



Heritage Newsletter



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Potatoes from Portrush By Dr Peter Wilson

I don't think there is a variety of potato called 'Portrush' but there is no doubt that a lot of potatoes are grown in town gardens and in the adjacent farmland. In or around 1860 potatoes were also grown on Ramore Head and Large Skerry. The originator of this attempt to diversify local land use was Thomas Black.

In his book *Portrush: The port on the promontory* author Hugh McGratten explains that Thomas Black created employment for local men and that cultivating potatoes was one such project. The Skerry attempt was initially unsuccessful, but later, in October 1861, five acres of potatoes were harvested and auctioned on the island. They were known as Skerry Blacks.

For how many years Skerry Blacks were grown is not mentioned by Hugh, nor does there seem to be much information available about the Ramore Head potato fields. However, as the photograph below shows, potato rigs were quite extensive and now, some 160 years later, they are still clearly visible whether you are up in the air or walking along the tarmac pathway.



Photo 1 Google Earth image of the Ramore Head potato rigs – on both sides of the pathway that runs along the headland.

Their degree of preservation strongly suggests that they were not just used for a single season or two; rather a lengthy period of annual potato production was likely. What is also curious is why the ground was not levelled when potato production ceased or when landscaping took place. It may



be the case that potatoes were grown on Ramore Head in more recent times and I wonder if was one such time was World War 2. It would be interesting to know.



Photo 2 Potato rigs on Ramore Head

Ramore Head is a small but interesting area of the town. The dolerite bedrock played a key role in a major geological debate in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; the rock has also been quarried in order to build the harbour; and during World War 2 its summit hosted a radio station designed to intercept radio communications between enemy ships in the North Atlantic.

These coded messages were then forwarded to Bletchley Park. Growing potatoes might not seem very significant in comparison with these other events but it's another (small) piece of the fascinating jigsaw called Portrush.

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Dr Peter Wilson for this excellent contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters.

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