

Does the Isle of Man have a natural gas field?

The current debate about drilling for natural gas on the eastern side of the Isle of Man “should be based on the geology” says Dr Dave Quirk of the Manx Geological Survey.

Regardless of the climate change issues around fossil fuels, “there is simply no guarantee that there is gas to be found,” and “any investment to investigate the possibility must be considered very high risk”.

The story starts in 1982 when BP drilled a borehole (exploration well) off the east coast of the Isle of Man. BP was hoping to find a gas field similar to those in Morecambe Bay. The well showed that the prospect they were targeting did not have any gas, but there were some indications of gas at a deeper level, at about 2 kilometres below the seabed, in rocks which have similarities to the Peel Sandstone. This would be something new as there have been no gas fields discovered in rocks of this age in the Irish Sea.

Unfortunately, and despite their best efforts, BP was unable to produce any gas which showed they had not found a field. Therefore, they deemed the well a failure and gave the block back to the UK Government, which owned the seabed at the time.

In 1991 the Isle of Man extended its territorial sea to 12 miles, and consequently the area fell under Manx jurisdiction. Local company, Crogga Limited, was given permission to re-evaluate the area, based on a promise to carry out evaluation work, including a modern form of echo sounding known as a ‘3D seismic survey’. The seismic survey has not been acquired, and the company now says it is unnecessary before drilling a £32 million well. This runs counter to industry good practice and presents extra risks because of the very high pressures encountered at depth when drilling a well.

None of the many oil and gas companies who have reviewed this area have thought it worthwhile investing in gas exploration, partly because of the results of BP’s failed well and partly because old ‘2D seismic’ data does not show anything that looks like a gas field.

“Would I risk my money in drilling for gas in this area?” Dr Quirk was asked. “No I would not, nor anyone else’s money for that matter. It is virtually a stab in the dark and I would certainly not consider it a wise investment.”

