



# Heritage Newsletter



Issue 39

## Portrush 1857 – 1907 : 50 Golden Years

By John Moore

### Portrush in 1857

Portrush began to develop as a seaside holiday resort during the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: aided in no small part by the entrepreneurial talents of people such as Dr John Boyd who built the Antrim Arms Hotel in 1837, Miss Rebecca Rice who built a series of fine houses on her terraced land at Craigvara and the landlord of Portrush, The Earl of Antrim, who sought to improve the living conditions of his tenants, the people of Portrush, and no doubt improve his revenue from the town.

The completion of the new harbour in 1835 attracted passenger traffic from as far afield as Liverpool and Glasgow and the completion of the railway from Belfast and Londonderry in 1855 provided a reasonably comfortable and economical means of transport for both the better off and the working man. Sea bathing and salt-laden clean air were becoming recognised for their health benefits and would become progressively more so as the Victorian age progressed.

Lord Antrim commissioned two masterful maps of Portrush under the grand title “Isometrical Perspective of the Town of Portrush in the County of Antrim, Ireland, the Property of The Earl of Antrim Shewing the Building Lots to be Let and the Description of Buildings Proposed to be Let”. One showed the town as then existing and the other as the Earl envisaged its development: both maps are dated 1857. This was to be the masterplan for the Portrush of the future.



Portrush in 1857 - D2977/36/6/13A 'By courtesy of deputy-keeper of public records, PRONI'

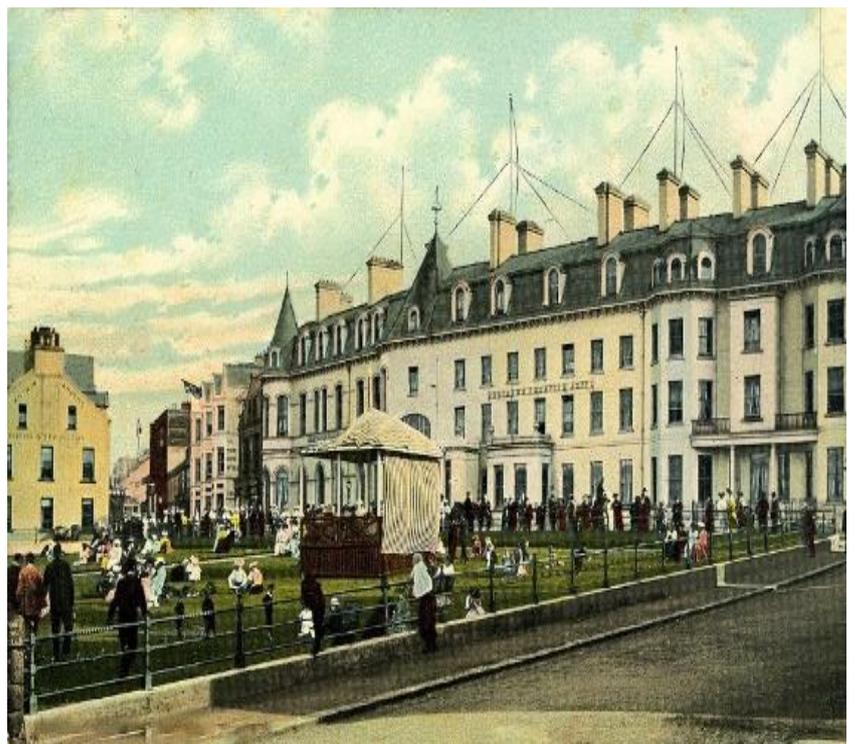


Proposed development D2977/36/6/13A 'By courtesy of deputy-keeper of public records, PRONI'

## Next 50 Years

The following 50 years would see Portrush increase in both size and population as the burgeoning tourist trade brought new buildings and jobs. The Railway Station, new in 1855, would expand from a single track, one uncovered platform and a longitudinal building housing all the necessary offices to a grand Mock-Tudor style edifice in black and white with a cathedral-like General Concourse. The Railway Company also owned the land to the seaward side of the new station and they developed this as a Pleasure Grounds complete with bandstand: a place where people could promenade, be entertained by local and military bands, enjoy a Pierrot Show or join in religious meetings.

By 1883 the Railway Company has also purchased the Antrim Arms Hotel and were in the process of transforming it into a veritable palace of luxury with opulent public rooms and first class service. Initially advertised as the Belfast and Northern Counties Hotel this was soon shortened to The Northern Counties Hotel under which name it would continue for over 100 years. Stretching southwards from the Northern Counties Hotel Church Street, later renamed Main Street would see the growth of high quality shops, many with fine Victorian and Edwardian shopfronts, catering to locals and tourists alike.

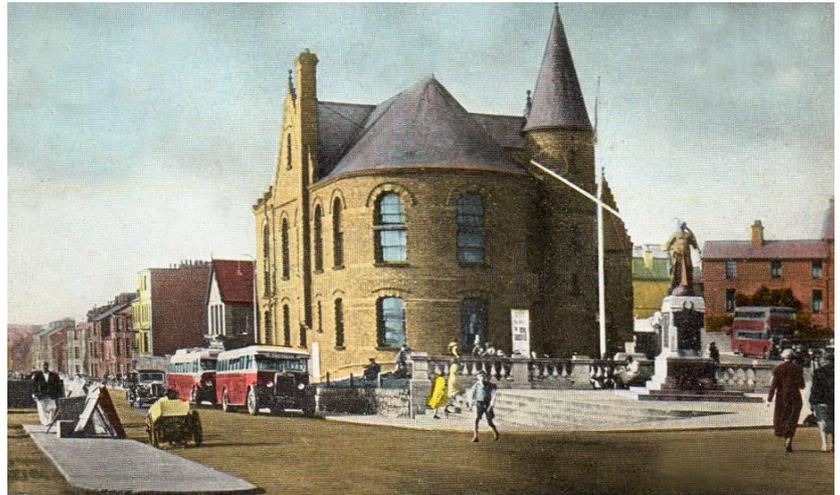


Northern Counties Hotel courtesy John Moore Collection

The White House, owned by Henry Hamilton, was the flagship store being a department store on the American style opened in 1891. Their mail order business attracted customers from across the world and such was the volume of mail generated that a new purpose built Post Office and Sorting Office had to be opened on Causeway Street in 1903.

Main Street also included three of the main churches in the town, Methodist being the earliest having opened in 1831, Presbyterian in 1843 and Anglican also in 1843. St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church on Causeway Street opened in 1851.

1872 saw the opening of the new Assembly Rooms at the junction of Kerr Street and Mark Street: a building which would become the Town Hall and remains today as a landmark in the town. Regular concerts, both amateur and professional, entertained local audiences whilst a series of bazaars endeavoured to reduce the debt on the building.



Town Hall courtesy John Moore Collection

Through time many of the grand Victorian houses, and many more of the less grand houses, became Private Hotels, Guesthouses and Boarding Houses accommodating the ever-increasing numbers of holidaymakers arriving in Portrush by sea and rail from across the Kingdom, the Empire and the world.

Wonders such as the Giant's Causeway had long attracted those of an enquiring mind for scientific study but with the addition of the legend of Finn McCoul and the fertile imaginations of local guides the Causeway became a magnet for holidaymakers seeking diversion and entertainment.

In 1883 the provision of a unique form of transport to the Causeway in the shape of The Giant's Causeway, Portrush & Bush Valley Railway & Tramway Co. Ltd., the world's first hydro-electric powered tramway and at that time the longest electric tramway made it much easier to travel to and from the Causeway: with the added attraction of travelling on such an amazing form of transport along a stunning section of coastline.



Causeway Tram at station courtesy John Moore Collection

The formation of the County Golf Club in 1888 brought a new attraction to Portrush. Golf was a rapidly developing sport and the new course, described as “one of the finest Golf Courses of the three Kingdoms” brought a new tranche of visitors to the town. By 1892 Royal patronage had allowed a renaming of the Club to The Royal County Golf Club and in 1895 to Royal Portrush Golf Club.



**Royal Portrush Golf Club courtesy John Moore Collection**

Thus by 1907 the 50 Golden Years had seen Portrush develop from a fairly quiet small town into a thriving holiday resort full of grand houses and hotels, fine shops, one of the finest railway Stations in Ireland, daily sailing from Greenock to Portrush and all the accompanying sources of entertainment and relaxation a body could desire. Those 50 years had seen the Earl of Antrim’s grand plan come to fruition in large part and to be improved upon and expanded far beyond that which even he had envisaged.

Our thanks to John for this excellent contribution to our Heritage Newsletters.  
February 27th 2021