

Remembering Castle Erin by Frances Wilson

After reading in The Chronicle that the site formerly occupied by Castle Erin is finally to be redeveloped I thought it might be interesting to look back at the early years of this imposing building which dominated the skyline of the West Bay from 1892 until 2006 through Victorian to Elizabethan times.

The Golf and Hydropathic Hotel, as it was originally known, was built between the railway line and the beach with the aim of catering for the two types of clientele visiting the resort and looking for high-class accommodation - namely golfers and sea bathers. His Honour Judge Orr wrote in praise of Portrush for combining these two pastimes as - "a celebrated watering place and one of the best golfing centres in the country and resorted to in summer time by tourists from all parts of the United Kingdom".



An early postcard showing the West Strand and Golf Hotel.

Lawrence Collection from the National Library of Ireland

There was a desire amongst landowners to develop bathing resorts such as Portrush by promoting rail travel and building hotels and promenades with the aim of encouraging visitors to benefit both in mind and body. References to Portrush including phrases such as the 'Queen of Watering Places' and the 'Irish Brighton' were designed to show that it was of a high standard.

Hydropathy was very popular, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, with wealthy Victorians who saw it as providing a cure for their many ailments. It was defined as the use of water for treating diseases and soothing pains either internally by drinking or externally by steam baths or sea bathing. Portrush, with its sandy beaches, provided an ideal setting for sea bathing and sought to capitalise on this fact. In this it was aided by the arrival of the railway in 1855 which brought in many suitable clients and led to a doubling of the population during what was referred to as 'the bathing season'.

The opening of the Golf Club in 1888 also provided a demand for high-class accommodation from those wanting to stay in the area whilst playing. Royal patronage was granted to the course in 1892 through HRH The Duke of York and the course soon became the largest and most prosperous golf club in Ireland. The Hotel was ideally situated adjacent to the station and the golf course and a bridge over the railway line gave golfers easy access to the course which at that time was located in a triangle between the present day Portrush Primary School, the Dunluce Centre and the Dunluce Avenue Car Park. The golf links were soon being referred to as the 'St Andrew's of Ireland'.



The Golf Hotel, Railway Station and bridge. Lawrence Collection from the National Library of Ireland

The first edition of *The Belfast and Province of Ulster Directory* to mention the Hotel is that of 1895 (the previous edition in 1892 was the year that the Hotel was built) and includes the following statement:-

"Year after year handsome and substantial buildings are replacing the rude dwellings which hitherto sheltered the hardy fisherman, and splendid hotels, the latest being the new Golf and Hydropathic, affording every comfort and accommodation to the weary invalid or those 'on pleasure bent' have been erected in various parts of the town."

It is listed as the 'New Golf Hotel' under the management of Thomas Murray and is one of 10 hotels in the resort at that time.

HOTELS.	
Bayview Temperance—	Miss Bannon
Eglinton—	James Massey
Lansdowne—	Robert Lee, proprietor
Londonderry Arms—	D. M'Culla
New Golf Hotel—	Thos. Murray, proprietor
Northern Counties—	M. Hamilton, manager
Portrush Hotel—	Miss Dunn, proprietress
Railway Hotel—	W. Ferguson
Ramore Hotel—	Wm. Hunter.
The Osborne Family and Commercial Tem-	perance Hotel

Mr Murray continued in management although it is referred to as the Golf Hotel in subsequent Directories until the 1907 edition when Basil McCrea is named as the proprietor and there are now 19 hotels in the resort. In the 1910 edition there are 24 hotels with the Golf Hotel under the management of Miss M'Crea who was still there in 1919, according to the Directory for that year - the last version available online.

The Hotel was certainly 'handsome and substantial' as described in the Directory and also 'afforded every comfort' as can be seen in these photos of the exterior and interior.



The ornate exterior of the Hotel
Lawrence Collection from the National Library of Ireland



The Hotel drawing room
Lawrence Collection from the National Library of Ireland

The start of World War II saw an end to the demand for high-class holiday accommodation and the Hotel was closed. It did not remain empty for long as following the bombing of Belfast, the building was requisitioned and the Ministry of Education re-housed there for the duration. After the War the building was taken over by the Christian Endeavour movement as a holiday venue for youth groups.



Castle Erin in more recent times showing the extension at the left

Its name was changed, in line with their procedure to call all properties by two words beginning with the letters C and E, to Castle Erin. Their other two Irish properties were Carrig Eden in Greystones (Co Wicklow) and Clar Ellagh in Kilkee (Co Clare).

Castle Erin was extended to provide space for conferences as can be seen in the final photo. Christian Endeavour sold the property in 2006 and it was demolished shortly afterwards thus bringing to an end over a century of providing accommodation to many generations of visitors to Portrush.

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

July 4th 2020