the New Year. "I want to hear more of the Manx spoken," he declared. "They have made a start with the teaching of it again, and I hope that in the New Year they will be doing more of it. It is a grand language, and it would be a scandalous shame if it was to die out."

That then is the hope that Mr Kneen cherishes for 1953. The hope that the New Year will bring fresh life to a language that was already dying when he was a boy. Even at 100 years of age a new year can hold the promise of a dream fulfilled.

"100 Years Old—Still Looking Forward." *Isle of Man Times* 3 January 1953: 1e-f.

4. "IOIST BIRTHDAY." ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (13 NOVEMBER 1953)

IOIST BIRTHDAY

Mr John Kneen, grand old man of the Ballaugh Curraghs, celebrated his birthday yesterday—his 101st. Mr Kneen is believed to be that age. He is a fluent speaker of the Manx language and one of the few people in the Island who remember it as the everyday tongue. He is frequently visited by students of the language and has made a 25,000-word record of old Manx customs for the Museum. A retired blacksmith, he has three sons and three daughters.

"101st Birthday." *Isle of Man Examiner* 13 November 1953: 1e.

5. "IOI YESTERDAY." RAMSEY COURIER (13 NOVEMBER 1953)

IOI YESTERDAY

Yesterday (Thursday) was celebrated by Mr John Kneen, of Ballamona Cottage, Curraghs, Ballaugh, as his 101st birthday.

Mr Kneen who remembers when Manx was spoken as an everyday language and has compiled a record of over 25,000 words of happenings and customs of bygone days for the Manx folklore survey, is a popular figure with Manx students who visit him from time to time in his stone built cottage to the heart of the Curraghs. He has a very retentive memory and delights to recount his reminiscences of former days.

Mr Kneen is a retired blacksmith and lives with his daughter, Miss Nellie Kneen.

Friends who called on Mr Kneen yesterday found him to good health and trying out a new pipe and some tobacco which were among the birthday gifts, and also sampling a cake which had been presented to him.

"101 Yesterday." *Ramsey Courier* 13 November 1953: 4f.

6. “THEY SAY ....” MONA’S HERALD (17 NOVEMBER 1953)

I’m as fit now as I was as a youngster of sixty. (Mr John Kneen, of Ballaugh, who was 101 last Thursday.)

“They Say ....” *Mona’s Herald* 17 November 1953: 5d.

1954

7. “102 TO-DAY.” RAMSEY COURIER (12 NOVEMBER 1954)

102 TO-DAY

The oldest resident of the North of the Island, Mr John Kneen, of Ballamona, Curraghs. Ballaugh, is 102 to-day (Friday). Mr Kneen, who lives with his daughter in a cottage at the edge of the Curraghs remembers the time when Manx was spoken as an everyday language. He is a retired blacksmith, [*missing* and] has a remarkably retentive memory.

A part of well-wishers will be going out to the Curraghs to-night to congratulate Mr Kneen on his birthday.

“102 To-Day.” *Ramsey Courier* 12 November 1954: 4e.

8. “HE IS 102 NOW!” ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (13 NOVEMBER 1954)

HE IS 102 NOW!

[1d] Bearded, patriarchal Mr John Kneen, the Island’s oldest man, celebrated his 102nd birthday on Friday. Messages of congratulation from his friends all over the Island and Manxmen overseas will reach the cottage home in the Ballaugh Curraghs, where he has lived all his life. He has been off the Island once, on a trip to Belfast 80 years ago, and has only been to Douglas two or three times.

At 102 Mr Kneen has a fine head of silvery hair and a strong voice which he has used so much for the teaching of the Manx [1e] language. Nothing pleases him more than a “lil cooish” and a “smook” with some of his Manx speaking friends, including Mr Charles C. Craine, of Laxey, a committee member of the Manx Language Society.

Last birthday he told Mr Craine he felt “as fit as a youngster of 60.” He reminisced about the days when he worked over the Lhen forge and hooped 36 wheels a day, and recalled his feats of strength as a shoemaker. “His memory is marvellous,” says Mr Craine, “and he is in every way a remarkable old man.”

“He is 102 now!” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 13 November 1954: 1d–e.

THE BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

9. "GRAND OLD MANXMAN." MONA'S HERALD (16 NOVEMBER 1954)

GRAND OLD MANXMAN

Placidly puffing his pipe, surrounded by gifts of tobacco sufficient to provide him with ample "smooks" throughout the winter, that grand old Manxman, Mr John Kneen, was "at home" to his many friends at his cottage in Ballaugh, on Friday.

The occasion was John's 102nd birthday, and among the visitors who arrived to wish him many more years of health and happiness were the Governor and Lady Dundas. Young students of the Gaelic were there in force.

Mr Kneen, who speaks his native tongue fluently, was happy to receive a greetings telegram in Manx from the staff and readers of *Mona's Herald*.

"Grand Old Manxman." *Mona's Herald* 16 November 1954: 6e.

10. "MR JOHN KNEEN'S GREAT DAY." ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (20 NOVEMBER 1954)

MR JOHN KNEEN'S GREAT DAY

Among those who called to congratulate Mr John Kneen, of Ballaugh, on his 102nd birthday last Friday were the Lieutenant-Governor and Lady Dundas, and several of his Manx speaking friends, including Mr Charles C. Craine, of Laxey; Mr David Craine, c.p. of Ballaugh, and Mrs Craine, Mr Douglas Faragher, Mr Brian Stowell, Mr Bernard Caine and Mr Walter Clarke.

Mr Kneen was in great fettle, enjoyed his "party" and his "lil smook" with his friends, and was very happy to receive his presents and messages of congratulation. He still has a good appetite, and smokes his regular 2 ozs. of tobacco a week. His presents included enough tobacco to last him the winter.

"Mr John Kneen's Great Day." *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 20 November 1954: 1e.

1955

11. "103 TO-MORROW." ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (11 NOVEMBER 1955)

103 TO-MORROW

Mr John Kneen, Ballamona Cottages, Ballaugh, celebrates his 103rd birthday anniversary to-morrow. For some weeks he has been in ill-health and confined to his home.

"103 To-Morrow." *Isle of Man Examiner* 11 November 1955: 1h.

12. "HE IS 103 TO-MORROW." ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (11 NOVEMBER 1955)

HE IS 103 TO-MORROW

The Island's oldest inhabitant, Mr John Kneen, of Ballaugh will celebrate his 103rd birthday to-morrow. Mr Kneen who is an authority on the Manx language, was a

man of remarkable strength in his younger days when he worked as a shoemaker in Lhen forge and hooped 36 wheels in a day.

He has lived in his cottage home all his life, and left the Island only once when he visited Belfast more than 80 years ago. He has been to Douglas only two or three times. Mr Kneen has been confined to bed for the past few weeks.

“He is 103 To-morrow.” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 11 November 1955: 1d–e.

13. “HEARTY CONGRATULATIONS TO ....” *MONA’S HERALD* (15 NOVEMBER 1955)

Hearty congratulations to Mr John Kneen, of Ballaugh, the Island’s oldest inhabitant, who celebrated his 103rd birthday on Saturday. Mr Kneen is one of the few remaining native speakers of the ancient Manx language.

“[News Gossip] Hearty congratulations to ....” *Mona’s Herald* 15 November 1955: 4f.

14. “PERSONALITY OF THE WEEK.” *MONA’S HERALD* (15 NOVEMBER 1955)

Away from towns, in quiet Ballaugh  
 You spent your working hours,  
 The music of the birds was yours,  
 The language of the flowers.  
 And so JOHN KNEEN of happy heart  
 You walked by nature’s side.  
 For full one hundred years, and more,  
 To reach life’s eventide.

“[News Gossip] Personality of the Week.” *Mona’s Herald* 15 November 1955: 4f.

1956

15. “HE’S 104 ON MONDAY.” *ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES* (9 NOVEMBER 1956)

HE’S 104 ON MONDAY

[1d] The Island’s oldest inhabitant, Mr John Kneen, who lives at Ballamona Cottages, the Cronk, Ballaugh, will be 104 on Monday. Although he has been confined to his bed for over a year, he is reported to be “keeping very cheerful.” He is cared for by his daughter. A son, who is a gardener at Bishopscourt, also lives at the cottage, which has been the home of Mr Kneen all his long life.

[1e] An authority on the Manx language, Mr Kneen was a man of considerable strength in his younger days when he worked as a shoemaker in Lhen forge and hooped 36 wheels in a day. He left the Island only once when he visited Belfast more than 80 years ago. He has only made two or three visits to Douglas.

“He’s 104 on Monday.” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 9 November 1956: 1d–e.

16. “BELIEVED TO BE ....” RAMSEY COURIER (9 NOVEMBER 1956)

Believed to be Manxland’s oldest resident, Mr John Kneen, Ballamona Cottage, The Curragh, Ballaugh, will have his 104th birthday on Monday. Latterly Mr Kneen, who speaks the Manx language fluently, has been kept to bed.

“[News in Brief] Believed to be ...” *Ramsey Courier* 9 November 1956: 4e.

17. “104 YESTERDAY.” MONA’S HERALD (13 NOVEMBER 1956)

104 YESTERDAY

Mr John Kneen, of Ballamona Cottages, The Cronk, Ballaugh, the Island’s oldest inhabitant and believed to be the oldest Manxman in the world, celebrated his 104th birthday yesterday, at his home, where he has been confined to his bed for some months.

One of the few surviving native speakers of the ancient Manx language Mr Kneen has recorded long talks in the Gaelic for the use of students. A former blacksmith, he has only once left the Island—on a visit to Belfast more than eighty years ago.

“104 Yesterday.” *Mona’s Herald* 13 November 1956: 1g.

18. “CONGRATULATIONS TO THE ...” ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (16 NOVEMBER 1956)

Congratulations to the Island’s Grand Old Man, Mr John Kneen, who lives at Ballamona Cottages, the Cronk, Ballaugh, and celebrated his 104th birthday on Monday.

“Congratulations to the ...” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 16 November 1956: 6b.

1957

19. “105 NEXT TUESDAY.” RAMSEY COURIER (8 NOVEMBER 1957)

105 NEXT TUESDAY

BALLAUGH CENTENARIAN’S BIRTHDAY

Next Tuesday (November 12th) will be the 105th birthday of Mr John Kneen, of Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh Curraghs.

Mr Kneen, a retired blacksmith, who in his young days spoke the Manx language and has compiled a record of over 25,000 words of happenings and customs in Manxland in the old days, lives with his daughter, Miss Nellie Kneen.

Though he is now very deaf and is kept to bed, he likes to have a call from his friends and he is sometimes visited by the Captain of the Parish, Mr David Craine and the Rector (Rev. W.V. Walmsley).

A *Courier* representative who called at the cottage in the Curraghs yesterday (Thursday) found Mr Kneen enjoying his afternoon “nap.”

He still eats well and enjoys a smoke and his daughter says he is looking forward to his birthday next week.

“105 Next Tuesday: Ballaugh Centenarian’s Birthday.” *Ramsey Courier* 8 November 1957: 5b.

20. “OLDEST MANXMAN IS 105 TODAY.” MONA’S HERALD (12 NOVEMBER 1957)

OLDEST MANXMAN IS 105 TODAY  
IS BEDRIDDEN BUT STILL ENJOYS “A SMOOK”

Mr John Kneen, who lives with his daughter, Miss Nellie Kneen, at Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh, is 105 today.

A retired blacksmith, Mr Kneen is one of the few remaining speakers of the Manx Gaelic, and a number of his talks on old events and customs have been recorded for the use of students of the ancient tongue.

Although hard of hearing and bedridden, he has a good appetite and still enjoys a smoke. He enjoys chatting with friends who visit the cottage.

“Oldest Manxman is 105 today.” *Mona’s Herald* 12 November 1957: 1e.

21. “105 YEARS OLD! MR JOHN KNEEN’S BIRTHDAY.” ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (15 NOVEMBER 1957)

105 YEARS OLD!  
MR JOHN KNEEN’S BIRTHDAY

Mr John Kneen, grand old man of the Curragh, Ballaugh, celebrated his birthday on Tuesday. He is believed to be 105 years old.

Mr Kneen was a blacksmith, who in his younger days spoke the Manx language. He lives with his daughter Miss Nellie Kneen and is now confined to bed.

“105 Years Old! Mr John Kneen’s Birthday.” *Isle of Man Examiner* 15 November 1957: 1e.

22. “MR DAVID CRAINE ....” RAMSEY COURIER (15 NOVEMBER 1957)

Mr David Craine, M.A., on Tuesday took a package of tobacco from the Lieut.-Governor to Mr John Kneen in his cottage at Ballaugh Curraghs on his 105th birthday. He found the old man in good spirits and able to converse on old times. He is rather deaf now and his eyesight is poor and he spends most of his time resting. But he was glad to say his appetite is still good, and he expressed appreciation of the Governor’s kindly thought.

“[News in Brief] Mr David Craine ....” *Ramsey Courier* 15 November 1957: 4d.



## THE PASSING OF JOHN KNEEN

1958

23. "LAST OF THE NATIVE SPEAKERS." RAMSEY COURIER (13 JUNE 1958)

### LAST OF THE MANX NATIVE SPEAKERS

#### DEATH OF MR JOHN KNEEN AT 105

[5b] The passing of Mr John Kneen of Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh Curraghs, on Friday last, who was believed to be 105 years of age last November 12th, removes one of the last of the Manx native speakers. He was probably the only Manxman who recalled the time when it was customary to speak more Manx than English in this Isle, more especially in the countryside where he was a blacksmith for many years.

John Kneen was born in St Jude's and his earliest recollections were of life in the parish of Kirk Andreas. The present St Jude's Church had only been put up 13 years when he was born and in Ramsey people recalled the building of St Paul's Church in 1822).

When he was only seven years of age his parents moved to Jurby East and he had his first taste of school there, being taught by a man named Dan Caley who was schoolmaster of the old parochial school which had just opened at that time.

Mr Kneen's first schooldays also coincided with the opening of Ballaugh Curragh Chapel which is situated only a stone's throw from the cottage in the heart of the Manx countryside where he lived for the last 19 years of his life.

Mr Kneen used to relate how he disliked school and left at the age of 10 to help in his father's smithy. His father was a very good smith with a large connection in the North of the Island and the smithy is a busy centre and they were kept at it from seven in the morning until eight or nine o'clock at night shoeing horses, repairing ploughs and hooping wheels and doing other work of that type. In later years Mr Kneen himself had his own smithy employing two or three apprentices, and like his father—also named John Kneen—he was famed for the high quality of his workmanship.

When he lived at the Loughan, Jurby, Mr Kneen was married to Miss Esther Kennish, of Andreas, and they had four daughters.

Three are still alive—Mrs Ethel Hudson, Ramsey; Mrs Florence Kneale, Ballachristory, Jurby, and Miss Millie Kneen, who has lived with her father in his declining years and looked after him. There are three sons—Frank who is married and lives in Ramsey; Edward, married and living in Andreas, and Tom at home.

After 57 years at Jurby Mr Kneen moved to the Lhen where he had a smithy until he retired at the age of 84. He lived at Ballachristory, Jurby, for about three years and then moved to his home in the Curraghs.

He had four sisters and two brothers, one of whom emigrated to New Zealand and the other became a policeman in Liverpool. He outlived them all. His father was 78 when he died.

Mr Kneen had only been off the Island once and that was on a day trip to Belfast many years ago. He remembered his christening at the age of 7 years, the ceremony being performed by the Rev. Strickett who was Chaplain at that time.

Mr Kneen could recall the time when the price of bread was 4½d for a 4 lb. loaf, tobacco was 1½d an ounce, beer was 1½d per pint and whisky was 2½d per glass!

It is remarkable to reflect that at the accession of King Edward VII in 1900 Mr Kneen was nearly halfway towards being a centenarian and he was in his 50th year when Lord Henniker died and Lord Raglan succeeded him as Governor. Mr Kneen was a young man of 20 when the railway opened, he was 30 when the seat of government was moved from Castletown to Douglas and from Douglas to Peel. He was 41 years old when the horse cars began in Douglas and was nearing his fifties when the Manx Electric Railway began.

In the year he was born Charles Dickens had just written his Christmas books and *Bleak House*. The last issue of Manx coins was made only a few years before the long reign of Queen Victoria had begun.

A few years ago it was realised that Mr Kneen's retentive memory and knowledge of the Manx language and customs should be drawn upon and he dictated recollections of the old days to his daughter and a record of over 25,000 words was compiled which is invaluable. Recordings of his voice have also been made and it will be recalled that in 1948 he appeared in a Wilfred Pickles' broadcast from Ballaugh.

He was always ready to welcome Manx students into his home—a frequent caller was Mr David Craine, C.P.—and his contributions to the record have included information about witchcraft, pumping out clay dubs, thatching, old bee hives, trimming hay ricks and many other subjects.

At the funeral at Andreas on Sunday the service was conducted by the Rector (Rev. R.J. Cannell) and the lesson from Corinthians [5g] was read in the Manx language by Mr J. W. Radcliffe, of Ramsey. Those present included Mr and Mrs David Craine, Mr Chas. Craine, of Laxey, and Mr Walter Clarke, of Ramsey.

The mourners were Miss M. Kneen, Mrs Hudson, Mrs Kneale (daughters); Messrs Tom, Frank and Edward (sons); Mrs F. Kneen, Mrs E. Kneen (daughters-in-law); Mr A. Kneale (son-in-law); Miss Moira Jopson, Miss Gwen Hudson (granddaughters); John Kneen (grandson).

The hymns "When I survey" and "The day Thou gavest Lord is ended," were sung.

Many beautiful wreaths were sent including one from the Manx Society bearing an expression of sympathy in the Manx language.

"Last of the Manx Native Speakers: Death of Mr John Kneen at 105."  
*Ramsey Courier* 13 June 1958: 5b.

THE PASSING OF JOHN KNEEN

OBITUARY AND OTHER NOTICES

DEATHS

24. [If] KNEEN—On June 6th, 1958, at Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh Curragh, John Kneen, aged 105 years. Interred at Andreas on Sunday, June 8th.

“Births, Marriages and Deaths.” *Ramsey Courier* 13 June 1958: 1f–g.

THANKS FOR SYMPATHY

25. KNEEN—The family of the late John Kneen wish to thank all those who sent beautiful floral tributes and messages of sympathy in their recent bereavement.

“Births, Marriages and Deaths.” *Ramsey Courier* 20 June 1958: 1f.

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IN MEMORIAM

26. [Ih] KNEEN—In loving memory of John Kneen (Manx Linguist) who died at Ballamona Cottage, Ballaugh Curragh, on June 6th, 1958; also Esther, wife of the above, who died on July 12th, 1931.

“Births, Marriages and Deaths.” *Ramsey Courier* 5 June 1959: 1g–h.

