



REGATTAS OF YESTERYEAR

By Frances Wilson

As befits any seaside town, water sports in Portrush have long been an attraction with competition between the locals and their neighbours hotly contested in a variety of ways over the years. At first these were just for fun but by the 1830s more organised competition in the form of regattas was starting to emerge with programmes detailing the races and the prize money on offer being printed in the local papers. They soon became the principal sporting event of the year presenting the local gentry with an opportunity to entertain their friends both during the day's racing and afterwards at a Ball and Supper.

PORTRUSH REGATTA.

THERE WILL BE A REGATTA
AT PORTRUSH,
25 On Friday, 28th July, 1837,
AND A
BALL AND SUPPER
AT COLEMAN'S HOTEL, PORTSTEWART, SAME
EVENING.

REGATTA.

The following Prizes will be competed for, viz. :-

1st. A Match for Gentlemen's four oared Gigs, not exceeding 24 feet in length, pulled by Gentlemen—the winning Boat four Silver Medals. Entrance, £1 1s.

2d. A Match for Fishermen's Yawls, open to all between the Causeway and Coleraine.

First Boat,..... A new Fishing Yawl.
Second ditto, £3 0 0
Third ditto,..... 1 0 0

3d. A Match for Gigs, rowed by sea-faring men—qualification the same as for the first race. £5. Entrance, 5s.

4th. A Match for the beaten Yawls. £3—no entrance, and two Boats or no Race.

Boats to be entered with the Commodore, Lieutenant PAYNTER, R.N., at Portrush, on or before noon on the 28th instant.

STEWARDS.

Lieut. PAYNTER, R.N., Portrush, Commodore.
ROBT. B. EVATT, Esq., Portstewart.
JOHN FOSTER, Esq., Portrush.
JOSEPH GREEN, Esq., Portstewart.
JOHN STEWART, Esq., Collector, Coleraine.
Lieut. Colonel CAIRNES, Treasurer.
R. B. EVATT, Esq., Secretary.

REGATTA BALL.

There will be a BALL and SUPPER at COLEMAN'S Hotel, Portstewart, on the Evening of FRIDAY, the 28th instant.

STEWARDS.

Lieut. Colonel CAIRNES. | Wm. C. GIBB, Esq.
Major BAINBRIDGE. | JOHN HENNINGSON, Esq.

Ladies' Tickets, 5s.; Gentlemen's, 7s. 6d.; not transferable—to be had of the Stewards. As only a limited number of Tickets can be issued, an early application is requested.

ROBT. B. EVATT, Secy.

Committee Room, 10th July, 1837.

LONDONDERRY STANDARD 26 JULY 1837

During the 1860s and 1870s the Regattas were a day out for both the locals and visitors with side attractions, such as bazaars and bands, providing additional entertainment to the rowing and sailing. Amongst the visitors were members of the gentry from Antrim and Londonderry who stayed overnight in the Antrim Arms (later the Northern Counties) and contributed generously to the prize money. Portrush would be packed with many arriving on special excursion trains from all parts of the country.



The aquatic competition was strong between the neighbouring towns on the north coast and from as far afield as Moville in Co Donegal to the west and Larne to the east. Classes of boats included Sailing Boats 24 and 20 foot Keel, Rowing Boats 24 and 20 foot Keel, Pair-oared Skiffs, Square-sterned Jolly Boats and Pair-oared 18 Feet Keel Boats. The races were not only classified by boat type but also by their rowers who were described as gentlemen, fishermen or sea-farers. At this time the fishermen of Portrush were strong men who rowed their boats all year in all weathers and they could win a lot of prize money on Regatta Day.



A Regatta in East Bay: Courtesy of John Moore Collection

Reports on both the races and the entertainment featured in the local press like this one from the Belfast Morning News of 20 August 1868.

"The second annual regatta, under the auspices of the leading gentlemen in and around Portrush, came off at this beautiful little watering place today. It being a general holiday in Coleraine, almost all the inhabitants of that town availed themselves of the use of the cheap train, which E.J. Cotton, Esq., the manager of the Northern Counties Railway Company, as usual on such occasions, placed at the disposal of the Coleraine people. Excursion trains ran from all stations on the line, bringing a large concourse of aquatic admirers to Portrush. The Coleraine flute band, headed by a scarlet flag, paraded the different streets of the town, and added greatly to the amusement of the day. A beautiful arch of crimson flags, which presented a very grand appearance, was suspended across the green opposite Seymour Place. Bath Terrace, also, was a scene of animation.

A ladies' bazaar, under the superintendence of the Rev. Henry Ffolliott, Rector of Ballywillan, and a number of ladies and gentlemen, was erected below on the green sward, to which a great many of Portrush visitors wended their way during the day, and purchased freely.

Every arrangement calculated to improve the sports having been completed about twelve o'clock the Commodore, N. A. Knox, Esq., started the First Race."



Full details of each race, including specifications of the boats, prize monies and the competitors with their boat name and home town were listed along with a report on the race itself. There was open entry to most of the races although one was only for boats from between the River Bann and Fair Head. The Royal Antrim Artillery Band had arrived on the 12.30 train and played several tunes to entertain the holiday-makers between the races.

The report finished with a rather unusual sentence - *"It was predicted during the day that a row would take place, but up to the time this despatch was forwarded, nothing occurred to call for the assistance of the constabulary."*

The Regatta was again reported on with much praise in the Belfast Newsletter 30 August 1871

"The fourth annual regatta was held here today in the bay opposite the town. The weather was exceedingly fine, a brilliant sunshine with a fine breeze rendering the day a most agreeable one for indulgence in aquatic sports, and most attractive for those fond of out-door amusements. The bay, charming at all times, never looked more beautiful and the varied scenery on land, extending on the right from the town, away to the bluff peak of the Causeway, wore its most pleasing aspect."



Portrush Regatta viewed from Salmon Green courtesy of John Moore Collection

The number of spectators on shore was very large, and comprised the leading inhabitants of the district with a considerable number of excursionists from Coleraine, Ballymena and Belfast. Irrespective of the regatta, the inducements to pay a visit to this very agreeable watering-place were very great taking into account the magnificent views to be observed on all sides, the pure



atmosphere, the genial day, and the fact of cheap excursion trains having been run from the different stations along the Northern Counties Line. The latter were certainly taken advantage of to the utmost extent, and it is only due to the officials in connection with the railway, to state that every attention was paid to the accommodation of the passengers notwithstanding the exceedingly large numbers who travelled along the line. As usual on such occasions, amusements of a most medley description were provided along the shore, while "extemporised" dancers, and professors of the "art of speculation" pursued their several avocations with great pecuniary advantage. Music, with all its charms, was not forgotten in the programme, as the band of the Antrim Rifles and the Killowen Protestant Young Men's band were present on the sward and discoursed "sweet harmony" to a most admiring audience. Indeed nothing was wanting to complete the thorough success of the day's proceedings but a little more regularity or rather punctuality in the starting of the races. There was some really excellent oaring on the part of the amateurs as well as the professionals."

RAILWAY NOTICES.

**BELFAST AND NORTHERN COUNTIES
RAILWAY.**

TO PORTRUSH AND BACK FOR 2s 6d.

**PORTRUSH REGATTA
AND
FLOWER SHOW.**

On WEDNESDAY, August 28,

A SPECIAL TRAIN will leave YORK STREET TERMINUS at 8 5 a.m., and Return from Portrush at 6-30 p.m. same day.

BELFAST TO PORTRUSH AND BACK,

1st Class	2nd Class	3rd Class
5s	4s	2s 6d

No Luggage allowed.
For Excursions from intermediate Stations see Placards.

EDWARD J. COTTON,
General Manager.

Belfast, 21st August, 1872.

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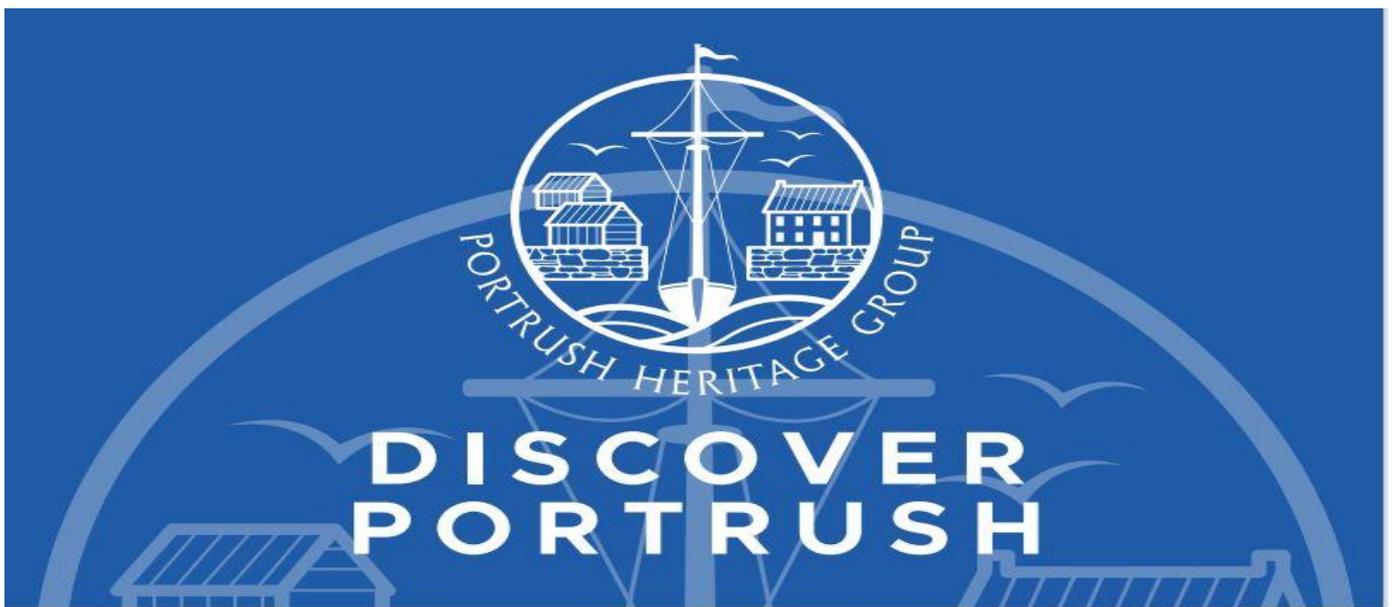
BELFAST TELEGRAPH 22 AUGUST 1872

Over the next few years the structure of the Regattas altered to include additional events and to extend over two days with evening entertainment such as firework displays. New events included a flower show in 1872 and swimming races in 1876. Horse races were held on the beach in 1885 with riders coming from near and far to try and win the prize money. 1900 saw cycling, running and a football match added along with a rowing race for men in His Majesty's service which was won by the RIC team, the Coastguards being runners up. It is no wonder that the Regattas attracted large crowds.



In 1907 the organisation of the Regatta changed and it came under the auspices of the newly formed Portrush Rowing and Sailing Club. Different categories of races were included with one for tradesmen and another for 'pair-oared boats to be rowed and steered by ladies'. From this time onwards the Regattas began to focus solely on rowing and sailing and the associated events seem to have been discontinued. However, these new style Regattas are a story for another day.

Our thanks to Frances for this most interesting article on Portrush Regattas of Yesteryear 25th September 2021.



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