

The British Legion: Supporting those who served (by Hugh McGrattan)

THE earliest organisation concerned with the welfare of Portrush veterans returning from the battlefields of World War One was set up even before the war ended in November 1918. The town had responded nobly to the call to arms, as sadly indicated by the number of young men of the district who died in the conflict.

The names of 53 are recorded on the Portrush War Memorial as having been killed during the four years of warfare. In fact, it is believed that at least 78 died during service with the armed forces between August 1914 and November 1918.

The exact number who volunteered for military service is not known, but without doubt a valuable contribution was made to the war effort by a town with a permanent population of only around 1,500. Noted war historian Robert Thompson, in the third of his renowned series of *Heroes* books, declared that for a town of its size the number of men who volunteered was “staggering” and there could be no question that Portrush had played its part. Portrush people, he said, should be “very proud of their town’s record of courage and sacrifice”.



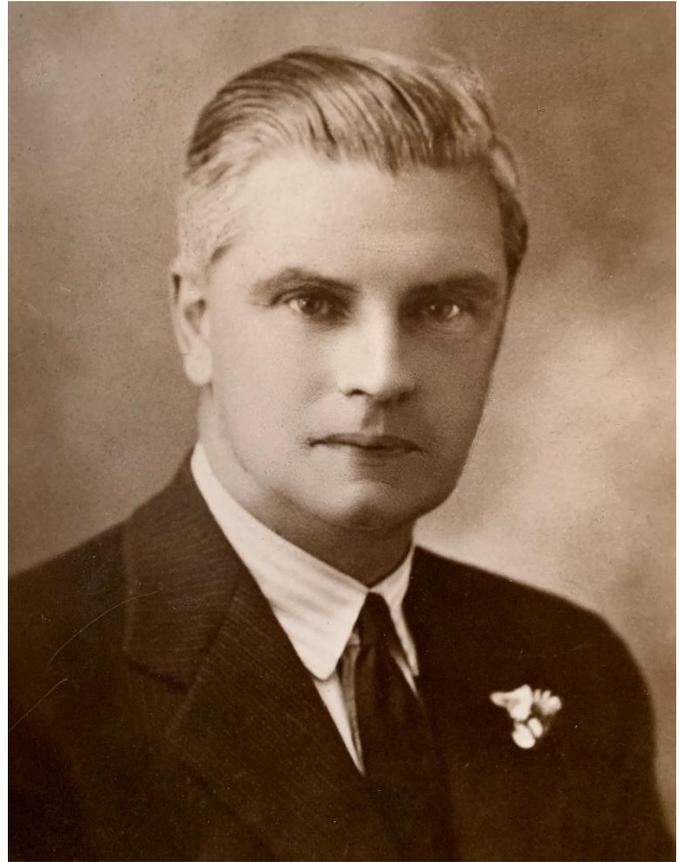
Portrush War Memorial

By the autumn of 1918, the war was at long last moving wearily towards a conclusion and some servicemen had already returned from active service. On the evening of Monday, 16 September, a meeting of these discharged and demobilised soldiers and sailors was held in the Town Hall for the purpose of forming a Portrush Post of the Comrades of the Great War.

The main speaker was W.H. Atkins, organiser for the North of Ireland of this recently-formed organisation, the aims of which he explained to his audience. The meeting then unanimously resolved that a Post should be set up in the town and every discharged man present joined up.

Local Hero

First Captain-Commandant of the Post was former King's Royal Rifles warrant officer Harry Hamilton, a son of the late Henry Hamilton of White House fame. He had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his gallant efforts to save two of his men who were lying wounded in no man's land near the German trenches. Sadly, both died before he could bring them back to safety. He himself was so severely wounded by an explosive bullet during his rescue attempt that he had huge difficulty dragging himself back to the British lines. After a period of hospitalisation, he was honourably discharged from the Army.



Sergeant Major Harry Hamilton DCM: Photograph courtesy of Mr Rory Hamilton

Appointed secretary of the new Portrush Post was James E. Gilfillan of 2 Mark Street and R.J. Taggart was chosen as treasurer. Elected as committee members were Tom Fleming, John Quinn, H. Stewart and S. Henry.

Thus, was an organisation committed to the welfare of ex-servicemen (and ultimately women) speedily established in the town. It was soon to be transformed into the British Legion when, in 1921, the three ex-service organisations set up in the aftermath of the war came together. The Comrades amalgamated with the National Association of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers and the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers.

The British Legion has remained an active element of the town's charitable activities ever since, becoming the Royal British Legion in the 1970s.



Initially, it had a permanent home in the little redbrick hall at Hamilton Place. In 1947, however, a significant step was taken by the Portrush legionnaires when they acquired the fine building at Dunluce Street which had been built in 1892 as the Royal Portrush Golf Clubhouse.



Former Royal Portrush Golf Clubhouse

It was there, in 1948, that I first became aware of the activities of the British Legion, when my father, who had just completed nearly 30 years in the Royal Navy, was appointed caretaker at the recently acquired hall. We were to live for two years in a ground floor apartment in the building, which was little changed from its existence as the Golf Club.

Exciting

For a ten-year-old who had been born in a little two-up two-down house in old Ramore Street, the Hall was an exciting prospect – especially on Sundays when it was closed to members and I had the unofficial run of the building! There were two billiard rooms, one on the ground floor which was constantly in use by the young men of the town six days a week, the other a much grander affair where important competitions might be played. In addition, table tennis could be set up in the main hall. At this time there was no bar, many of the Legion's local officers opposing such provision, although a special licence was granted once a year for the annual Smoker.

The most prominent member of the British Legion at this time was undoubtedly W.R. Knox, who had served in two world wars and been awarded the Military Medal. Although originally from Bushmills, he was a man totally committed to Portrush and its people, with the British Legion and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution among the many organisations with which he was closely associated. He had topped the poll and chaired the Urban District Council every year since the 1920s and was held in much awe by small boys such as myself. But I got to know him well in later years and found him to be a man of great kindness and generosity to whom Portrush owes a great deal.



WR Knox CBE MM JP

There were many ex-service men living in the town at that time, veterans of both world wars. The Legion Hall (or Clubrooms as it was often described) bustled with activity several nights each month, and not just with members of the Legion branch but also with the ladies of the Women's Section, who had their own meeting rooms. Their gatherings invariably ended with tea, sandwiches and cakes, which were deposited before proceedings started in the large cool pantry attached to our apartment. This was linked directly to the hall above by a small lift in which the food and pots of tea brewed by my mother could be laboriously raised to the floor above. I didn't mind helping with this hand-operated delivery system as there was always a generous box of surplus goodies at the end of the night for the kitchen staff!

DUNLUCE STREET IN 1950

THE Portrush British Legion Hall, back in 1950, marked the end of Dunluce Street, which was basically a cul-de-sac. It stood on the very edge of the Big Triangle, a 46-acre remnant of the original Royal Portrush links, which had now moved completely across the Bushmills Road to the sandhill area behind the East Strand.



Other large buildings adjacent to the Legion premises were the old Masonic Hall, the 1924 Orange Hall, the Technical School and the recently constructed Telephone Exchange (now the Medical Centre). There was still an air raid shelter at the back of the Tech. The broken-up concrete from several others was being used as hard fill at the back of Golf Terrace. The opposite side of the street included the Ulster Transport Authority bus station at the Victoria Street corner, a garage (Moore's, I think), the old electricity power station (now dubbed the Dunluce Hall and occupied by two end-to-end badminton courts) and the Council-owned Fire Station (complete with 1934 Dennis fire engine).

The area in the middle of the wide thoroughfare was still un-treated and during the summer dozens of UTA tour buses were often parked overnight on the hard sandy surface. The "new" road across the Triangle did not exist and the Primary School, apartments and Fire Station had yet to be built.

I recall Dunluce Street with certain childhood affection, for it was my home and play area for two years – courtesy, of course, of the British Legion. The area has changed vastly in 70 years. However, in 1950 it would still have been recognised by the pioneering golfers of earlier years, for it still hovered between what must have been for them an exciting era of anticipated expansion and the busy business community it has become today.

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

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