

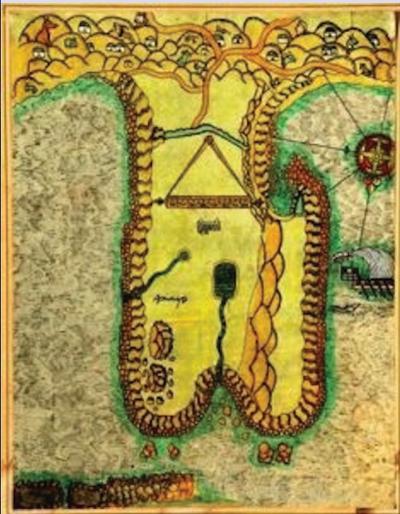
THE HARBOUR

This adventure tracks Portrush harbour's history and its importance for industry, tourism and leisure in the local area. So, whether you want to find out about exporting rocks, the famous Scotch boats ferrying hundreds of tourists every day or the Yacht Club, this is the topic for you!

The History of the Harbour



The earliest depiction of a harbour at Portrush appears on the 1580 "Swift" map of Portrush Peninsula.



This was a rocky inlet at the southern end of Ramore Head and sheltered from Northerly and North-easterly winds by the massive bulk of the headland. This inlet was later developed as a more accessible harbour and improved by the addition of wooden jetties and steps. It is today what we know as the Old Dock.



Pilgrim Steps 1



On the wall of the Old Dock adjacent to Kerr Street Brae you will see a number of protruding stones with flat top surfaces: these are the Pilgrim Steps which take their name from the emigrants who descended them and crowded onto small boats, clutching their worldly possessions before boarding a tall sailing ship which they hoped would take them to a new country where they would make their fortune.

Emigrants may also have been taken from Port-an-Dhu, an inlet on the east shore, across the narrow channel to the Skerries Road where they boarded the tall sailing ships to take them across the Atlantic. The passengers on these large ocean vessels then endured weeks at sea before they reached Philadelphia, New Castle (Delaware), New York and Charleston in America. The ships then returned to Belfast or Londonderry, packed with profitable cargo such as fish, whale products, livestock, salt meat and timber. New England also built many ships for Irish and Scottish merchants.



The term 'pilgrim' is usually a religious term, where someone will travel to a religious place as a symbol of their faith or in order to experience a religious journey. These travellers were known as 'pilgrims', as the earliest of the ships, in the 18th century, carried persecuted Presbyterians fleeing Ireland in search of religious freedom in the New World.

North Pier Dock 2

Growing Industrial Needs

During the medieval period the harbour would have been used by many of the Spanish and French fishermen fishing local waters to provide essential seafood for the populations of these countries.

It is also known that during this period considerable trade was carried on between the North Coast of Ireland and many other continental European countries including several of the Baltic nations. In the eighteen century Portrush had become an important port for importing and exporting cargo for merchants in the nearby town of Coleraine. Whilst Coleraine did have its own harbour this was to be reached by crossing a shifting sand bar at the mouth of the River Bann and then navigating that river up to the town. Neither was easy in good conditions and with a high tide but in bad weather and with low water the task became virtually impossible.

In 1826 a group of Coleraine merchants and Principal Landowners came together to finance and construct a new harbour at Portrush. The eminent engineer, John Rennie, reported in 1803 that the only site that he could discover was within the West Bay at Portrush. Having obtained the necessary Act of Parliament and Royal Assent to the setting up of Portrush harbour Company 21 June 1827 work was started without delay.

The basalt rock used to construct the two piers was blasted from Ramore Head completely removing Crannagh Hill and from the west facing cliffs in the area behind Kerr Street. The original plan was quickly achieved well within budget and the engineer, now Sir John Rennie, persuaded the company to adopt a revised scheme which would result in the much larger harbour we see today.

At this point some 100,000 tons of rock had been torn from the headland and placed in the two piers. By 1829 ships were using the new harbour and in December Sir John noted that the north pier was now 402 feet (122.5 metres) long and the south pier 230 feet (70.1 metres) long. By 1835 the new harbour was complete.

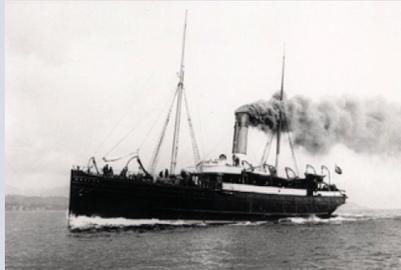
Over time the harbour would see many changes in its use. The area left by the removal of Crannagh Hill would become a coal yard, then home to an RAF Marine Craft Unit and finally the location of Waterworld, a council owned indoor water play park. The south pier would become home to bathing boxes, diving boards, steps and two tethered rafts.

Local entrepreneurs would set up businesses hiring out rowing boats to holidaymakers or providing refreshments to those using the beach and harbour from the "Teas & Ices" shop on the south pier (now rebuilt and operated as Babushka).

Cargoes of many sorts would be imported and exported, principal among the exports being crushed basalt stone from Craighulliar Quarry. Passenger carrying boats from Scotland and England would transport thousands of holidaymakers and day trippers to and from Portrush and a container shipping company, "Anglo-Irish Transport" would operate between Portrush and Preston, during the 1960s. A fleet of fishing boats, initially sail powered but later diesel engine powered, would operate from moorings in the harbour with their catches being eagerly awaited and landed on the north pier.

Passenger Ships

From the 1830's steam ships had been bringing tourists from Scotland to the north coast of Ireland with cruises to Londonderry and the Giant's Causeway being particularly popular. A regular weekly steamer service was established in 1822 from Glasgow to Londonderry with wooden paddle-wheel steamers calling at five ports en route, including Portrush. In 1845 the Port Rush Steam Navigation Company started a service between Portrush and Liverpool and through time regular communication was established with such places as Oban, Troon, Morecambe and the Clyde.



Above: "Scotch" Steamer Azalea

This rapidly elevated Portrush from being a small unimportant fishing village to a popular resort. The increasing popularity of sea bathing, with even Queen Victoria partaking of this healthy practice, and the proximity to the Giant's Causeway lead to Portrush becoming a major tourist resort with promotional headlines such as "The Queen of Ulster Watering Places" and "The Brighton of the North".



Above: Arrival of the Scotch Boat

Commonly referred to locally as the "Scotch Boats" a number of steamers plied the route between Glasgow, Ardrossan and the Clyde Estuary generally and Portrush for nearly eighty years. Perhaps the best known ships were those of the Laird Line, in particular the Hazel which was purpose built for the route and with a speed of 19 knots could do a round trip every day between Ardrossan and Portrush.



Above: SS Hazel

Hazel could carry 1,250 passengers and with daily crossings she contributed greatly to the prosperity of the town. Sadly, with Great Britain having declared war on Germany in response to Germany's invasion of Belgium on 4th August 1914, Hazel made her last visit to Portrush on 6 August. Attempts to revive the service after the war came to nought.



Above: Cruise Ship "Wind Surf" in West bay, Portrush - 2013

In more recent years several cruise ships of various sizes have visited Portrush. Anchoring in the West Bay they transfer their passengers to and from the new low-level floating pontoons using their own Tenders.

Stone Bins

The local basalt is of excellent quality for road building, railway track ballast, harbour works, airport runways and other construction work requiring a strong sharp-edged stone. Crushed stone and individual larger stones weighing 5 tonnes or more were exported by ship from early in the 19th century.

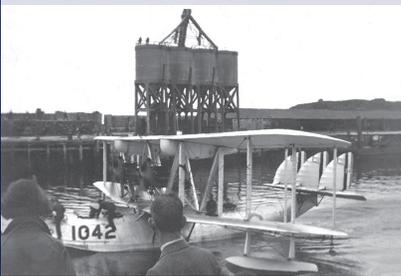
"Stone Boats" were a regular sight in the harbour up to the 1970's when the trade ceased. Throughout the 19th century stones would have been brought to the harbour by horse and cart and manually transhipped, in later years using small steam powered cranes, into the holds of the waiting ships. Such methods could take up to

two days of hard dirty work to load 500 tons (508,023 kg) of stone. This trade increased to such an extent that construction of four large silos was started in 1912 on the North Pier of the harbour.



Above: The "Stone Bins" and harbour from above the West Strand

These silos, known locally as the "stone bins" were built in reinforced concrete and held a total of 500 tons (508,023 kg) of crushed stone – 125 tons (113,797 kg) in each silo. Work was completed in 1914 just before the start of the First World War. Stone arriving at the quay side could now be dumped in a sunken hopper at the rear of the silos from which it was lifted by a chain bucket conveyor system to the top of each silo and dropped in. Ships moored alongside the silos were loaded by metal chutes which were lowered from each silo and down which the stone flowed into the ship's hold. The first ship to use the new silos was the Wheatlands and the 500 tons (508,023 kg) were loaded in 40 minutes!



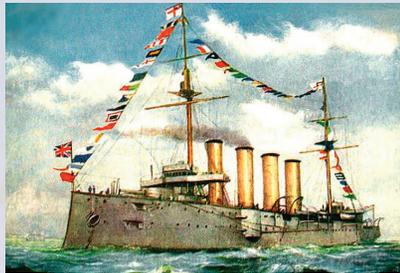
Above: The "Stone Bins" in colour, 1967 (Courtesy of Neill Donaldson)

The bins ceased operation in the 1970's as competition from enlarged road carriers and bigger and better equipped ships from modernised ports

rendered them obsolete. Demolition of the silos proved a difficult task as they had been strongly and solidly built. Their removal greatly altered the harbour landscape as their towering bulk had been a feature for more than sixty years. It has been argued that they should have been preserved as a wonderful example of industrial heritage, almost unique in Europe.

Naval Ships

During the first half of the 20th century warships of the Royal Navy regularly made courtesy calls to Portrush with the first recorded visit being in 1907. Amongst the earliest naval visitors was HMS Drake, now a wreck on the seabed off Rathlin Island. She was accompanied by HMS Black Prince and HMS Antrim.



Above: HMS Drake

Following the First World War whole fleets of Destroyers were regularly seen at anchor off Portrush. Such visits were an occasion for celebration. Portrush Urban District Council would organise sporting events, bus tours and other entertainments for the ships' crews and laid on dinners and receptions for the officers. Local shops, cafes, hostelries and dance halls benefited from the tidal wave of hundreds of sailors on shore leave, perhaps with several weeks unspent pay in their pockets.



Above: HMS Hood at anchor in the West Bay

In the summer of 1925 the largest vessel in the Royal Navy, the battlecruiser HMS Hood, spent a memorable five

days at Portrush. She proved a huge attraction with people from all over the province coming to see her: special excursion trains arrived from Belfast with sightseers and hundreds of people gathered daily on Ramore Head to watch the huge vessel. Local fishermen did a roaring trade in taking sightseers out around the Hood and many were able to go aboard in organised visits: in total, 10,000 people are reported to have boarded the ship on guided tours during its five-day visit. The crew were able to take part in tours to the Giant's Causeway and various tournaments held in Portrush, as well as dances and shows. A special clubroom was opened in the Town Hall, with free writing paper for the men to send a precious letter to their loved ones at home.

Commissioned in 1920 HMS Hood was the largest warship in the world and remained so for the next twenty years. In May 1941, during the hunt for the German battleship Bismarck Hood was torn apart and sunk by a single salvo from that ship. But for three survivors 1,500 British sailors perished in the North Atlantic Ocean including one Portrush man, George Shearer, who had perhaps seen her or even walked her decks in an organised visit in 1925.



Above: HMS Hood

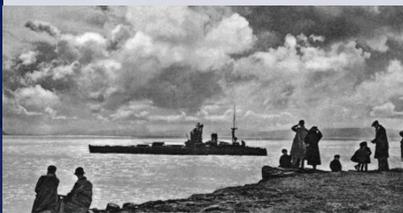
In 1930 the battleship HMS Rodney one of the most powerful battleships in the world at that time, visited Portrush. As part of a round of social events during this courtesy visit her Captain, later Admiral of the Fleet, 1st Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, KT, GCB, OM, DSO & Two Bars, Andrew Browne Cunningham, he was invited to officially open and name a new street in Portrush – Rodney Street. In the Second World War, as Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet, Cunningham led British naval forces to victory in several critical Mediterranean naval battles. In 1943, Cunningham was promoted to First Sea Lord, the professional head of the Royal Navy, a position he held until his retirement in 1946. Incidentally, when HMS Rodney sailed at the close

of its visit it had acquired a gift from the people of Portrush. It was a black Persian cat named, appropriately, Rodney.



Above: HMS Rodney at anchor in the West Bay Portrush

The light cruisers HMS Durban and HMS Wessex were among annual visitors during the thirties and HMS Nelson made a return visit in 1938, just one year before the outbreak of the Second World War. Many ships of various sizes and nations would visit Portrush throughout the war and on clear days lines of vessels could be seen on the horizon as north Atlantic convoys entered the Western Approaches on the final leg of their hazardous journeys from North America to the Clyde or the Mersey.



Above: HMS Nelson at anchor in the West Bay viewed from Ramore Head

Post war visits included the battleship HMS Duke of York plus a cruiser, aircraft carrier and destroyer in 1947 during Navy Week. The following year two Battle Class destroyers anchored in the West Bay. The last of the "big guns" was HMS Vanguard in 1953. During the 1960s and early 1970s several Canadian, American and British warships, mostly destroyers and frigates made courtesy calls to Portrush but they became less frequent as time passed. In 1977 the Royal Yacht Britannia brought Her Majesty the Queen to the town as part of her Silver Jubilee celebrations.

Yacht Club

For centuries, the sheltered location of Portrush and its offshore Skerry Islands has provided safe anchorage to maritime travellers, fishing fleets and vessels from across the world.

- At the end of the eighth century Vikings sailed their longships along the north coast, raiding and pillaging as they went along.
- During the medieval period Portrush served as an important landing place for the castle and settlement at Dunluce.
- In the late seventeenth century the Old Dock was built and emigrants descended the Pilgrim Steps and crowded onto small boats clutching their entire worldly possessions to sail to the New World.
- In the early 1820s, wooden paddle steamers started arriving from Scotland with visitors hoping to enjoy the remarkable and unique scenery of the causeway coast. The popularity of these excursions accelerated the transformation of the small fishing village of Portrush into a tourist port.

By 1827, merchants in Coleraine drew up for a new harbour to be constructed to accommodate the larger pleasure boats, fishing vessels, cargo ships and ferries now visiting the coast. By 1830, over one hundred thousand tons of rock had been quarried from Crannagh Hill, on the adjacent Ramore Head, to build the robust harbour walls. Located almost half-way between Malin Head and Fair Head, the town of Portrush established itself as a central fishing and trading harbour in the middle of the 19th century. This provided the economic base for the development of a regional boat building industry alongside those at Moville and Greencastle.

The most iconic boat built in the area, however, remained the Drontheim. Its distinct double-ended clinker hull with the unique sandstroke made it a safe and well-performing seaboat. Its manoeuvrability and seaworthiness made it the choice of boat for generations of fishermen along the Northern seaboard of Ireland. These

boats were often used for racing in Regattas which were taken very seriously.

Regattas have been held in Portrush for almost 200 years. A reference to a Regatta on Wednesday 6th August 1834 appeared in the Liverpool Standard where it reported that "thousands after thousands thronged to the races where the shout was "Portrush against the world". Sadly on this occasion the Innishowen won. Another advertisement, in the Londonderry Standard, for a Portrush Regatta on Friday 28th July 1837 detailed Gig Rowing Races and Fishermen's Yawls which were open to all between the Causeway and Coleraine.

A Portrush Rowing and Sailing Club is reported in the Belfast Newsletter to have been formed on the 22nd June 1906. The classes of sailing boats over the next decades changed to provide One Design racing from the Drontheim to the Jewel Class. As well there was a handicap class where the most famous yacht was the sloop Kitty of Coleraine which inspired Jimmy Kennedy to write the song "Red Sails in the Sunset".

After World War II activities at the Club reflected the change from traditional clinker built sailing yachts like the National 18 to modern planning hull dinghies like the Olympic Class Flying Dutchman which with its trapeze harness for the crew was regarded as one of the fastest racing dinghies in the world. The club which by now was renamed, Portrush Yacht Club, witnessed further changes in racing dinghy class popularity with the development of the lightweight, high performance classes of Fireball, Scorpion and GP14 with their hard chine planing hulls. Multihulls also became popular in the 60's with the Yachting World Catamaran class becoming established.

Today Portrush Yacht Club is one of the most successful sailing and boating clubs in Northern Ireland with its splendid new premises overlooking the Harbour and vibrant sections catering for Cruising, Sub-Aqua Diving, Kayaking, Sailing, Sea Angling and Surfing. Training Courses are available in Dinghy Sailing and Keelboat / Powerboat Handling.



Above: The Causeway Lass and Maid, East Bay Regatta



Above: Portrush Yacht Club and sub-aqua divers

South Pier - Leisure at the Harbour 3

The harbour would host swimming competitions and become the home of Portrush Yacht Club and the RNLI. With the arrival of the railway in 1855 tracks would be laid to the harbour and these would be used for many years by the railway company and the Portrush, Bushmills and Giant's Causeway Tramway Company to transport goods and raw materials.



Today it is a much quieter place with little commercial or passenger traffic apart from the occasional cruise ship anchoring in the West Bay and landing its passengers by tender. A small number of boats offering sea-angling trips, undertaking a little commercial fishing or running sightseeing trips around the coast. Moorings are much better organised and the harbour has become a marina for pleasure craft.

The bathing boxes and all the diving and swimming equipment has gone as have all the remnants of the harbour's commercial past.



During the Victorian era the idea of mixed bathing would have been anathema to upper and middle class sensibilities. The bathing suits of that period were extremely conservative and bathing machines which allowed ladies to change away from public view and then be wheeled into the water so that they could enter it "in private" were very much the order of the day. In Portrush the Blue Pool was the accepted bathing place for

gentlemen with Murtagh's Mouth reserved for ladies and the small beach below Craigvara available for ladies and children. This latter area being known as the Ladies Bathing Place. However, with the increasing leisure time available to people, the popularity of seaside resorts and the perceived health benefits of sea bathing that situation was gradually changing.



Portrush would appear to have been somewhat of a leader in this change as, according to a report of a meeting of Portrush Urban District Council in the Northern Constitution of 6th July 1901 mixed bathing was already taking place at the South Pier of the harbour. Despite that the main topic under discussion in the council meeting was the provision of bills to be posted stating that the Blue Pool would be reserved "for the use of ladies from ten o'clock a.m. till twelve o'clock noon, and from two till four o'clock p.m. each day, and ladies were at liberty to bathe at the South Pier at any time".



The Blue Pool was a popular location for bathing and, with the provision of four new bathing-boxes and renewal of the spring-boards and ladders in 1900, was the location for diving displays which attracted huge crowds. At some point floodlighting was installed which allowed these displays to be held even when the evening light faded.



The Council had acquired the bathing-boxes on the South Pier in 1900 and provided attendants to oversee both these and the boxes at the Blue Pool. The South Pier was provided with landing stages, spring-board and fixed diving boards, a chute and tethered rafts. These attracted large numbers of swimmers, divers and spectators to the South Pier of the harbour. All of these were within the harbour but at least one diving board was positioned on the outside of the pier for diving into the open sea.



A major attraction for families was the "wee beach" in the south-east corner of the harbour. This was an area of sand well sheltered from the wind and with shallow calm water suitable for young children to play in. It was also convenient to the "Teas & Ices" on the South Pier from which emporium one could purchase hot and cold refreshments, confectionery and beach requisites such as buckets and spades. This wooden building went through various iterations during its life, being washed away or damaged by storms on several occasions, finally being rebuilt in sturdier materials to become the café we see today.



Whilst the principal function of the harbour was to provide shelter and facilities for commercial vessels moorings were also available for

privately owned boats of various types. Regattas were a regular feature both from the harbour and from Portandhu harbour in the East Bay. Portrush Rowing and Sailing Club was established in 1906, its first Commodore being Mr G. H. Moore-Browne of Portstewart who was well known in yachting circles. Through time Portrush Rowing and Sailing Club would become Portrush Yacht Club who Clubhouse is on the North Pier.

The Blue Pool Swimming Club was very active in the early years of the 20th century. As well as arranging well supported diving displays and competitions at the Blue Pool they organised swimming races around a course in the harbour.

Always a popular attraction in the harbour the "rowing boats for hire" operated for many years from the corner of the South Pier and beside the Lifeboat-house. The Doherty family were associated with this activity for decades and also with the operation of the Queen Elizabeth which took you on a trip out around the Skerries.



The last quarter of the 20th century brought change to the use of the harbour for recreation. Swimming and diving facilities gradually disappeared as did the colourful bathing-boxes, apparently for reasons of "health & safety". Moorings became more regimented and the harbour took on the trappings of a marina. The little rowing boats were viewed as a potential source of damage to boats moored in the harbour and had to go. Even the "wee beach" virtually disappeared at times due to dredging activity in the harbour.

