



Prominent Portrush Men at the beginning of the 20th Century Part 1 by Robert Corbett

In 1909 an English publisher, W.T. Pike & Co., published an outstanding book titled *Belfast and the Province of Ulster in the 20th Century*, as part of their 'New Century Series'. Consisting of over 600 pages in total, it presented a wealth of information on the development of Ulster and a superb collection of illustrations. Approximately half of the book was devoted to contemporary biographies, accompanied by photographs, of around 900 distinguished Ulstermen edited by William Thomas Pike, who was based in Brighton.

At the time of its publication the value of the information contained within its covers was recognised. Today it remains a valuable source for local historians. Using information from this book, it is possible to create a snapshot of some prominent Portrush men in the first decade of the twentieth century. This article focuses on those who were leading lights in the commercial life of the town at the time, but subsequent ones will feature individuals who made a significant contribution in other spheres.

One of the leading businessmen in the town was Captain Frederick Henry Watt, a coal merchant, who lived at Westport House. Born in 1849 at Gravesend, Kent, he was the son of John Robert Watt, Portrush. F.H Watt received his education at Coleraine Academy and Coleraine Academical Institution.

He served as a Portrush Town Commissioner and as a councillor on its successor body, Portrush Urban District Council. Watt holds the distinction of being the last chairman of the Town Commissioners, dissolved in 1898, and first Chairman of the Council, established in 1899. He also served as a Justice of the Peace and director of Portrush Harbour Company.



Mr. F. H. Watt, J.P.



Watt and Sons' Coal Office now Portrush Yacht Club; Photo Hurricane Debbie 1961

A committed Orangeman, Watt was a member of Portrush Purple Heroes L.O.L. No. 742, becoming Worshipful Master, and held high office as Grand Master of the County Londonderry Grand Orange Lodge and a Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland. F.H. Watt married late in life, taking as his wife in 1903 Elizabeth Worsley, the only daughter of James Hogg Barnett, Dublin, and granddaughter of Rev. Dr John Barnett, Moneymore.

Another leading business man in Portrush was Joseph Henry Caskey, who lived at Antrim Gardens. The son of Joseph Warden Caskey, Coleraine, he was born at Cookstown, Co. Tyrone, on 31 July 1845 and was educated at Cookstown Academy. In 1876 he became the head of the Caskey & Company, who were general drapers and fancy goods importers. Established in 1866, the firm had premises in Main Street and Bath Street, Portrush.



Mr. J. H. Caskey.



Caskey's Store on Main Street

Caskey married Mary Gill in 1874, and they had three sons and three daughters. Mary died in 1889. J. H. Caskey served on Portrush Urban District Council and was its chairman in 1907. He represented the Council on the Coleraine Board of Guardians, who administered the Irish Poor Law, including the workhouse. Caskey died on 7 August 1916.



Mr. W. W. Hill.

Although he lived in Coleraine, a successful businessman in Portrush at this time was William Woods Hill, the senior partner in the firm of Hill Brothers who had drapery stores in both towns. He was born in 1867 at Lisachrin, Garvagh, the son of John Hill, and was educated at Moyletragh National School and Kilrea. W.W. Hill served as a councillor on Coleraine Urban District Council, was a member of the committee of Coleraine Technical School and a member of the committee of First Coleraine Presbyterian Church. He had extensive business relations with South Africa. Hill travelled widely, and his recreations included motoring, golf, bowls and shooting.



To conclude it is worth noting that surprisingly there is no entry for Henry Hamilton, who founded The White House department store in Portrush in 1891, in the book published by W.T. Pike & Co. in 1909. Anyone wishing to find out about this colourful, enterprising and successful businessman should consult Hugh McGrattan's book, *Portrush: The Port on the Promontory* (Ballycastle, 2015), which includes a chapter entitled '1891: The Remarkable Mr. Hamilton and his White House'. It should be remembered that when William Thomas Pike wrote the entries about the individuals featured in this article they were still alive. Further research therefore needs to be undertaken to complete their stories and, in addition, compile biographies of many other Portrush people, particularly women, who made a significant contribution to the development and life of the town. To paraphrase a well-known saying, a local historian's work is never done!

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

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