



Heritage Newsletter

Issue 6

A New Station for Portrush by John Moore

In October 1888 the Belfast & Northern Counties Railway, who had by now had acquired the major North Eastern railways, appointed Berkeley Deane Wise as their Resident Engineer. Wise was a talented and renowned civil engineer who carried out major improvements across the network and introduced important safety measures including new somersault signalling and a tablet system to ensure single usage of any section of track. He was also a talented architect of the calibre of Charles Lanyon although their styles differed greatly.

Wise planned a completely new railway layout and station for Portrush to cope with the massive increase in traffic, especially during holiday times. Three platforms were to be provided, each of 600 feet in length, double that of the original single platform from 1855. A train shed providing effective weather protection was provided over all three platforms for 200 feet and a Grand Concourse or General Hall was to be constructed to provide all the offices and circulation space required for the handling of large numbers of passengers.

Essential services such as water towers, coaling stations and a new locomotive turntable on the ground behind Salisbury Terrace were provided as was a new modern signal box, operated for many years by Charlie Morrow, and, in 1895 a Goods Shed, platform and yard were added with access from Eglinton Street.



The new station opened in the spring of 1893 having been constructed by McLaughlin & Harvey Ltd. of Belfast. Together with the new signalling and trackwork it had cost more than £10,000.

The new building was truly impressive and certainly one of the most handsome railway buildings in Ireland. The style was Mock Tudor in stucco painted black and white on a red brick base. A well-proportioned clock tower rose to a height of fifty feet with four dials each five feet in diameter. Ornate glazing provided shafts and washes of coloured light within the building and some of this remains today as a reminder of that time.

The new platforms could easily accommodate the longer trains now arriving in Portrush both as scheduled services and day excursions bringing “trippers” for a day on the beach or to special events.

The General Hall, separated from the platforms by elegant wrought iron railings and platform gates, was 100 feet long by 60 feet wide and provided with all the usual offices splendidly furnished. With its high open ceiling it formed a well-proportioned and impressive space to welcome visitors to Portrush.

Of special note were the two charmingly odd kiosks for the sale of refreshments, sweets, tobacco, newspapers and similar essentials of railway travel. These were designed in a Tudor Cottage style with pitched, tiled roofs and leaded glazing. Only one of these survives today in the Transport Museum at Cultra.

Time was off the essence with railway travel. Strict timetables always had to be adhered to and it was essential that both railway staff and travellers were aware of the correct time. To this end a spectacular long case clock was provided within the General Hall in a position where it could be seen from both the Hall and the platforms.

The clock was some seventeen and a half feet tall and had two faces, front and back, each three feet in diameter. Reputed to be the tallest grandfather clock in the world it had an eight-day mechanical movement with a single weight that was wound from the face. The maker's name, inscribed on the clock face, is



'Sharman D. Neill' of Belfast and the clock was dated 1892 on the centre wheel. The pendulum was some 44" long and weighed 14lbs. and the striking gong was 40lbs in weight. The clock was removed from the station in 1971 when the station closed for business and was rescued from scrap in 1984. It has now been restored and returned to the area where it is now temporarily displayed in the entrance hall of Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council office in Coleraine awaiting a move back to Portrush. This clock lives on in many memories of meetings, leavings, and romances which started or finished "under the station clock".



The Station also had a licensed café and restaurant with seating for 250 to 300 people with an open balcony overlooking the Pleasure Gardens and West Bay which were also owned by the railway company. Underneath this were large cellars which were the central stores for liquor for all the BNCR railway hotels, dining cars and refreshment rooms. Some 90 by 30 feet in size it could accommodate up to 300 diners. Throughout its life it performed many functions, as a café and restaurant and a venue for meetings. By 1924 it was being used as a concert hall with a stage at one end and during the Second World War American soldiers used it as a canteen and recreation space. In later years it saw duty as a school meals canteen amongst other things. By the 1970s it had become unusable and was demolished.

Berkeley Beane Wise's fine building was the gateway to Portrush for vast numbers of visitors. Arriving through the monumental General Hall travellers were decanted into a large open station square where they were met by many forms of onward transport. Guests of the railway's own grand hotel, The Northern Counties, were met by the hotel's carriage at the main entrance to the station from whence they were transported in some style and comfort to that hotel. This carriage always had priority within the station square and was the only vehicle permitted to park immediately outside the station entrance. For many years the railway company made a point of closing the station square to all non-railway vehicles for one day each year to maintain their sole ownership and to prevent any rights-of-way being established over it. Sadly, as time marched on, train travel was overtaken by the motor vehicles and the need for a large station in Portrush decreased. By the end of the 1960s the writing was on the wall – Portrush railway



station would close. Then the arrival outside Coleraine of the New University of Ulster adjacent to the railway line provided a lifeline. A commuter service from Portrush to Coleraine was established with new halts being provided at Dhu Varren and the University for the convenience of students and a utilitarian seasonal station at Portrush. The dilapidated station was sold off to make a new life as a nightclub and amusement arcade.

Thankfully the major part of the building was maintained in its original state. It stands today as a landmark in the town with its tall clock tower still one of the first things seen by visitors to Portrush. Thanks in large part to the staging of the Open Golf Championship in 2019 trains now arrive at a new station and three platforms are once again available for use. However, they remain a mere shadow of the original station and very much over-shadowed by that fine building.

Our thanks to John for this excellent contribution.

Portrush Heritage Group April 25th 2020