

## Leaght Bun Scoill

I must start by thanking you all for your kind invitation to come and speak here on such an important occasion. This is a wonderful place and great work is going on here for your language. I know we are amongst friends.

My name is Annie Kissack and I work for the revival of the Manx language in the Isle of Man; I am a teacher and I work in, and for the Bunscoill Ghaelgagh, the only Manx language school in the Isle of Man. It is mainly about this school that I will be speaking to you this afternoon. My husband is with me on this visit; his name is Phil Gawne and he is a member of the Isle of Man parliament, the Tynwald, and our Minister for Agriculture. But before this, he was a Manx language officer, and much of what has been achieved for the Manx language, in recent years, particularly in relation to the setting up of the school, has come about as a result of his efforts.

Some general background information about the Isle of Man.

I should explain a little about the Isle of Man in general, before talking about the the Manx language and the school. The Island is in the middle of the Irish Sea, with England, Scotland and Ireland surrounding it. It takes about four hours to sail to the Isle of Man from England and about half an hour to fly there from the nearest airports. It is about 30 miles long by 12 miles wide. The capital is Douglas, where nearly half the population of the 80,000 live. The Island is fairly hilly with a mainly rocky coastline and a few sandy beaches. It is fairly windy and wet in the winter, but doesn't get too cold, and the summers don't get too hot either.

The Isle of Man has long regarded itself as a small nation, and as I mentioned, has had its own parliament for nearly a thousand years. Nearly half of its current population are recent incomers, mainly from England, some of whom have arrived to work in the island's finance industry. The older traditional population, the Manx, are the descendants of earlier Celtic and later Norwegian settlers, along with later immigrants from Scotland and England.

The Island largely governs itself; it makes its own laws, has its own taxes and, importantly for what I will say later, its own education system. Its links with the United Kingdom come through connections with the Queen, who is the Lord of Man. She is represented by a Governor, who has very little real power. The United Kingdom is in charge of defence.

A brief outline of the history of the Manx language

The everyday language of the Isle of Man is now English, but this has not always been the case. For hundreds of years the language of the country people, the majority, was Manx Gaelic. It is believed that this language developed from the original Old Irish that was spoken by the people who settled in the Isle of Man and Scotland in the 5th century, and that the language survived the Norse invasions, and later, developed in its own unique way. The Manx Gaelic speakers call their own language ‘Gaelg’, that is, Gaelic. The modern Manx language has lots of words in common with modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic but has many differences too;

Manx survived as a community language a lot longer than people might have expected, in spite of a range of external influences working against it. About 100 years ago, the census showed that some 4,000 people still knew or could use the indigenous language, Manx. By 1974, however, the last native speaker of this unique language, Ned Maddrell, had died and most people thought that the language was dead too.

The mid- to- late nineteenth century saw a very rapid decline in the language, with parents no longer passing it on to their children. The tourists who came flocking to the Isle of Manx in the nineteenth century, brought money and prosperity but they also brought English, and the need to know English. When school attendance became compulsory during the nineteenth century, children had to learn through English, and in truth, many of the parents wanted this, as they saw this as a way to future prosperity. Manx wasn’t actively persecuted in a systematic way, but it became, in the words of one late nineteenth century clergyman, like ‘an iceberg floating in southern latitudes’.

I will explain this further with an example from my own family; my mother, who in school in the 1920s and 30s, was aware there was a Manx language because it was still spoken among her grandparents at home when they didn’t want the children to know what they were talking out, but she herself learned nothing of the language, and didn’t want to at the time of growing up. The language’s associations with poverty and ignorance were very strong. My mother’s own parents were born in the 1890s and they did not know the language but may have had a passive knowledge of certain words and phrases. This sort of generational pattern was fairly common among Manx families.

In spite of a generally indifferent and sometimes hostile environment, individuals and small groups of enthusiasts fought to keep the language alive during the twentieth century. During the 1940s and 1950s, members of Yn Cheshaght Ghailckagh, the Manx Language Society, used help from De Valera’s government in Eire, to make recordings of a handful of old people, surviving native speakers of Manx. Most of these people lived in distant country

areas, and many had not used the language for many years. Within ten years, most of these individuals were dead, so the recordings were made just in time. Even those recordings, extremely useful though they are, show how far the Manx language had become affected by English influences by this point.

So we reach the mid- 1970s and the death of the last native speaker, Ned Maddrell. There are at this point, maybe a few hundred people at most, with some knowledge of Manx; such knowledge arising in some cases from an academic interest, an emotional tie, or both.

Further social and economic changes can then be shown once more to have an impact on the fortunes of Manx. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a political and economic decision to encourage lots of new residents to live on the Isle of Man, had, as a side effect, a general increase in Manx nationalism amongst the Manx population. One of the results of this was an increased interest in Manx history, music, folklore, and of course, the language. This coincided with a much wider trend of revival of folk music in the 1960s and 1970s. The possibility of singing songs in Manx was opened up. Perhaps as a result of both of these factors, Manx experienced a sort of mini-boom. Interestingly, a small number of new residents themselves became active in propagating the language. So the pool of people generally interested in the language increased. There were lots of classes for adult learners set up but unfortunately the number of actual fluent speakers did not appear to increase significantly as a result, in spite of the more positive climate. Then I think, slowly and inevitably, everybody got older and more tired and the language movement lost a bit of its impetus. This really has been the pattern of the twentieth century revival; surges of interest and then lulls. But Manx has never disappeared.

So on to modern developments. During the early 1990s, a Gallop Poll established that just over 40% of parents would like to see the teaching of some Manx Gaelic in schools. The Isle of Man Department of Education perhaps was a little surprised by this, but responded by employing three teachers to visit the Manx primary schools and indeed, secondary schools, every week and provide half an hour of teaching about the Manx language to children of seven years old upwards whose parents wanted them to learn it. The teaching was mostly given through English. This peripatetic teaching still takes place. Children leave their normal lessons and go and work in another room with the Manx teacher in groups varying from four to twelve children. It is more popular in some schools than others, although generally there is a much smaller uptake at secondary school- perhaps because many of the secondary teachers view this as a disruption to their 'proper' lessons. You can now take higher level qualifications in Manx, the equivalent of an GCSE and 'A' levels, the examinations that pupils will take at sixteen and just before leaving school at eighteen.

In spite of all these positive developments during the 1990s, we still had very few fluent speakers of the language; lots of people now knew *about* Manx but very few were getting further than just knowing a few words and phrases. Something more radical was needed. A small number of Manx language activists decided to concentrate their efforts on the very young. The Scots and Irish had shown that they were considerably more successful passing Gaelic on to young children than to adults, so it was decided to teach Manx to pre-school age children. So Mooinjer Veggey, the Manx Gaelic Nursery and Playgroup Organisation, an educational charity, was born and opened its first playgroup in Braddan, near Douglas in 1996.

This playgroup was for open for five mornings a week to children between two and four years old., and took up to ten children at any time. We persuaded the Department of Education to rent us an old school house , and with a lot of help from friends and family, and asking for sponsorship we got the building ready. The original staff at Braddan were mothers of children who had taken a childcare qualification in order to be allowed to work in the group.

The important thing about Braddan was, and still is, that it is run entirely though Manx, although very few of the parents of the children who attend are actually Manx speakers. Staff used the immersion method of language learning and parents were often amazed at how quickly their children were understanding and in many cases, actually talking the language. Some of these parents then went off to night school to learn some Manx themselves.

Further Manx playgroups opened in the next few years and although these did not teach through the medium of Manx- they did introduce lots of Manx to up to two hundred children a year through the introduction of songs and rhymes and easy phrases. We decided that although we didn't have enough fluent adults available to teach through Manx, we could still teach something of the language and get the parents interested. We also began to make some money for the organisation by taking on contracts to run nursery groups on behalf of the Department of Education; the profit from this was fed back into the Mooinjer Veggey organisation and helped us to train and employ more people. So Mooinjer Veggey became an successful provider of pre-school education on the Island.

If you demonstrate that your young child can be successfully educated through the language then you have to follow it through when they start full-time education, which in the Isle of Man is at between four and five years old. Yet there was nowhere for all these Manx - educated children to go to continue their Manx-medium education Parents like ourselves began to lobby the Isle of Man Department. of Education pointing out that there were now a

few children due to leave Braddan playgroup who would have to wait till they were seven years old before coming into any contact with the language again.

In response to this, in September 2000 the Department of Education introduced a half-day a week session at Ballacottier school in Douglas where children in the first three years of primary education were taught through the medium of the Manx language. This involved their parents removing the child from their local primary school and driving them to Douglas for one afternoon. The Gaelscoil, as it was known, was introduced as a compromise measure which was used to gauge the level of support for full-time Gaelic-Medium Education. The move was well-supported but parents of Gaelic speaking children felt that the Gaelscoil could not provide enough hours of Manx to maintain pre-school progress.

During 2001 we were fortunate that both the Director and the Minister of Education were interested in the concept of Manx -medium education, and indicated if we could find enough children of the right age to start in September, the Department would be willing to pay for a teacher to run a full-time unit attached to one of the Manx primary schools. It took some persuasion for parents to take what seemed at the time a bit of a risk, but eventually we found nine children to start at the unit in time for the new school year. Five of them had already spent a year at their local primary schools and the others were due to start that autumn term. Julie Matthews was the pioneering teacher, assisted by Cathy Clucas, who had already worked as a leader at the Braddan playgroup, so children and parents already knew her. The unit continued the immersion methods practised at Braddan playgroup, and the Moonjer Veggey organisation retained its strong association with all that went on, including the employment of staff on behalf of the Department, and the promotion of the Manx bilingual concept to interested parents.

Events have proceeded very swiftly since then. We now have our own school building in St Johns, forty seven children in three classrooms, three teachers and two part-time assistants. Julie Matthews was appointed as head teacher in September 2006 and the Bunscoil Ghaelgagh is now treated as a stand-alone school by the Department of Education.

At this point, it would seem relevant to have a look at some of the many issues that have arisen during the last few years, and perhaps address some of the questions about the school that we have either asked ourselves, or have been asked about by other people, whether they be parents, teaching professionals, or visitors from a variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds.

### **Why do parents chose the Bunscoil?**

There seem to be a range of reasons why children are sent to a Manx language school. Quite a lot of Manx parents feel ashamed or annoyed at the fact that they didn't get any Manx teaching at school, and as Manx people, want to remedy this for their children. Some, probably fewer, are interested in bilingualism, or some kind of mildly alternative education. Some, I suppose, like the idea of a small school. A large number come because they have been to the Manx playgroup and like our organisation and trust the individuals in it. As I said before, few of these parents actually speak Manx themselves. There is no doubt that even more children would attend the school, if parents could get them there in the morning, but most Manx families work, and it is not always practical.

### **How do we encourage children to use Manx?**

We don't have a problem getting the children to speak Manx, at least in the school. The reason for this is that we try and make the children feel very happy and very confident, so that when they do feel ready to try out some Manx on their own, they won't worry about making mistakes. The following method worked well for one teacher of a new class of initially reluctant speakers; he put a little Manx flag on the table of one group for the first lesson of the morning and later moved it to other tables as a reminder to the children that they must try to use Manx while the flag was there. This was seen as a game but within a week all the children (aged six and seven) were trying to use Manx all day, whether or not the flag was there. They seem to have internalized the message without being confronted. Another method of encouraging the children to use Manx comprises of older children being asked to name anyone whom they have heard using a lot of Manx in the playgroup. Extensive use of Manx over a week results in a small prize. Praise works very well with the younger children. We also make up silly songs to encourage them to use the language outside; playground skipping rhymes are very popular and young children quickly join in. The older children are taught truthfully about how the language declined and the responses to this are often quite dramatic; some children become very patriotic, and determined to save the language from extinction.

### **When do the children actually start talking in Manx?**

The younger children sometimes start to speak Manx straightaway; other children resist for a little while or speak back loudly in English. If they do this, teachers say (in Manx), 'yes, that's a good answer ...do you know how to say it in Manx?' Often children will then give a Manx response. We find that most children speak some Manx within six to eight terms, although many speak much sooner than that. If you came into our school today; in the first class, the four to six year olds, you would hear the teacher speaking Manx, and the children generally speaking back in English with some Manx words and phrases . A small number of

the youngest children respond to the teacher exclusively in Manx, even if it takes them a long time to complete a sentence.

In the second class, where the children have been in the school for two to three years already, you would hear the children use mostly Manx to the teacher with some English words/phrases where they do not have the Manx vocabulary or grammar; in the third class, the eight-to- eleven year olds, you would hear almost all Manx being used to the teacher and amongst themselves in the classroom, although the same children may also use English in the playground for some of the time.

Some parents of new children have been worried that a young child going into an immersion classroom might be overwhelmed or upset because they wouldn't understand what was happening. In practice, this has not happened; initially, very few young children appear to comment on the language being used but seem happy enough just to get inside and play. Just like in the playgroups, the youngest children are taught lots of songs and rhymes very early on. If we want the children to do something we always show them as well as tell them. So if it's time to go to the door to go out, the teacher will go to the door and say 'I am going to the door.' and then gesture to the children, 'Come to the door.' The children will see and hear this happening many times in one day so it does not take them long to understand this, and before long, to use such phrases. Songs and rhymes which repeat certain phrases are very useful even with much older children. If I hear a group of children regularly making a mistake, say , with the grammar of a particular sentence, often because they are still thinking about the way such a sentence is formed in English, then I will make up a short song for them where they will use the correct phrase very many times.

### **Do the staff ever use English?**

If a child clearly misunderstands something we are saying to them in Manx, or, say if we have to explain to a naughty or very young child, why they should not climb over the wall and run into the road, then we would talk to that child about it in English, away from the hearing of the rest of the class. If it was something that required a lot of discussion, we would ask the parent to explain it to the child at home. This has only happened very occasionally. Mnr Rogers, the Class Three teacher, has never needed to speak to his class of fifteen in English; and his class would never attempt to speak back to him in English. When the English language itself is being taught to his class, we try to ensure that it is taught by another teacher (currently me), so to keep intact the established linguistic relationship between main class teacher and class.

All the teachers speak to each other in Manx, although the staff who supervise meals at dinnertime cannot speak Manx. It would be good in the future to have all Manx-speaking staff, but at the moment, this cannot be achieved.; instead we make sure that the dinnertime assistants appreciate what we are doing, and try and use a few phrases.

### **What language is used in the playground?**

One child alone can change the language used by the children playing outside in the playground, whether from English to Manx or the other way round. We noticed that there were a few children who seemed to use Manx more easily than the others, and got these particular children to go and help the younger children to use Manx by playing particular games with them or just talking to them. They liked this; it gave them a particular role of responsibility and the younger children responded by trying to use a little Manx outside. The positive effect of skipping games has already been mentioned. But, the truth is that in the playground, left entirely to themselves, the majority of children use English among themselves for most of the time, even though spontaneous Manx conversations can be overheard sometimes. We should not be surprised at this; this pattern happens everywhere. But, we did decide, as teachers, not to get too worried or upset about it. We can only encourage, not force children to use Manx and we are realistic about the fact that the children live in a largely English-speaking environment. We also feel, that as they are making great efforts to speak Manx inside the school, then they might actually need some short periods of time when they can relax together, and if that means using the language with which they are most familiar, then we have to accept that.

### **How do we deal with lack of Manx Gaelic resources?**

As part of the primary schools on the Isle of Man, the Bunscoill is expected to follow the same curriculum as other schools as far as possible. So, if the children in the new school down the road were learning about ancient Greeks, so do we. Which means we need lots of books and resources on a wide range of subjects. This is extremely difficult for two reasons- the first being that we don't have the right books, and the second and related reason is that we don't always have the vocabulary. I'll explain this latter point first;

The Manx language was never really a literary language but was primarily a spoken one. It was a language that people used on farms and on fishing boats. As such, it was not the language of the educated people, or the most powerful people on the Island, for a very long time, if ever. In addition, over the years, it has lost a lot of its original Gaelic vocabulary; so there are now far fewer words in Manx than say, in its cousin, Irish Gaelic. There are quite a lot of words for old farming practices which are no longer required, but few words for toys, or baby clothes or whatever.

The people who first wrote down the language were clergymen who needed it to communicate with their congregations so nearly all the written literature that we do have is religious. Portions of the Manx Bible began to be translated in the 1750s and the main translations was completed by the end of the eighteenth century. So today, if we want to read 'traditional' Manx literature, we have the Bible, some eighteenth and nineteenth-century songs (many obscure and/or linguistically corrupt) and a large number of religious pamphlets or leaflets raging against the abuse of alcohol. Hardly the sort of stuff that young children want to read. Yet we live in a world where written language is important, so by starting the Bunscoill, we were really setting ourselves a challenge almost as big as the setting up of the school itself; what would the children read?

At the beginning, the teachers themselves translated simple childrens books from English, and stuck Manx words over the top. This was, and still, is a long and boring process. We found that asking non-teachers to translate books for us was generally not so successful. Apart from making errors, some people did not adapt their language to the childrens' needs, and inevitably, such books took so long to be translated, that they were no longer very useful.

However, the business of trying to produce a lot of books quickly showed up a very positive thing; we did find that the Manx language, even with its reduced vocabulary, and lack of literary tradition could still be used to translate virtually everything we wanted, and with the help of some academics and scholars, we soon had lists of more technical words and phrases to draw on. So we could talk about science and modern technology, as well as the Bible. Things also improved when we got computers and overhead projectors. We could translate a particular page, put it on the overhead projector and read and discuss it with the whole class, without needing to have twelve copies of each book. It is also cheaper to do that. So improving technology has helped us a lot.

Nonetheless, teachers were being paid for teaching, not translating and we soon realised that we needed to employ someone whose sole job was translation of suitable texts. Fortunately, we persuaded the Department of Education that this was the case. Since September 2006, Bob Carswell, has joined the staff, as a translator and writer. He is also an original poet in Manx Gaelic, so he can create original work as well as translate. His post is paid for jointly by the Manx Heritage Foundation and the Department of Education. In a few months, the number of texts which exist in Manx Gaelic has doubled, and life is a lot easier for the staff, even though they still need to translate fairly regularly. There has also been a fair amount of activity from individuals not directly involved with the school. Brian Stowell has translated

'Alice in Wonderland' by Lewis Carroll- for the first time, we now have a long, classic childrens' book illustrated in full colour.

### **At what point is English introduced and for how long is it taught?**

We teach children to read and to write as well as how to speak in Manx. But at some point they also need to learn to read and write in English. How much English should the children study? That was a question from the beginning, but we decided at the school to wait and see how the children progressed in Manx before deciding when would be the best time to introduce English, and how much of the language would be taught. We thought that it would be stupid to encourage children to speak the Manx language, and then as soon as they began to show some real progress in it, to introduce English. We looked to see what other countries did but decided in the end, to do what we felt was appropriate for the children we had.

So this is what we do at the moment: English lessons start when the child is in his or her fourth year in school, that is, when the child is between seven and eight years old. At first the children start with an hour a week. I usually start the lesson by saying, 'Put your English hats on now!' , and when the lesson is finished we take off our English hats, so it is clear to the children that we want them to go back to Manx again. This clear signalling of intent works very well. English lessons take place through English and there is a strong emphasis on literature, partly to compensate for the current deficits in this area in Manx.

By the time a child is in the final year at primary school, (and we now have five children in this situation), the child receives about four to five hours of teaching in English. It tends to come on one day, so during the rest of the week, the flow of Manx is undisturbed. We feel it is the right amount of time we need to ensure that the children reach a satisfactory standard in English. All other subject areas (including French) are taught through Manx.

I know that many people will judge the success of the school, sadly, not on how well the children do with their Manx, but whether or not, they perform well enough in written English. For me, personally, as the teacher of English at the Bunscoill, this is quite a pressure, particularly in these early days. But I think they are doing very well in both languages. As a general observation, I can see no difference between the English writing abilities of the older Bunscoill children, and that of similar groups in other schools. Children with spelling difficulties have spelling difficulties in both languages- not because one is having a bad effect on the other. Of course, I am aware that some parents, or in one case I know, grandparents, might suspect that if their child does not do very well, it is *because* of the Manx, rather than the child having some general difficulties. This has been anticipated. At the very beginning of the child's school career, it is really important for us to talk to all

parents about what to expect from bilingual learners. It is now very helpful to be able to show parents the sort of work that the very oldest children are doing in English. This usually reassures them that their child is not going to come put of primary school unable to read and write in the majority language.

### **How can we judge how well the Bunscoill is doing in terms of the Manx language, and indeed more generally?**

We live in a environment where teachers have to justify what they do and show that it is effective. The Isle of Man government has invested quite a lot of money in Manx medium education, so it is a fair enough question to ask. In general terms, I feel the school is a great success. The children are happy being there; they feel secure, and they are treated as individuals. They experience a broad curriculum, they are progressing well and most are showing signs of great personal confidence. Of necessity, there is a great deal of trust between parents and teachers, so relationships are excellent. In this, it is like any other good small school.

Politically, and in terms of the promoting the Isle of Man abroad the Bunscoill has been quite useful. We are visited by TV or radio or visiting academics at least once a month and receive excellent publicity. The Bunscoill shows that the Isle of Man can think differently and be innovative and that it values its history and heritage in a very practical way. The former indifference or hostility to the language does appear to be disappearing, and the school has a positive role as a symbol of the country's future and its youth.

So what about the school's effectiveness in terms of transmitting the Manx language? Setting aside all the other achievements, that, is after all, what it has been set up to do. The only academic work on the childrens' use of language has been carried out by Marie Clague; her Phd is soon to be completed and will be useful. We have no fluent Manx-speaking inspectors or advisors within the Department of Education. The responsibility for ensuring standards are met lies with the teachers themselves. Broadly speaking, as a staff, we are satisfied that the language is being transmitted effectively; that the children understand it, use it, have a positive attitude towards it, and ultimately achieve fluency in it. In this, the school is indeed achieving one its main objectives. In general terms, the immersion method is a very effective tool for acquiring Manx.

Yet a whole range of questions open up from this. What, for example, makes a good Manx speaker/ reader/ writer? Is it the willingness to use the language with confidence? What about accuracy? What about creativity? What about pronunciation? What about the ability to generalize and extend what is already known? What about the range of domains in which the

child will use the language? Or the speed with which they acquire new concepts? Our assessment systems are in their infancy but all these issues will need addressing eventually. It is likely that we will have to wait until many years have passed, and we have enough children passed through the school to know how children learn Manx in the Bunscoil situation and what we can expect them to do in the future.

Adult Manx speakers are another group who might legitimately form judgements about how successfully the school transmits the language, and indeed, visitors from the wider Manx-language community are always welcome, not least because they can communicate with the children. When such Manx speakers do come in to look around, they listen to the children speaking Manx and they notice the kind of language on display and in books. The Bunscoil is, in one sense, a community school for the wider Manx Gaelic community and a focus of activity. It doesn't prevent members of this community from being critical however. Several people seem disappointed that the children don't actually *sound* like the old native speakers of Manx, or that they use lots of English forms in their Manx. Both of these factors are true but probably unavoidable. For certain, the Manx emerging from the Bunscoil will not be the classical Manx of the Bible or the late Manx of the native speakers, but something else arising out of these things.

### **So what of the future?**

In September we expect that four of our oldest pupils will go to the secondary school for eleven-to- eighteen year olds at Peel, about three miles away from the Bunscoil. We hope that they will be able to continue some form of Manx there for two to three hours a week, and that they can keep up some links with the Bunscoil. Exactly how this will happen is still being discussed. As you might expect, this is not going to be straightforward, either for the secondary school concerned, or for the people trying to make it happen, but we are determined to try and make Manx a recognized and prestigious subject in secondary schools in the future.

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