Where, What, Why

I loved the Isle of Man before I could even locate it on a map without the help of Google. This was mostly attributed to the delight I garnered from telling family and friends where I was going and watching them struggle to understand if I was joking or not. Some laughed nervously. Many offered a half-hearted *Oh...yes of course, that’s wonderful!* An alarming number of my friends thought that “the Isle of Man” was my clever new name for the bar. One of my aunts offered, as I bid her adieu the day before my trip, *Have fun and don’t forget to kiss the Blarney Stone!*

The one person that understood entirely what the Isle of Man is was my good friend Tom Hopkins; when I mentioned where I was going, he immediately lit up and asked if I would be willing to do any outside research. I accepted, and he told me about his grandfather’s cousin Roland Hopkins, with whom he had once been close but had lost contact with. He sent me all the information he had (which came in at a whopping “Roland Hopkins, West Braust, Andreas.”), and like that, I had an adventure inside my adventure.

In the interest of transparency, I suppose I should admit that I picked the Isle of Man entirely because it’s such an obscure place. I didn’t even know it existed until I started searching for a location in the British Isles that was unusual enough to beat out a slew of English majors vying for a travel grant. Seeing as my selection process relied on very little knowledge and a little too much hope, I had a lot of research to do, starting with: where *is* the Isle of Man, anyway?

Floating in the Irish sea between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, only 33 miles in length and 13 miles in width, the island is a merely more than a blip on the radar. In fact, legend has it that the island was created when Irish giant Finn MacCooill tossed a boulder at Scotland. He missed his mark by a cool several hundred miles, and the boulder splashed into the sea, creating the Isle of Man; the island is so small, the myth is almost believable.

As I poked around the Isle of Man tourism site, trying to come up with a list of reasons I should alight on the oversize boulder, it became increasingly clear that the island’s tourism centers almost entirely on Manx heritage sites and cultural events. The
website outlined week-long heritage itineraries and offered a Heritage Pass that, for a surprisingly low price, gave tourists a week of heritage site admissions and transportation passes. They also focused a great deal of energy on the upcoming Queenie Fest. I didn’t think that the Isle of Man was going to be one of my wilder trips, but I wasn’t quite expecting one of their main attractions to be a festival entirely dedicated to the celebration of small sea scallops. Then again, I come from a town that holds an annual Corn Fest, so I’m not in a position to judge.

It’s curious that the tourism relies so heavily on the Manx heritage. The island rests mere miles from large, highly influential countries, and their population is less than half native Manx and nearly forty percent British. In a natural exchange of cultures, and especially with so many English immigrants, the Isle of Man should be taking a turn for the British. The opposite, however, has occurred. In recent years, Manx school curriculums have brought back the study of Manx Gaelic and Manx music, and the heritage sites and festivals focus almost exclusively on Manx history; outside influence is given a surprisingly small nod, if given one at all.

It became clear, as I dug through website after website, that the reasons behind the Manx cultural revival weren’t going to become immediately obvious through research. Manx pride didn’t appear to have a definite answer, and definitely wasn’t quantifiable. The reasons, it seemed, were hidden in the Manx people, the ones who had started the revival and were carrying it on from day to day. The Manx heritage had to be learned from the inside out. I recruited my mother, who always has her bag packed and whom I blame and thank for my wanderlust, to come with me, and we set off into the land of _traa dy liooar_ (“there is time enough”), a long-lost Hopkins, and Manx pride.

**The Bus With No Stops**

After twenty-four hours of travel, during which my mother and a behemoth from the UK got into a heated altercation over my mother’s right to recline her seat on an overnight flight, we touched down in Manchester. Quite frankly, I’m surprised we even made it past there; a border police officer became quite miffed that I didn’t have a printed travel itinerary on me, proceeded to call me “little girl,” and probably should have arrested me just based on the terrifying amount of pure rage that crossed my face at that comment.
Instead, we somehow found ourselves on a tiny two-propeller plane, clutching flimsy handwritten boarding passes that had been made up for us at the gate.

We bounced into the Isle of Man uneventfully, found out that my mother’s debit card would conveniently refuse to work for the next week, and overconfidently hopped onto the first bus that rolled into the station. The Manx people are renowned for their kindness, or so I’d heard, so it surprised me when the bus driver snapped at me when I asked him if the Heritage Pass – which, may I remind you, notes in large letters on the back that it all transportation and admission prices – would be “um…alright? For this bus trip? To Douglas?” His attitude problem turned out to be a blessing in disguise however, as it set off the temper of the sweet little lady sitting I sat beside. Dressed head to toe in purple, with a permanent bulldog frown and big blue eyes, she introduced herself as Millie as she raised a wrinkled fist and shook it at the bus driver. I’d like to give him a knock, she assured us. And tell him it wouldn’t cost ya anythin’ to be pleasant. I couldn’t turn my head to look at her as my face turned progressively greener as we took swooping turns through the countryside, but she didn’t seem to mind and chatted away with us and shared information as if we were old friends, especially on the subject of her upcoming eye surgery. They’re just going to pop it right out and then sew it back in, she offered brightly, which I must say really helped with my nausea.

As she worked through the details of her life on the Isle of Man – which covered eighty years and counting – and laughed about how outsiders assumed she knew everyone on the island, I looked around and realized there was no way in heaven or hell two jetlagged Americans would be able to navigate this bus system. We sped through blurred fields, stopped seemingly at random, and no amount of staring at the bus schedule and its listed stops could indicate where in the entire island we were.

Finally, trying very hard not to vomit into the purple purse that perched on her lap, I turned to Millie, and asked her to impart what was apparently an old Manx secret on me. She brightened up when I said we were headed into Douglas, and she reassured me that she was definitely going to the same place and was planning on getting off at our stop anyway.

Thank goodness she was with us, because I would have never known we were in the capital city of the Isle of Man; to call this place small would be an understatement. She
hobbled off the bus behind us, pausing to glower at the bus driver, and scooted off down the street with me, my mother, and our suitcases breathlessly in tow. For a woman who is so adamant that not everyone on the island knows one another, Millie certainly did a good job disproving herself. We stopped every fifteen feet or so as she ran into friends and explained to them, with some degree of pride, that she was showing some Americans around. Since she seemed to know every third person that had ever set foot in her country, I decided to try my luck and asked her if she knew of a Roland Hopkins. Her bulldog frown got deeper and she shook her head, bleating out an almost disdainful *That's not a Manx name. Wouldn't know him.* I wasn’t really sure what the difference was, but I took it to mean she was not going to offer her networking services in my quest for this elusive Roland.

Millie brought us nearly all the way to the Manx Museum, our first destination, and like a little purple ghost, vanished to the hospital; I later figured out that the hospital was at least five bus stops from where she had gotten off with us.

The Manx Museum was, without a doubt, one of the most excellent museums I have ever been in. I would find throughout the week that excellent museums were a running theme in the Isle of Man, but this one really blew me away. It walked visitors through the Bronze Age into the age of the Manx Celtics, who left behind carvings adorned with their Ogham alphabet. After several centuries of living peacefully and far from anywhere a reasonable person would want to travel, the Manx Celtics were invaded by Vikings. And thus, the Manx were born. The museum covered the history of the island all the way into present day, and I’m sure I would have much more to say on the subject had I not gotten tangled in a conversation with a tour guide who very desperately wanted to be interviewed for my paper.

I sat down with him, and for the next thirty minutes learned of the great rivalry between the major southern cities of Douglas and Peel. The guide explained to me that both Peel and Douglas will claim themselves as the “more Manx” of the two. A Douglas native himself, the guide insisted that Douglas was more Manx; he explained that since Peel is a fishing village involved in a trading triangle with Ireland and Scotland, the people there have an “imported culture.” I was nearly convinced that Douglas was a clear winner, but I’m sure people from Peel would be happy to call Douglas’s ferry to England into question.
Jetlagged and ready for bed before five in the evening, we made the grave error of attempting to take a bus to the city of Peel. We sped into the city, and stopped at a point at the top of the town. As it was a major town, in which everything of importance was lower, closer to the shore, we decided to wait until the next stop, which would surely be town center. Ah, and here was our great error. We looked at each other with a sort of slow horror as the bus turned down a side street, swung away from Peel’s city center, and shot off into the countryside.

“It’s fine,” my mother reassured my exhausted, confused self. “We’ll just hop off at the next stop and come back the other way!”

The bus stopped several more times, but we wisely decided that hopping off the bus into empty countryside as night approached was probably not our best move. Finally, we spotted a bus coming the opposite direction, rang the stop request button for all we were worth, and finally made it back into Peel, where we convinced a very bored and lonely barkeep to ring us a taxi to Knockaloe Beg Farm.

Fiona, the lovely innkeeper, greeted us warmly, as if we were certainly not three hours late and interrupting her dinner, and showed us to the bunkhouse. It was cozy, clean, and charming as all get out, but I am not joking one bit when I note that we were living in her barn. Through one of the windows, one could look into where the sheep slept in the next room over, and chickens clucked in and out of our detached bathroom. It was fine by me, but I thought my poor mom was going to have a small heart failure.

“Ah, and one more thing,” Fiona added on her way back to her house. “Don’t leave the back door open, the goats are very tame and you can expect them to get into your bed with ya!”

And so, here we were.

*The House of Obi Wan Kenobi*

Fiona’s instructions to travel from Knockaloe to the city of Peel were relatively simple: walk through the meadow until you get to the road, climb under the bridge that will be just ahead of you, and follow the old railroad bed straight into the center of town. Of course, when my mother and I attempted to follow these instructions, we ended up in the middle of a factory that smelled similar to the chicken curry I left in my fridge over winter
break. We couldn’t fathom why the instructions didn’t include this noticeably large industrial structure, but we strode purposefully through the parking lot as a number of puzzled factory workers wove their trucks around us.

We blearily stumbled into what was apparently the one coffee shop in all of Peel – I nearly wept – and we noted with nearly-awake interest that we were in fact, in a building attached to The House of Manannan, our destination of the day. We flashed our Heritage Passes importantly at the woman working the front desk (she seemed unimpressed), and entered into a darkened room to watch a short introductory film on Manannan, the island’s namesake. As legend goes, Manannan was a fearsome Celtic sea god that protected his island by shrouding it in fog and mist when intruders approached. In other words, Manannan meant business and was meant to be taken seriously. A shame then, that wrapped up in his brown cloak with a perfectly manicured grey beard, he bore a shocking resemblance to Obi Wan Kenobi and I was left a hopeless victim soft giggles for the rest of the day. I might have pulled myself together, but every time his holographic form disappeared around a corner to guide us into the next display, my mother would urgently and very loudly whisper CHASE HIM! I feel that it is perhaps safe to say that the other visitors did not take to our presence kindly.

Finally, we ran into a tour guide that interjected herself into our giggles and saved us from ourselves. As we inspected ancient loom stones – rocks with holes whittled in the center to hold loom threads taut – she swished over and commented, “Ah yes, my grandmother used to call those fairy stones when we found them in the garden.” Discussion of fairies and a mention of deep roots on the island? She must be a true Manx woman, and I wanted to see what she might be able to tell me about the island. I mentioned that we planned to head north in the next few days, and asked if there was anything she would recommend seeing.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m from the southeast, so I’ve never been up that way.” I blinked at her. On a 33-mile island. Surely she was joking, and I laughed apprehensively.

“My whole family’s in the south,” she said, shrugging, “Got no reason to go up there.” My mom and I tried our best not to look taken aback, but I presume we failed miserably. Our new friend didn’t seem to notice, and went on to explain Manx family names, which are positively maddening. Last names, passed down through generations of families that
generally stayed in close proximity to one another, are a dead giveaway as to what part of the island you live in, she explained. The first names are a little more complicated; names tend to get recycled through a family in as many permutations as possible, and then they are repeated. For example, one Corlett family from the northern town of Laxey can have a John Thomas, a Thomas John, a John Patrick, a Patrick Thomas...and then all over again, inside out. I honestly don't know how Manx families keep Christmas gifts straight every year.

Just then, she spotted another set of visitors inspecting the loom stones, and headed off to tell them about their grandmother and absolutely befuddle them with an explanation of Manx names. We continued into a room that contained a life-size display of home life for the Vikings and their Celtic women. Despite the forceful (to put it lightly) means by which the Vikings acquired Celtic women, they had a relatively peaceful and mutual coexistence, in which Norse location names took over, but Celtic language survived. Interested to learn more about this coexistence, I crept up closer to the display to hear the discussion between the mannequins. The Viking man had apparently just arrived home from a weary and womanless few months at sea, because I arrived just in time to hear his Celtic wife coyly quip, “Well, you’re going to have to wait if you don’t wash the journey off ya!” I swear to Manannan this museum was built to make me giggle uncontrollably.

We stepped off to another section of the museum so that I may contain myself, and ran into several tour guides making their way up the stairs. With some degree of surprise, they asked what I was doing there – it’s probably worth noting that I was probably the youngest tourist on the island – and once I mentioned my interest in the Manx culture, the female guide immediately stepped aside.

“Oh no, I moved here. I’m not real Manx. You should talk to him, he’s real!” she said, pointing to the other guide. He could not have looked more pleased, and launched into a brief all-inclusive analysis of the Manx people. He noted that my age stood out because the island is having great difficulty retaining young people due to the severe lack of employment, as is to be expected in a place as small as the Isle of Man. He joked that most Manx people, when you come to the island, will greet you with four phrases: Hi, how are you, when did you get here, and when are you leaving?
“We’re not trying to be rude,” he laughed. “But we’ve been based around tourism for so long that we assume everyone that comes is leaving shortly.” He attributed the extreme friendliness of the Manx people to their booming tourism industry in the Victorian era; many families owned several inns or stores, and thus became comfortable striking up conversation with anyone they may cross paths with. Though the tourism industry has died off, the welcoming nature of the Manx lived on.

“What’s real Manx?” I asked, thinking about his partner’s quickness to jump out of the way and label him as the real deal.

“Hard to say. What we are changes over time – we can be Celtic, Viking, Scottish, new English, whatever. As for me, I’m supposedly Manx because I go back generations...but we don’t go back to the Vikings so I don’t think I can honestly say I’m real Manx.”

He laughed, looked at his partner knowingly, and added “But there are plenty of places on the island where I make sure to specify that I’m Manx, and certainly not English.”

Before we could delve into a quick chat about what the Manx really have against the British, the two were off to attend to a group of schoolchildren romping through the museum, and we were left to our own devices.

Curious about Manx pubs and encouraged by a note in the guest book at our farm that pointed us to The Creek for a “messy night out,” we stopped in for a pint. The barkeep, when I asked for two ciders, gave me a quick up-down and asked me if I really wanted the full pint. The cider was named “Knock ‘Em Dead Sally” so I suppose I should have listened to her, but I insisted on a full pint for myself, and a mere half pint for my mother. As it turns out, Manx barkeeps are often correct and Manx cider is quite strong. Thirty minutes later we were hiccupping and giggling, and retreated to a nearby grocery store to collect rations for the evening.

I thought I was doing quite a good job navigating the store despite each aisle’s annoying tendency to tip slightly to the left, but then my mother pointed out that they carried Desperados. It’s difficult for me to aptly convey how much I love this beer, which is brewed in France and unavailable in the states. In my excitement I leapt backwards into a shelf of candy, thusly ripping a display of Tic Tacs to the ground and thoroughly embarrassing my poor mother who scooted us out the door before I could Godzilla my way into any other shelves.
We made the excellent decision to walk back home through the meadow that had delivered us in Peel. It seemed a good idea, only because we had forgotten that it had drizzled all day and the meadow was comprised of knee-high grass. We arrived in the farmyard amid a symphony of splashes, squelches, and small pliff pliffs as the cuffs of our jeans slapped together wetly.

“Mom, our clothes are never going to dry,” I whined with a degree of despair, as I peeled off the clothes that had fused to my skin.

“Ah, there is time enough,” she said wisely. As it turns out, there most certainly was not time enough and my shoes continued to intermittently burp up small puddles for the remainder of the trip.

**Another Day, Another Attempt to Communicate With the Dead**

I wish I could say that the morning we had to go from Peel to Douglas on a 7 o’clock bus was as pleasant as the cows grazing meekly on the wildflower-dotted landscape around me, but that would be wildly inaccurate. I dragged at least four people into a black hole of misery with me before the sun even rose. I prodded my mother out of bed just before five, and then we set about rousing Fiona and asking her to ring us a cab. For some reason, probably because it appears that Manx people are tucked away in bed before seven in the evening, we expected her (and the entirety of the island) to be awake before seven in the morning. It was a surprise then, after ringing her doorbell several times, to see her shuffling to the door bleary-eyed and pajamaed. She rang up a taxi – “I’ve just woken him up so he won’t come round for ten minutes or so” – and tried her best to be Manx-pleasant with us, but within minutes she retreated back into her bed to have a good Sunday sleep in. Can’t say I blame the poor woman.

We made the first bus into Douglas, where we ran breathlessly into (what I supposed was) our inn, left all our bags and valuables with a confused-looking woman, reassured her that we would probably be back for them later in the day, and jetted off to the Douglas Steam Rail. Let me mention now that I have never been somewhere so endlessly charming and pleasantly surprising as the Isle of Man, and the Steam Rail was arguably the most pleasant charm of them all. It chugged down the track toward us, whistling cheerfully and spewing great marshmallows of steam, causing the mob of ancient Brits around me to hoot
softly with excitement. For the next hour, the train chugged through fields along the coastline. Confined to the likes of Amtrak up until this point, this was pure magic to me, and I unashamedly hung my head out the window like an overexcited golden retriever for the duration of the trip.

It was almost with disappointment that we arrived at our destination in Port St. Mary; if I had had no plans for the rest of the day, I would have trundled back and forth on the Steam Rail for hours. But alas, I had some culture to delve into, and so we hailed a bus – I had learned my lesson and asked the bus driver to just tell us when we had arrived – to Cregneash, a living museum depicting the life of ancient Manx peat farmers.

I’m sure the displays in the welcome area were very interesting, but if we had figured out anything at this point, it was that the best information would come straight from the Manx themselves. And thusly, we met Gill Porter, who worked Cregneash reception.

Born and raised on the island, Gill explained that as a child, she was discouraged from speaking Manx Gaelic, as her parents and grandparents viewed it as a useless language, especially seeing as they were surrounded by so many English-speaking countries. In the late 1960s into the 1970s, she noted, the Manx began to stir up their cultural revival. Due to a massive influx of British immigrants and a boom in the financial industry, the island raked in money, but saw a significant decline in their main industries of fishing, farming, and tourism. As the Manx lost their jobs and their wealth, so too did they lose their stake in their land. The British bought up properties across the island, and slowly drove up prices and drove the Manx out.

The Manx youth didn’t quite take kindly to this British blip in their generations-long history on the island, and they pushed back, hard. They began by fighting the issue superficially, with vandalism. They spray painted British homes with warnings to leave or else, and in one case a group of Manx youths set fire to an unfinished British housing development. Here Gill leaned in, and with a prideful smirk commented, “My cousin drove the getaway car for that one!”

In schools, the revival took deeper roots. Schoolteachers were pushed to teach Manx Gaelic in their classrooms, and one boy’s school adopted an entire curriculum taught in Manx Gaelic. Despite this push, Gill noted, she was still heavily influenced by British culture. As a child she attended a private school in the southern city of Castletown with an
enormous number of British students, where she learned to suppress her Manx accent in favor of a more British accent. She was just as proud of her heritage then as she is now, she assured us, but then it was more important to fit in than to be proud.

She went on to note, perhaps a touch bitterly, that some British island-dwellers seem to be a bit foggy on the concept of what makes someone truly Manx. Many British assume that once one moves to the Isle of Man, they can be considered Manx, but the true Manx would never accept such a blasphemous definition of Manxness.

“There isn’t a real pecking order to Manxness,” she explained. “Either your family has been here for generations and you were born here, or you’re not Manx.”

As more visitors wandered into the welcome area, Gill directed us upstairs to view several displays on the Cregneash way of life. After skimming a very confusing display about crofting, which was never fully explained in the entire museum, we retreated back to Gill’s desk, where we bumped into Geoff Corlett, the most intense man on the entire island and the savoir of the Roland Hopkins quest.

He gave us a very brief and equally confusing explanation of crofting, but stopped as soon as Gill edged into our conversation to tell him about my project and my goal of finding a somewhat-definition of “Manx.” Instantly, he brightened up, his ruddy face got a little redder, and he swept his cap off his wispy white hair; this was going somewhere good. He delved into an explanation of his side work in the “Manx Connection,” which is essentially a massive network of Manx people all over the world. Geoff explained the scattered Manx as a result of the punishment system utilized up until three generations ago. Criminals had two choices: imprisonment and a death sentence on the island at Castle Rushen, or deportation to Australia, Tasmania, or New Zealand. Keep in mind also that this is the Isle of Man, and thus not quite a haven of hardened criminals; a stolen loaf of bread could earn you a one-way ticket to Tasmania.

Some thought that perhaps law enforcement on the island was a little extreme, and emigration to the United States and Canada became increasingly popular. Outside the Isle of Man, the highest concentrations of Manx can be found in New Zealand, Ontario, and Cleveland (yes, Cleveland surprised me too), and are surprisingly easy to connect with their generations-lost relatives on the island. You will remember, as I learned from the poor woman who had never seen the northern half of her island, that Manx names go through a
maddening cycle of reuse; because names rarely change within families, finding relatives abroad is a simple puzzle one can put together with just enough patience and passion...and Geoff had more than enough of both.

He took us down into Cregneash to give us a brief personal tour of a thatched hut squatting in the center of the village, where he proved that his enthusiasm extends to every corner of his life. Never before have I been so fascinated by three-legged stools (which were invented because they were sturdier on a dirt floor), and I mean that seriously. He also pointed out to us the subtleties of Manx folklore. He gestured to the mugs hanging from the rafters, all of which were pointed with their mouths toward the fireplace, and explained how the Manx would only sweep their floors into the hearth; fire was the end all be all for the Manx, and to ignore it would be to summon bad luck to the home. He then took us outdoors and pointed out the peat fields some distance away, where the Manx, governed by superstition, would only dig peat from the first to the third of May each year. This seemed more than a little inefficient to me, but anything for a lucky year I suppose. Another unsuspecting couple wandered into his designated hut, Geoff leapt off to bombard them with more information than the human brain can successfully compute, and we wandered off through the village.

Having taken our fill of countryside photos that in retrospect looked largely the same, but all felt really important at the time, we stopped in to bid Gill and Geoff adieu and ask them to call us a cab. We realized pretty suddenly that of all people, this man would probably be our best bet for finding Roland. I asked meekly, knowing that the guy had an English name and thus might not be received kindly, but Geoff merely gave me a bit of an astonished look and asked whether or not I had bothered to look in a phonebook yet.

“Well...no,” I replied stupidly, trying to figure out why this was the first time I had even considered that method. With a loud huffy WELL! Geoff slammed a telephone book open on the table before me, causing me to jump slightly, and flipped nearly immediately to the only R. Hopkins in all of the northern region of Andreas. There was no doubt that this was the Mr. Hopkins I had been sent to find. Geoff excitedly pulled his cell phone from the holster at his waist and wildly gestured at me with it.
“Go on! Give him a call!” he practically shouted. I backed away and made some spluttering noises as I realized that Geoff had forgotten the part where I mentioned that Roland was likely not of this world any longer.

“Well, I’m not really sure about that…”

“Oh go on, he will probably be very excited to hear from you and his relatives in the States!”

“Well…I mean thank you…but…but I really think he might be dead, actually.” I thought perhaps suggesting that this man was six feet under and therefore unavailable to take my call would dissuade Geoff’s enthusiasm, but no such luck. He tried at least two more ways to convince me that calling the number for a deceased man would be a jolly good time, but at last was content to just write down Roland’s number for me, so that I could “give him a ring later.”

The search for the lost Hopkins rekindled, we asked how expensive it would be to hire a driver who might take us up to Andreas, where there is very conveniently little to no public transportation. Geoff looked absolutely wounded at the idea that we would pay actual money for a driver’s services. He waved away that suggestion impatiently, insisting that he would take us himself the next day. We exchanged emails, agreed to get in contact about a favorable meeting point, and my mother and I were on our way off down the hill to Port Erin. I got the sense that Geoff would have preferred for us to stay and chat with him until the sun went down, but we had one Queenie Fest to explore.

An annual celebration in the south of the Isle of Man, the Queenie Fest is a celebration of the sea, which provides the island with fishing as one of its most important industries. The celebration, which includes copious amounts of the Manx Queenie, a small sea scallop that can be found from Norway to the Canary Islands, has grown beyond an appreciation of the dish into a celebration of history, culture, and ocean conservation. In fact, Manx fishermen themselves, recognizing the importance of protecting a sea creature so deeply ingrained in the Manx culture, launched the recent initiative to block off preservation areas for the Manx Queenie.

Despite it being mid-June, the temperature had dipped into the low forties, and so we skimmed the displays quickly (my favorite being a small tent that advertised their expertise in “Ferrets and Net Making”), and made a beeline for the food. I ended the day
with a huge queenie sandwich – admittedly one of the more uncommon and un-local ways to consume these tiny shellfish – and an exceedingly awkward picture with some poor soul dressed up as an enormous queenie. Hilariously, Queenie Man is the last memory I have of this entire day; my notebook is blank and I’ve flipped the day over in my mind a million times, but I can’t remember a single thing beyond being gripped in a large foam claw. Very honestly, I think it can be chalked up to a sensory overload-induced blackout as a direct result of conversation with Geoff.

**Isle of Man, Where Everybody Knows Your Name**

Disappointingly, the address that Geoff gave us rejected each of our increasingly desperate emails to him, and so we accepted that we would not be spending the day amid a barrage of information and would be headed to Castletown instead. I have to admit I was almost pleased at this arrangement, because it meant that we would be able to take the Steam Railway. We left from our hotel with a spring in our step and a generous thirty minutes to get to the train station. Across the street from our hotel I noticed a sign that indicated that the rail station was located just over two miles from our present location. We looked at each other with a determined despair, and embarked on a shin-splintering powerwalk across the city of Douglas. Truly one of the sweetest sounds I have ever heard was a loud departure whistle as the train strained its way out of the station...as we pumped along a solid quarter mile away. At least we had a marginal understanding of the bus system by this point.

Castletown, settled in the southern end of the island, is home to the island’s remarkably intact Castle Rushen (the Manx name their towns very creatively, I know). The castle, though it appears tiny from the outside, was positively endless. We got lost in the depths of the castle, finding ourselves in a banquet hall full of mannequins. Here we learned the curious tradition of depluming peacocks, cooking them, and sewing their plumage back on to present the dish. Call me new-fashioned, but this seemed a little ridiculous...though it probably looked very impressive, which it appears is all that kings really cared about in the olden days. After many sets of dizzying staircases, we came upon the best display in the entire castle, in which a medieval knight crouched over a toilet while a very speaker system treated visitors to various grunts, splashes, and groans of agony. I took several pictures, at
least one video, and stood there laughing in disbelief until my mom sidled up to me and commented “You do realize this is the longest you’ve looked at any given display all week, right?” She was absolutely correct, and so I tore myself away and we finally clawed our way out of the depths of the castle into the gift shop, as I’d forgotten to pick up postcards for any of my professors (hi guys!).

After several minutes, the woman sitting behind the cashier’s desk looked up at us innocently from her newspaper.

“So...are you Tess?”

I looked at her, entirely bewildered. There was no way a twenty-something American tourist was fast-traveling news, if news at all, and – with the exception of the grocery store incident – I hadn’t done anything bad enough for my reputation to precede me. As it just so happened, we had run into Geoff’s wife on a good bit of luck, and he had asked her to keep an eye out for “the American girl and her mum.” She gave him a ring, and after a good deal of quarreling and crabbing, they agreed that they would be picking us up and giving us a personal tour of the north the following afternoon. We couldn’t believe the serendipity, and headed out to finish up Castletown with a visit to the Nautical Museum and the House of Keys.

“Ah the Nautical Museum, huh? Let me call over there and let him know you’re coming. Have him let you in free.” Maybe I didn’t need that Heritage Pass after all.

The Nautical Museum, located across a drawbridge that is run entirely by anyone who happens to be nearby and notices that the bridge needs opening or closing, was an absolute gem.

“Ah! And you must be Tess!” the guide boomed as I walked in, giving me a spinal readjusting clap on the back. He took me into the basement of the museum, which was little more than a sandy garage for boats, where a large vessel rested lopsidedly in the sand. This ship, named Peggy and estimated at a solid two hundred years of age, was the oldest and best-preserved ship that had been found on the island. A small British family joined us, and he excitedly repeated the entire history of Peggy to them, and then took us upstairs to inspect a display of cannonballs. He had us handle an assortment, and sent us on our separate ways through the building.
“Oh, and of course, don’t lick your hands,” he jovially shouted after us. “Those are all made of lead, you know!”

After inspecting the “drinking room” of the museum – once the home of borderline insane inventor George Quayle – that contained a rotating fireplace and countless hidden liquor cabinets, I returned to the front room to find my guide discussing the value of American ghost hunting television programs with my mother. Even though he tried to give me lead poisoning, I did quite like him a lot.

He sent us off down the street to the House of Keys, which housed the lower branch of Tynwald – the island’s Parliament – called the Keys. Eventually, people realized that this invite-only government branch, comprised of rich white men who could adjust laws to suit themselves, was perhaps not the best way of doing things, and so the Keys were forced to be subject to public elections.

We arrived just in time for a mock debate; we were the only people there besides a lovely British couple, but that did not quell our guide’s enthusiasm in the least. He worked at the front of the room alongside a judge with a creepily realistic video-projected, and could not have loved his job more. As the debate got rolling and the paintings hanging on the walls around us transformed into videos of opinionated old men, our guide shouted *hear, hear!* and shook his fists and leapt up to whisper into Videojudge’s ear. This, my friends, was a man truly cut out for his line of work. Though the lovely British couple refused to engage in heated debate with me, and my mother kept falling asleep, I loved the presentation. We walked through twelve historically heavily debated laws, and I learned that surprisingly, the Isle of Man was the first country to give women the right to vote (with extreme parameters, but still).

We arrived back in Douglas in a hunger-crazed daze, but expecting disappointment; we had noted up until this point that everywhere on the island, even the major cities, were shut down for the night around 5pm. Imagine our surprise when we found Douglas’s main street swarming with people and all restaurants going full steam ahead at 6:30 – on a Sunday, no less. You would think that an island that hasn’t changed in fifty years would be predictable, and yet there we were.

We rode the famous Douglas Horse Tram up the Promenade, looking for places to eat; we saw plenty, but didn’t know how to get off the tram. We were seriously considering just
jumping off casually as the tram was going full clip, but fortunately several women in front of us had the wherewithal to simply alert the driver to their wish to stop.

Overwhelmed with choice and exhausted from a day that had started before dawn, we resorted to a first course of dinner at a nearby ice cream shop, which closed at “half past six...or maybe seven. Doesn’t really matter.” We were back in our hotel by seven, and prompted by some odd delusion, suggested that I would pop down to the pub and make a couple friends. I was asleep within thirty minutes.

At some point in the night, I woke up in a sudden panic, realizing that I hadn’t yet taken the time to go out and have a look at the legendary Isle of Man night sky. I stumbled out of bed to take a look out the window and make sure there were no clouds. I bonked my forehead rather sharply on the glass and decided that perhaps that would be a project for the next evening.

**Go To the Roundabout and Take Your Second Left**

My favorite thing about the transportation systems in the Isle of Man is that they’re as wildly unsafe as they are wildly charming. The morning of our adventure with the Corletts, we embarked for Laxey, a small town to the north, on the Manx Electric Railway. The railway is comprised of several open-sided cars that teeter their way along roadsides and a steep drop down to the sea. Nothing holds you back, besides common sense and a gentle urge from the conductor to please remain inside the car. We disembarked at Laxey, and took off to the summit of Mount Snaefell on another railway. This one was marginally safer (the cars even had sides!), but still teetered precariously over steep fields of horned sheep. I should perhaps mention here that Mount Snaefell, despite its grand name, is not really a mountain by any stretch of the imagination. Standing at just 2034 feet above sea level, it really is a very, very large hill. Even so, it promised breathtaking views so up we went.

The breathtaking views weren’t a lie. From the summit, one can see the six kingdoms: Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland, Mann, and Heaven. While we spent a good deal of time gazing at the countries drifting across the sea, we spent most of our time inspecting the island. It’s so small that you can very easily see *every* part of the country from the top of Snaefell, and notice how very close the towns are to one another, though the windy roads and bus routes would have you believe otherwise.
I have something of a tradition of doing headstands in important places around the world, and I’ll admit here and nowhere else that I’m sort of making it my trademark (if I become viral, you heard it here first). A man standing slightly behind my mother laughed and asked me if I was trying to make a life trademark. He really seemed to understand me on a spiritual level, so I eagerly went over and showed him the picture that my mom had snapped of the moment. He assured me that it was an excellent picture, even though he was looking about six inches to the left of the tiny screen on my camera. I looked down slowly and saw his white cane, and politely excused myself from the situation and every interaction with humans ever again.

At the bottom of the mountain, Geoff and Gill zoomed up, we loaded in, and we were at last hot on Roland Hopkins’s trail. We took a lap around the town of Laxey, where Geoff grew up with a large family that ran the area’s major flourmill. He then took us down to the river that runs through Laxey and explained that the town’s name comes from the Norse word laxa, which translates to salmon.

“No salmon anymore!” He exclaimed. “The mills killed them all off!” About five minutes later I realized that he had nonchalantly admitted that his own family essentially killed off the town’s namesake, but he didn’t seem very worked up about it. I followed suit. The Corletts, like all Manx, are extremely proud of their island, and discussed the absolute pleasure of raising children on the island. Not only is the Manx school system is one of the best in the world, they explained, but the island has an almost bewilderingly low crime rate. I wanted to suggest here that perhaps that stemmed from their history of deporting and executing petty market thieves, but I thought better of it.

They stressed that the schools put an emphasis on Manx culture and heritage since the financial sector in the 70s that drew in the British and drove the Manx out. Gill, like the first Gill we met at House of Manannan, distinctly remembered Manx youths spray painting houses and setting British structures on fire. She noted that to this day, there are still great numbers of Manx that resent the British and their existence on Manx land.

“I don’t let them get away with complaining about Mann,” she said proudly. “Like I say to them, ‘if you don’t like it, there’s a boat out in the morning.’”

Finally, at long last, we arrived in the tiny rural town of Andreas – as if there is any other kind of town in the Isle of Man – and immediately set about asking for directions to
West Braust Farm. I was positively glowing. This was my shining moment, the climax of the trip, and the finale of a grand quest. We pulled up next to homely couple sweating away in their garden, and Geoff hung out the window gaily to ask for directions. The snaggle-toothed man blinked at us for a moment, shaking his head slightly, and turned to his wife.

“Claire! Know of a place called Braust?”

His behemoth wife dug herself out of the garden and blinked at us in the same blank way, panting heavily.

“No... no... never heard of it. Say, I think if you go back down the street to the roundabout there and take the first left, it must be there.”

Why we listened to these two clueless humans, I will never know, but we spun the car around, took to the roundabout, and hailed off at the second left. We drove several kilometers into nothingness, and finally pulled up next to a woman walking her poodle and asked for new directions.

“You know, I’m not sure!” she said, scratching her head. “But if you go back to the roundabout there, and take your second left, I think that’s the right direction.”

It was only until we had gone around the roundabout ten times, taking each road in and out of it at least twice, that we stopped at a post office. Geoff stomped in purposefully. He stomped back out thirty seconds later, his face nearly purple.

“Dumb blokes have no idea what I’m talking about. Idiots must be English.”

I was starting to worry a little for Geoff’s heart health.

“You know, if we don’t find it... that... that would be okay...” I offered meekly from the backseat.

“No! No! Don’t be ridiculous, now. We will find it,” he insisted.

Down the next road, we received directions from a girl shearing several hundred sheep. Geoff hopped to the car with renewed spring in his step; since she was also a farmer, she must know where we were going, according to his logic. Her directions deposited us directly into an abandoned airfield. Finally, my mother, bless her soul, remembered that we had written down Roland’s number several days prior, and an appropriately ancient-sounding woman picked up. As a resident of West Braust Farm, one would suppose she gave excellent directions, but instead we ended up down another empty road.
At last, we bumped into our savior, a farmer selling potatoes out of the back of his Volkswagen van. He knew precisely what we were looking for, and gave us exact directions and a sense of restored faith in humanity. We arrived, two hours after our arrival in Andreas, at the driveway of West Braust Farm (which, I may add, was less than one hundred feet from the two snaggletooths that didn't know what we were talking about).

I hopped up to the doorbell excitedly, and a very fit, very confused woman in her mid-fifties came outside and stared at me.

“Um...you're not Joy, right?” I asked. In retrospect, this was probably a bit offensive seeing as Joy should have been closer to one hundred. She ignored that question (but probably questioned life and her self-perception late into the night), but instantly perked up when I explained that I was looking for Roland, her father-in-law. She immediately bounced over to the car to explain the directions to the Hopkins’s nursing home, and we were off again. Ah, the sweet labyrinth of frustrated adventure!

For the week, I had been thinking of Roland as a dead man, but I walked into his sterile convalescent room, adorned with military uniforms, medals, and pictures of a life gone by, and there he sat, alive and well. He was easily the most ancient human I had ever seen in my life, and I had to shout directly into his ear to explain what I was even doing there besides interrupting his dinner. It had taken hours of pure frustration to find him, but the look on his face when he realized that not only had a long lost relative from the States remembered him, but a complete stranger had come looking for him...I would have gone around that damn roundabout two hundred more times for that look.

I sat with him for a while, visiting and getting to know him, and snapped a picture to send off to the stateside Hopkins family. He gave my hand a grateful squeeze as I left, and I couldn’t believe my luck over the past week that had brought the great quest to this point.

The Corletts picked me up and we headed south to Douglas. Along the way, they took me over Mount Snaefell so that we could drive part of the course for the TT, the annual motorcycle race across the island. They explained the extreme danger of the race, as the cyclists sped down the curvy country roads at several hundred miles per hour.

“They’re making it much safer, though,” Gill said brightly. “We only had one person die this year!”
They dropped us off at our hotel, presenting us with an enormous bag of souvenirs from the Manx Heritage Association as we climbed out of the car. They hugged us tightly, wished us safe travels, asked us to keep in contact, and like that, they were gone and our journey was over.

**There Is Space Enough...For a Conclusion**

I know I've used the word “charming” an unacceptable number of times in this paper, but I do feel that each one of them was deserved. I've been fortunate to travel a good number of places in my life, but I have never met people as thoroughly charming as the Manx. Living in a beautiful, timeless landscape, the Manx people truly understand what it is to have pride in one’s land and culture, and tirelessly work to preserve the Isle of Man in a number of ways.

Instead simply acquiescing to British influence that threatened to drive out generations-old language and traditions, the Manx pushed back in any way they could. Realizing that their superficial vandalism attacks weren’t going to save their heritage, they looked to schools and governmental structures to revive their language and organize mass celebrations of their culture. Though the museums across the island are fantastic and offer a comprehensive look at the history of Mann, the real magic of the island lies in the people. The Manx culture is elusive, undefined, and unquantifiable, but the pride in it is incredible, understandable, and almost palpable.