

Manx Notes 468 (2020)

THOMAS LEECE

THOMAS LEECE AT AGE 90

I. ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (7 APRIL 1950)

[1c-d] Old age rests lightly on Mr Thomas Leece, of Kerrowmoar, Kerrowkeil, Malew.

At the age of 90 he rises at 7 a.m., works throughout the day on his farm on the lower slopes of South Barrule, and does not retire until around 11 p.m.

He has an 80 years' memory span and when visited by an *Isle of Man Examiner* representative this week, unhesitatingly recounted the events of his life from boyhood in clear retrospect.

He was born in the district in which he now lives, but in his younger days went far afield. He sailed with the Port St Mary fishing fleet over 70 years ago, worked in the Foxdale lead and silver mines with a candle stuck in his hat with clay, sailed away to South Africa and laboured in the gold mines, and then returned to the Island to farm for half a century.

He comes of a family of long-livers—his mother reached the age of 93, his father was 85, and a brother 88.

His recipe for long life is “hard work and plenty of it.” He said: “I have worked hard all my life and it never did me any harm.”

Mr Leece is one of the fine old type of Manxman which is fast disappearing.

He is one of the few remaining who can speak the Manx language “naturally”—that is, he learned it as a child from old people who spoke no other language and not from text books.

[1c] Mr Leece was busy on the farm when the *Examiner* representative called to ask him something about his long life.

He started talking about the Ronague district, where he was born and spent his boyhood, and eventually returned to start up as a farmer.

As a youth, he said, he went to sea with the Peel herring fleet, and later with the Port St Mary fleet. He was on the nickey *Fame*, of Peel, with Captain Willie Skelly, and on the *Seal* and *Topaz*, of Port St Mary.

There were about 200 boats in the Port St Mary fleet, and more sailing out of Peel, said Mr Leece. These operated about 20 miles off the south coast of the Island, and also went to Kinsale and Dunmoor. Also for three years he was at Lerwick and the Orkneys.

“It was a hard life,” he commented, “but there was no shortage of young fellows eager to go to sea.”

He recalled a number of old “salts” of the herring fleet, particularly mentioning Captain Tom Kinley, of Port St Mary, who was in the *Zenith* when he was sailing.

IN THE FOXDALE MINES

Continuing to mark the milestones in his long life, Mr Leece said he left the fishing in 1886 and went to work in the Foxdale mines which were then in full production.

He said about 300 men were engaged in the mines, and about 50 in the working he was in.

“I lived at Kerrowkeil then, and for two years walked to East Foxdale every day to the mines,” he said.

They worked eight hour shifts below ground, the shaft of the working going down 100 fathoms, the working being reached by means of a ladder with “landings” cut in the rock at periodic intervals for resting.

It was not mining as it is to-day he continued. The men fixed candles in their hats with clay for light.

Mr Leece recalled that in the first week he was underground he was allowed to leave his shift a couple of hours earlier than the other men as he was to be married next day.

On the way up the ladder on his own, the candle on his hat went out when he still had three-quarters of the way to go and he had the nerve-shaking ordeal of making the long ascent in the dark.

Mr Leece very conservatively described his ordeal as “an uneasy time,” but added that he managed it all right, and was married the next day at Malew Church by the Rev. Hugh Stowell Gill. That was in 1887.

[rd] He recalled the life in Foxdale when the mines flourished. The village was a centre of activity, trains ran frequently into the district, and work was provided there for men living over a wide area.

OFF TO SOUTH AFRICA

Continuing, Mr Leece said in 1889 he left the Foxdale mines and went to South Africa. He reached a mining town called Clarksdorp, in the Transvaal, and went to work in the gold mines. There was a lot of prospecting going on then, but chiefly owing to the transport difficulties, many of [1e] the established mines were not making money. The yield of gold was only about an ounce to a ton of quartz, and the quartz could only be moved by bullock cart. Years later a railway came up from Kimberley, which was what was badly needed at that time. Here again he worked hard and long, but after a year gave it up and came home again.

At Kerrowkeil, a far cry from the Transvaal—he started farming, and has been there ever since.

Though he will be 91 on his next birthday on June 28th, he still runs the farm with the assistance of his son Alf and his wife. Even now, he said, he was putting in a 16 hours day—up at 7 and not going to bed until 11 p.m.

He does not do the heavy work, but can find plenty to keep him busy, and does a good day’s work.

He said he had never had an illness of any severity in his life. Even the winters he gets through without any trouble.

“In fact,” he added, “recently my son and his wife went down with influenza, and I looked after them.”

He goes down to Castletown fairly regularly, and thinks nothing of the two miles’ walk over the fields to Ballamodda to get the bus.

SPEAKS “THE MANX”

Mr Leece is one of the few people remaining on the Island who can speak the Manx language really well.

He said he learned it from his father and mother and an old lady who lived near to his family when he was a boy who could speak nothing but Manx.

“My mother and father spoke English usually, but used Manx when they wanted to say something they did not want the children to understand,” he added with a smile.

Last year he and another fine type of old Manxman living in the same district—Mr John Kinvig—made records of the Manx language to go to America for the benefit of the Manx folk there.

A devout Chapel-goer, Mr Leece has been connected with Kerrowkeil for over half-a-century. He has been a society steward for 50 years, and even now, in his grand old age, very rarely misses one of the Sunday evening services in the little chapel on the hill.

“Hats off to a Grand Old Manxman,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 7 April 1950, 1C–E.

THOMAS LEECE IS 95 (1954)

2. ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (2 JULY 1954)

Mr Thomas Leece, of Kerrowmoar Farm, Kerrowkeil, Malew, the great Manx scholar, celebrated on Monday, 27 June, with his family, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, his 95th birthday. In the last month he underwent an operation in Noble’s Hospital, from which he has made a splendid recovery. He can still accomplish a day’s work in the fields.

“Mr Thomas Leece is 95,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 2 July 1954, 11A.

“THE FOUR SAINTS” OF KERROWKEIL (1954)

3. ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (9 OCTOBER 1954)

[11D] When the chapel bell tolls for evening service at Kerrowkeil on a Sunday, four elderly people tread the same paths they have trod for many years.

Ninety-five-year-old Thomas Leece, a class leader sets out from his cottage at Kerrowmoar on his weekly trip to the “chapel in the hills”; Mr and Mrs W.J. Cornish set out from Grenaby, and when all three have arrived outside the church, it

is only then that Mrs A. Watterson trips across the road from her home opposite the church.

Local people call these four “the four Saints of Kerrowkeil.” Said a farm labourer to the *Times* reporter, “We mean no disrespect. It is just that they seem to devote all their time and energy to the church. It’s a pity that the young people don’t follow their example.”

Sometimes there are as many [11e] as eight people at the service, but whatever the weather is the regular four will, always be there.

Mr Leece remembers the days when the chapel used to be full to overflowing, and when children used to sit on the window ledges. He has been attending this church for 78 years without a break. Mrs Watterson, who is 77, has been all her life, and Mr and Mrs Cornish have been going regularly for 50 years.

The church was built in 1814, and even to-day, it has practically the same atmosphere as when built the only new addition being an army-type stove which stands in the middle of the floor between the pews and the altar.

Asked if there were many people at the services these days. Mr Leece replied, “Sometimes we are the only four, possibly the smallest congregation in the Island. You might call us the quorum for a church meeting. We are always here.”

“The ‘Four Saints’ of Kerrowkeil,” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 9 October 1954, 11d–e.

THE DEATH OF THOMAS LEECE (1956)

4. ISLE OF MAN EXAMINER (20 APRIL 1956)

A link with an Isle of Man populated largely by Gaelic-speaking people, and with the days when mining, crofting and fishing were extensively carried on, was broken last week by the death at Kerrowkeil Farm—the home of his son, Mr Alfred Leece—of Mr Thomas Leece. He was in his 97th year and had caught a chill a fortnight before.

A native of Ronague, Arbory, Mr Leece was employed in the Foxdale mines during his early life. Later, he emigrated to South Africa, where he worked in the gold mines of Johannesburg and Kimberley prior to the outbreak of the Boer War.

Returning to the Island he settled at Kerrowkeil and resumed work in the Foxdale mines. Mr Leece also sailed in the old nickies, making many voyages to the fishing grounds of the Irish Sea, the Shetland Isles and Orkneys.

His command of the Manx language was of such fluency that his help was often sought by students; in recent years, too, he made a number of tape-recordings for the American Manx Society.

Mr Leece also possessed an extensive knowledge of old Manx customs, and on many occasions he placed his lore at the disposal of the Manx Museum and scholars.

Throughout his life he worshipped at Kerrowkeil Methodist Chapel, and was known locally as one of “the four saints”—a group of elderly men who, indifferent to

the state of the weather, always attended the regular services at the chapel. Mr Leece was a lifetime member of the Colby branch of Rechabites, being the oldest member of the branch.

The funeral took place at Arbory Churchyard on Sunday, having been preceded by a service at Kerrowkeil Chapel conducted by the Rev. Gareth Cooper. At the service, the 23rd Psalm was recited in Manx by Sir Joseph Qualtrough, who also spoke a tribute to Mr Leece. Later, at the churchyard, Sir Joseph recited the *Nunc Dimittis* in Manx.

Mr Leece is survived by two sons and four daughters.

“[Southside News] [Malew] Manx veteran dies at 96,” *Isle of Man Examiner* 20 April 1956, 11c.

5. ISLE OF MAN WEEKLY TIMES (20 APRIL 1956)

Mr Thomas Leece died at the home of his son and daughter, Kerrowkeil Farm, Malew, on Thursday of last week, in his 97th year. The end was quite unexpected, although he caught a chill a fortnight ago.

The late Mr Leece, born at Ronague, Arbory, belonged to that old school of Manxmen of whom few remain. In the course of his long life he had been crofter, fisherman and miner.

The achievement for which he will long be remembered was his command of the Manx language and his store of old Manx customs, idioms and anecdotes. In this respect he was well-known and his assistance has been much appreciated by the Museum authorities and scholars alike. He was visited in later years by many interested people at his home under the shadows of South Barrule and a conversation with this fine old man was both edifying and illuminating.

In recent years he made tape recordings for the North American Manx Society which will scarcely be repeated or equalled by any of his contemporaries.

In his adolescence he worked in Foxdale mines, but as a young man emigrated to South Africa, where, before the Boer War, he worked in the gold mines of Kimberley and Johannesburg. But as the years passed, the call of his native Isle proved too strong and he returned to Kerrowkeil and again worked in Foxdale mines and, as was the custom in those far-off days, between times sailed in the old nickeys to the fishing grounds of the Irish Sea, Orkneys and Shetlands.

A lifetime member of the Colby tent of Rechabites, he was the oldest member.

Throughout his long life he worshipped at Kerrowkeil Chapel and was known locally as one of “Four Saints” who attended this tiny place of worship.

Deceased is survived by four daughters and two sons. Mrs J. Cornish, of Grenaby; Mrs H. Lilley, of Ballasalla; Mrs Quinlan, of Holywell, North Wales; Miss Isabel Leece and Mr Alfred Leece (with whom deceased lived) and Mr Harry Leece, a Labour Officer with the Alberta Government at Calgary, Canada.

The interment took place at Arbory on Sunday, preceded by a service in Kerrowkeil Chapel, conducted by the Rev. F. Ockenden, Superintendent Minister.

“[News from the South] [Malew] He spoke Manx well,” *Isle of Man Weekly Times* 20 April 1956, 11f.

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STEPHEN MILLER, RBV

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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Isle of Man Examiner (7 April 1950)

(2)

“THE FOUR SAINTS” OF KERROWKEIL



Isle of Man Weekly Times (9 October 1954)

(3)



Isle of Man Weekly Times (20 April 1956)

