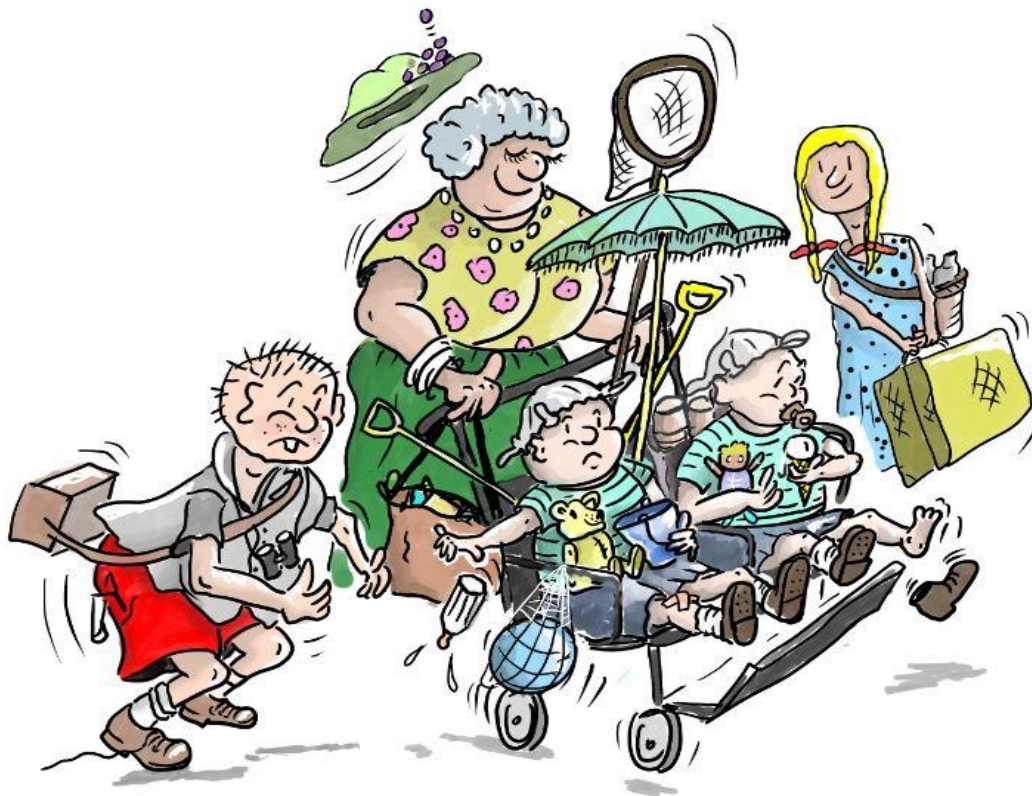


The Excursion

by Kate Murphy

We are going to Portrush on the excursion train with Aunt Maggie for a day out. We board the train in Antrim and she is to join us in Ballymena. It is quite an undertaking for my mother to get myself, my brother and three year old twins to the station and on to the train. The double pushchair is big and clumsy and, as well as holding the twins, it is hung with bags containing all the paraphernalia that young children need on a day away from home.



Drawing by Brian Willis

At Ballymena station a huge crowd is pressing to join the train but there is no sign of Aunt Maggie. Where is she? What if she can't get a ticket? How will we manage if she doesn't get on? My mother, in her cotton summer dress is anxiously hanging out the window and I see her face light up with relief as she waves and calls, 'Over here Maggie. Over here.' Aunt Maggie struggles on. She has more bags and sweets for everyone.

There are no seats and I squeeze up beside my brother Barney to make room for her.

The train is big and noisy and puffs out great clouds of dense smoke. The sheep and sometimes the cows run away from us as we chug through their fields. We are still a long way from the sea, about an hour, but we watch to see who can see it first. The twins fall asleep on my mother's and Aunt Maggie's knees.



They don't know what the sea is. I don't think Barney remembers either; he's only four. And *there* it is, and it goes on forever with little boats on it, and there is sun and yellow sand. I'm very excited but it is not easy to get everyone off the train. The twins don't like being wakened and are crying.

The station is huge and full of people all pushing to get out through the little gates. I'm afraid I will be swept away. My mother says if I get lost I'm to go and stand below the big clock, but I don't want to get lost so I hold on tightly to the pram.

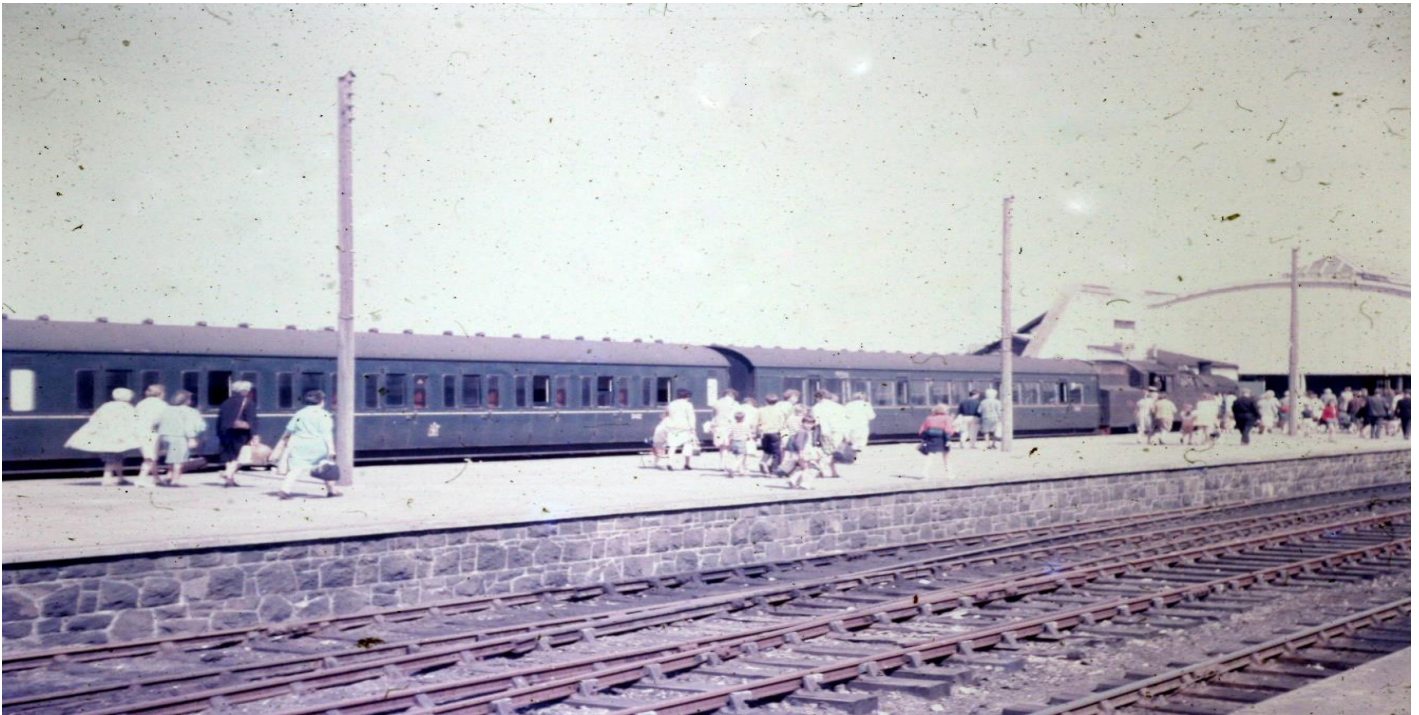


Photo courtesy of Canon John McKegney

And then we're free. The beach is enormous, the sea is cold and I get a ride on a donkey. The sandwiches have sand in them but I don't mind. The twins have fallen in the sea and soaked their last set of clothes. They are dressed in a blanket and my mother's cardigan until their clothes which are hung over the pram, dry in the sun. The tide is coming in. Barney has made a moat round his sandcastle for the sea to fill but is upset because the castle is washed away too.

Then Aunt Maggie suggests that we go to a café for tea. It's a real café with tablecloths and waitresses in black dresses with tiny little white aprons and hats.

I'm going to have a café when I grow up.

We are getting afternoon tea with scones and a selection of fancy cakes. There are eight cakes; I choose the one with the pink icing. It's hard and isn't as nice as it looks so I eat a butterfly bun as well and feel sick.

There are two scones left.

'Eat them into you,' Aunt Maggie says, 'And finish the cream in that jug.'



She pours it into Barney's cup. The twins are feeding each other, and the floor, with bits of bun. The nice waitress who says 'Madame' is looking across and is watching us.

'Put them scones in that bag,' says Aunt Maggie. 'You'll be glad of them for a cup of tea when you go home tonight.'

'The waitress is watching', I whisper.

'That's all right. We paid for them.'

I don't look at the waitress anymore. I know she is looking at me. As we straggle out of the café and head for the train station I see her out of the tail of my eye as she reaches for a floor brush to repair the damage. Because I am not looking where I'm going, I fall down the step and graze my knee, but my tired mother has little sympathy for me. The train is not so crowded on the way home. The twins are able to lie down on the seats in their damp clothes and sleep, and Barney, propped against my mother, puts his thumb in his mouth and drifts off too.



Photo courtesy of Canon John McKegney

'Well, child, did you enjoy your day out?' Aunt Maggie asks.

'Yes thank you,' I say but I close my eyes and think about it so they won't ask me any more questions. When I have my café there won't be any customers like Aunt Maggie. And children who make a mess of the floor won't be allowed in!

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Kate for this lovely story. 13th March 2021