

“MRS CLAGUE OF THE NIARBYL”



In 1958, Mona Douglas when writing of her collecting of Manx song and dance mentioned that “[o]n the west side of the Island I found most of my material coming from women” and mentioned as one of two names, a “Mrs Clague of The Niarbyl.” She recalled her in some detail:

Mrs Clague of The Niarbyl was another well-known character. Wife and mother of fishermen, she lived in a thatched cottage on the beach, where in summer she made teas for visitors and told them tales of mermaids and fairies and warning spirits of the storm. She was also a good herb-woman, and though well over seventy when I knew her had hair black and shining as a young girl’s, wound in thick plaits round her shapely head, sparkling, snapping dark eyes, and a body still lithe and slender. She knew many songs and dances, and was always kindly and patient about instructing the persistent youngster who was continually worrying her for details of words, steps and figures.

A rumour in 1938, that the cottage had been condemned and was due to be demolished led to the *Isle of Man Examiner* seemingly hot-footing it to Dalby to see what was going on.... They reported that it was not to be demolished, being in the ownership of Mrs Teare of Ballacooil, who intended to rethatch the cottage and to carry out a number of external repairs. Mrs Clague now lived elsewhere, but kept a number of her personal possessions there and visited it each day. However, she was still running a café at the Niarbyl, though it was separate from the cottage itself: “So Mrs Clague, whose café stands between the cottage and the neat little building which is generally (though mistakenly) referred to as ‘Florrie Forde’s bungalow,’ can look forward to another successful season with a light heart.” Quite what the gravity of the mistake over the correct name of the bungalow was is not made plain.

How long the café carried on for is unclear nor for that matter when it opened for business. There is an advert from 1927, in the *Souvenir of Manx Home-Coming* brochure showing it was at least running then. The 1901 Census finds her living at the Niarbyl, aged 32, with her husband, Henry, a sailor (37), and their three children, William H. (12), Edith M[ay] (6), and Frederick F. (1). All were born in Patrick. No one spoke Manx. In 1891, she was living with her widowed mother, Annie Watterson (43), a charwoman, at Ballacain in Patrick. Married by that date with William aged then just 2, Henry was enumerated onboard of the fishing boat, *Bessy* PL124, bound for the Irish mackerel fishing at Kinsale. The *Examiner* piece from 1938 has her living at the Niarbyl for 65 years, *ie*, supposedly from birth, a clear mistake, as with a mention in 1954, that she was taken there when a child by her mother. It is not clear at present where her mother is living in 1901, but clearly not with her daughter. However, we know that Annie Clague *née* Watterson herself died in 1954, aged 86,

and was buried in Patrick churchyard on 12 September, the funeral leaving from “Westwood” in Dalby at 1 pm. Her husband, Henry, had died much earlier, in 1937, when 74 years old.

There is a photograph of her, taken in 1938 to go along with the *Examiner* article. The quality is not of the best with her in strong shadow, nevertheless, one can make out the “thick plaits round her shapely head” mentioned by Mona. There is no record of what she collected from Annie Clague, or rather, nothing attributed as such to her. It is clear that Mona could not have collected as a child from Clague when she was in her 70s as the ages do not match. Her fieldwork was in the 1920s, when Annie Clague was a little younger and, for that matter, Mona Douglas was a little older....

