

## The Era of the Entertainers

by Hugh McGrattan.

Taken from his book “Portrush, The Port on the Promontory”

The newly-liberated crowds of pleasure-seeking tourists who first thronged the streets of 19th century watering places were soon no longer satisfied with just sea, tea, sandwiches, sand and scenery. One popular magazine in 1883 summed up the situation when it printed a less than complimentary article which declared, tongue in cheek:

*“Though excessively dull, Portrush is truly regarded as the Queen of Ulster marine resorts. Its visitors go there apparently not for amusement, but to lead an amphibious life for a month or two, and to amass a fund of superfluous (!) health for the rainy winter.”*

Clearly the novelty of a trip to the seaside with a good book or periodical to read while seated in the sun (or shelter) with perhaps a sing-song on the char-a-banc going home was beginning to wear off and something to sustain the happiness level was needed. Thus was holiday entertainment born and, in resorts everywhere, indoor and outdoor entertainment became an essential part of the seaside break, be it a day, a week or just a weekend (a trendy new word that was coming into common usage as shortened Saturday working hours were introduced).

By the 1890s a music hall atmosphere was being introduced into many aspects of the holiday with minstrel shows and pierrots particularly popular. Portrush, as one of Ireland’s top resorts, was quick to take a lead and it has been claimed that for a time at the start of the 20th century no fewer than five minstrel shows were on offer, including the one on board the Scotch boat on its way to the north coast.



The Arcadians were a popular pierrot show in the 1920s, run by Lil and William Conaghan (stage names Lil and Willie Dennis). Their open-air stand was beside the Arcadia Café, newly built by W.R. Chalmers, one of the town’s leading business men. Arcadia Café image courtesy of John Moore Collection

A bold step was the creation of the Portrush Winter Gardens Company in January 1910. The impressive pavilion with its skating rink and various other attractions included a moving picture theatre. It stood on the recreation grounds beside the railway station, once the mecca for excursion parties. The firm went into liquidation in 1916 and was only briefly revived as the Skating

Rink and Variety Theatre until April 1918 when final demolition work commenced.



A lovely period picture of Billy Keene's minstrels, another highly popular summer show in Portrush in the early years of the last century. This picture is dated 1905.

The railway company was to again enter the field of tourist promotion when it invited a blossoming touring circus and entertainment company led by Evelyn (Chipperfield) and Francesco Trufelli to set up a permanent site on the recreation grounds. The site had been vacant for 13 years.

The decision of the Trufellis to take up the railway company's offer proved to be a fateful one and for 90 years now Barry's has been a major asset of the resort. Their fascinating story and that of other participants in embryo days of resort entertainment is told in some detail by James Fairley in his excellent "*Fun is our Business*".

A history of all seaside entertainment in the town is worth a book in itself, and Portrush writers Maurice McAleese and Rodney Byrne have also gone some way towards that in their respective and very readable books *Golden Strands* and *Vintage Port*.

I will confine further coverage of a golden era of song and dance, sketches and quips to a few pictures of the long gone personalities who once were familiar and well-loved figures in the town where they were the Summer Entertainers!



A minstrel show in action on the beach at the Ladies' Bathing Place. The size of the pre-World War One audience is an indication of how popular these shows were.



Dan Derry was a top ventriloquist of his day and had appeared on the professional stage in Scotland. In Portrush, he and his dummy Larry O'Hooligan were part of the Arcadians show. When Dan (real name Gillen) joined up at the start of the First World War, Larry went with him! When not in the trenches, they helped in concert parties entertaining the troops.



The inimitable Wee Archie was a hugely popular street entertainer in Portrush between the two world wars. One of his favourite pitches was at the junction of Main Street and Atlantic Avenue, and each summer he provided six days of entertainment every week. A Scotsman, he died in 1947 and is buried in Ballywillan Cemetery.

## The Thespians

Regular on-stage professional entertainment in the town, as the history of the Town Hall reveals, goes back a long way. From the summer entertainment and various amateur acts and performances which were so important to the summer entertainment scene, grew an energetic amateur movement that, fortunately, is still going strong today. Members of the Portrush Amateur Dramatic Society were treading theboards in the 1920s and 30s and from this talented group grew the Portrush Players, who remained in existence until the 1980s when, like so many neighbouring drama groups in Coleraine and Portstewart, they faded from the scene.



Members of the Portrush Players (previously Amateur Dramatic Society) presented the three-act comedy *Yellow Sands* in the Town Hall in February 1937. The actors included Daisy Logan, Ernie Sandford, Olive McConaghy, Isa Campbell, Vin McIlmoyle, Etta Moge, J. McDonnell, J. Woodhouse, R.J.L. Kennedy, J.L. Ledlie, Margaret Dunlop and Mina Clark, plus an unnamed live parrot. Harry Hamilton was producer and John Logan stage manager.

However, from the Players had grown the Portrush Music Society, as well as the Ballywillan Drama Group, first organised by members of Ballywillan (Holy Trinity) Parish Church in 1952 to produce an annual pantomime. Today these two excellent societies, which share many of their members, produce award-winning musical shows in Coleraine's Riverside Theatre and superbly keep alive in Portrush that long tradition of amateur drama.

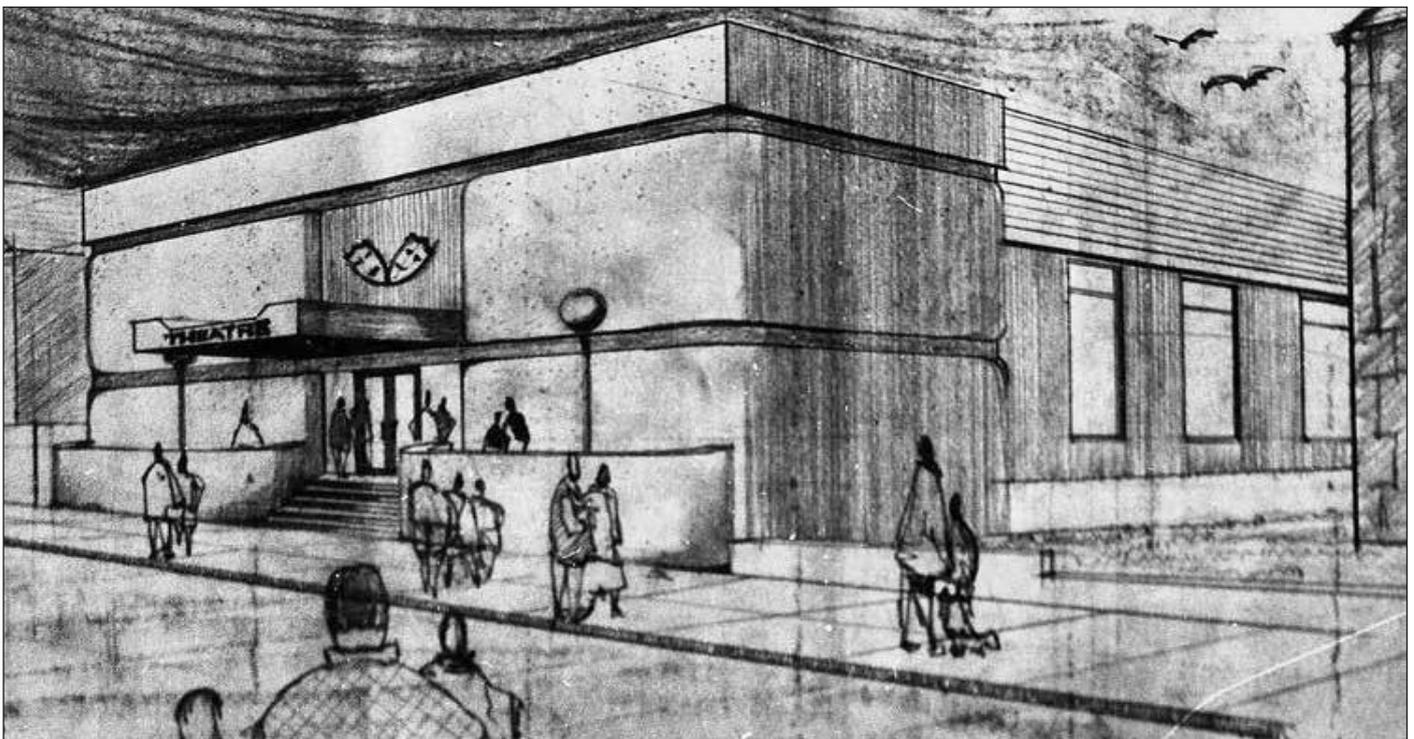
Portrush plays another important role in helping to maintain the art of the amateur stage through the Portrush Summer Theatre. First organised in 1954 by some of Ulster's leading thespians as a means of giving amateur groups all over the Province the opportunity to produce plays for a week under professional conditions, the Summer Theatre has been going every summer since.



Each dramatic society presents four performances of their play in the course of a week, with as many as eight societies thus providing a full season of entertainment in the resort. The venue from the start has been the Town Hall, although for a period of five years while the Hall was under renovation, St. Patrick's Parish Hall (formerly the Palladium Theatre) in Causeway Street was used.

The limitations of the Victorian-era concert hall in the Town Hall have long been recognised as a drawback for some of the more elaborate productions such as musical shows, so much so that in the 1970s the Portrush Music Society and Ballywillan Drama Group moved their increasingly professional musical productions to the Riverside Theatre in Coleraine. The last musical to be presented at the Town Hall was the Music Society's production of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Mikado" in 1976.

The former Portrush Urban Council did draw up plans for a more modern municipal theatre based on the old Orange Hall (now the Youth Centre) but although the planning was at a fairly advanced stage, it was cancelled by the new Coleraine District (later Borough) Council which took over control of Portrush affairs in 1973.



An artist's impression of the municipal theatre planned for Portrush in the early 1970s and created around the former Orange Hall in Dunluce Street. The scheme was scrapped by the new Coleraine Borough Council.

Our thanks to Hugh for allowing us to reprint the above text and images from his excellent book 'Portrush The Port on the Promontory'

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