

## 1976: The Night of the Bombs

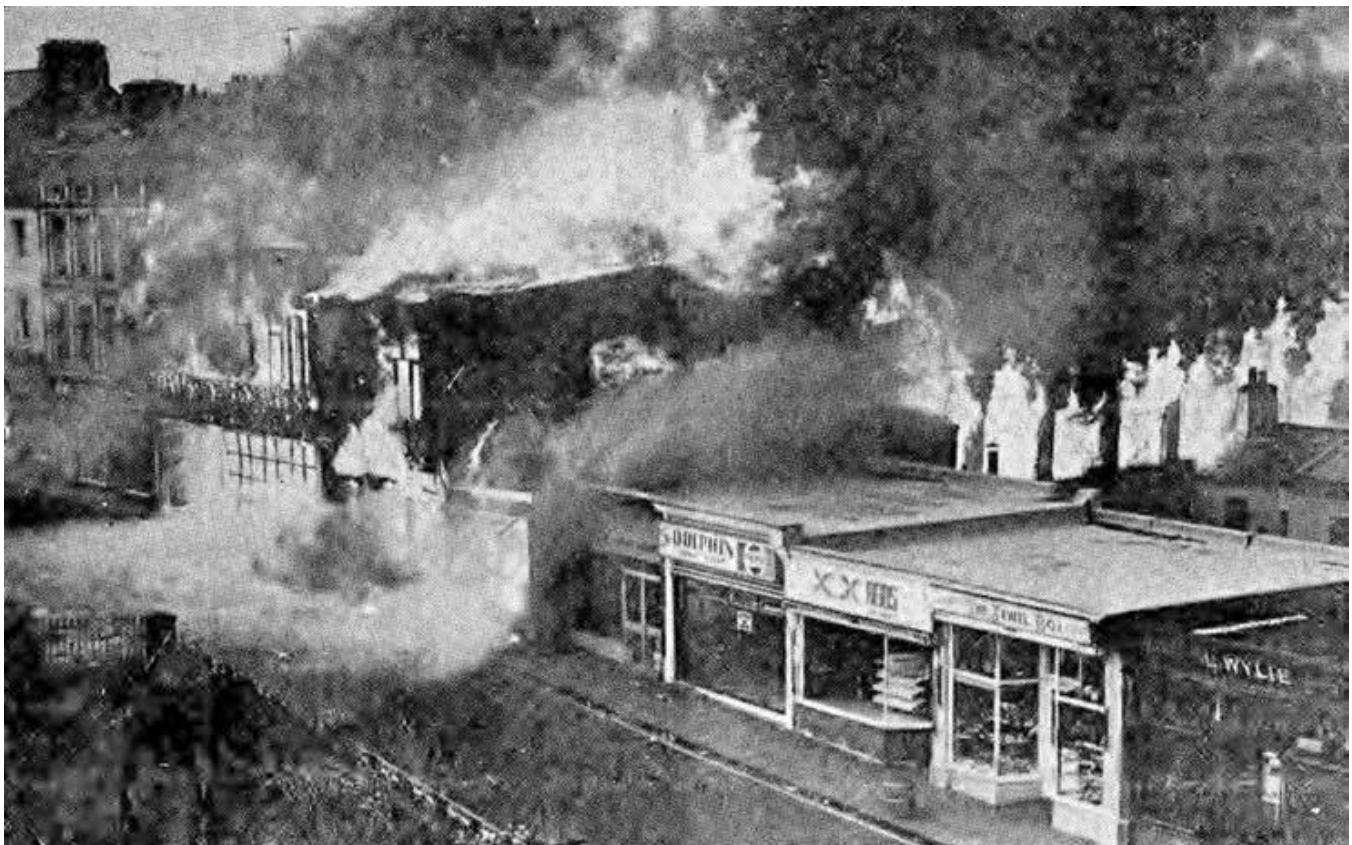
From 'Portrush The Port on the Promontory' by Hugh McGrattan

*On the evening of Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> August 1976 devices exploded within a short time of each other in several shops, cafes and other buildings throughout Portrush. Apparently the fire bombs had been planted during a typically busy summer afternoon in the resort by several young women, posing as holidaymakers. They were timed to go off after closing time, thus causing maximum confusion and damage. A total of 13 business premises were destroyed or badly damaged in a night of mindless destruction.*

*The attack, which made headline news all over the world, is today recalled as just one of many attacks against cynically- titled "economic targets" by the I.R.A. Thankfully, on this occasion no one died.*

*I was a reporter on the staff of the Chronicle at the time, but, unusually, was not actively involved in the coverage of the event due to a bout of summer flu. However, I did write this article the following day. It was too late for the Chronicle, which was published overnight, but was carried as a black-bordered feature, framed by pictures of the devastation, on the back page of our sister publication, the Northern Constitution.*

*I reproduce it here largely as it was published:*



*Portrush burning. The scene at Main Street on the night of 14 August 1976, as several business premises on both sides of the street burn fiercely. Incendiary devices had also been placed in premises in several other parts of the town. Some were discovered before they exploded but around a dozen premises were destroyed or badly damaged*

We used to call it Big Forte's in my teenage days, to separate it from Wee Forte's, the family's other café down the street. It was a place to meet, to chat, to plan, to drink a cup of coffee for sixpence or, if things were tough, a cup of tea for fourpence. I peered in one afternoon only last week and marvelled at how little it had changed since I patronised it regularly nearly 20 years ago. Same layout, same tables, same chairs. A little unchanging oasis in a changing world. Now it is gone.

So has Sportsland, a last reminder of the “old” Picture House where I spent – some would say misspent – so many of my schoolboy Saturday afternoons. And the Swiss House drapery store, where I spent my time rather more reluctantly when I was out shopping with my mother. The Lido Café, too, lingered long in childhood memories. It was one of the few places you could buy ice cream in the austere days after World War Two. Sliders at threepence and sixpence. A bag of chips for fourpence. A pile of red bricks with the dust and smoke still rising.

The Medical Hall had changed a lot in recent years, roused from its Edwardian slumber by Gerry Macauley. The Portrush House as we knew it had also been gone a long time – I still have the set of draughts my father bought me there. There had been alterations at the old Northern Bank building as well, although still retained was the distinctive “three-bay, three-storey stucco classical façade with attic aedicule” as the Ulster Architectural Heritage was recently moved to describe it. I’m not quite sure what that means. I just know it looks nice and I hope that it will survive despite the devastation all around it. It was hard not to be angry as I watched the flames boil skywards the previous night. Angry because of what was happening to my town.



*A picture of devastation. This area of Main Street, pictured on the morning after the terrorist bomb attack of 14 August 1976, suffered most damage with several shops and business premises destroyed. Other parts of the town were also attacked, causing similar damage*

The sickening sound of yet another bomb going off. The stream of cars vacating the danger area. The appalling, agonising wail of a dozen fire engines dashing from one end of the town to the other. All combined to paint for me the picture of the senseless sacrifice of an innocent town on the altar of – what? I walked the length of the town the following morning, only my Presscard permitting me to walk where only a few hours before the right had been extended to all – the tourist, the resident, the policeman, the trader, the fighter of freedom with his gallon of petrol and his bomb and his hate.

Tommy Mercer's wee coffee shop was scattered across Dunluce Street, just a mass of wooden and glass splinters. There were smashed windows on either side and at the back of Golf Terrace, where the bomb intended for the British Legion Club had gone off. There were charred remains on the Craigvara Green, behind the twisted girders and burned rafters and the black empty windows of what had once been the top of Main Street. Smoke still rose from the ashes and the smell of burning was everywhere. Looking at the blackened walls of the shell of the building next door, I could recall how we used to stop and look at the pictures outside Lee's Photographic Studio on our way home from school. Happy pictures of weddings, babies, or soldiers in uniform.



Left photo: Souvenir Shop ; L'Atelier doorway ; Swiss House; Sportsland. Photographs by Patricia Gray (Nee Lee) courtesy of David Martin's Facebook Portrush Tales

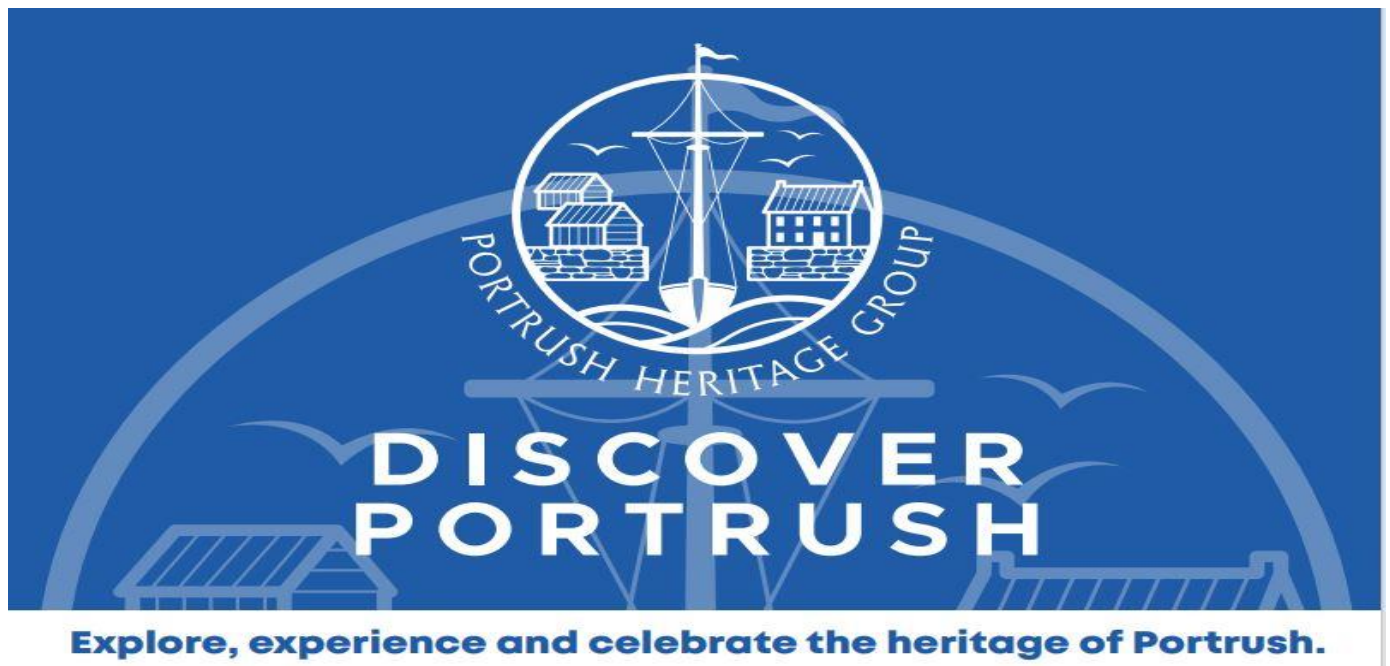
Up the stairs, with their beautiful brass treads, lay the mysterious realm of the photographer, where we never dared to enter. Now the hand of a terrorist had changed all that. With more brilliance than Billy Lee or his father had ever used in all the flash bulbs they fired over the years, that intriguing world had been erased – as effectively as an unfixed photo print exposed to the midday sun. With it went a heritage of negatives of the Portrush of the past and its people, and I am numb with the pain. Of course, they will rebuild Main Street, perhaps better than before, but never quite the same. A town, though, is more than buildings, more than brick and concrete tombstones of the past. The people will rise above even this, possibly the greatest catastrophe Portrush has ever known.



*In the aftermath of the Portrush bombs, many acts of generosity and sacrifice were recorded as the people of Portrush and the surrounding area, along with members of the various emergency services, sought to assist those who had been affected by the outrage, as a result of which some 120 people found themselves out of work. Although Portrush was to escape much of the pain and horror which other towns in the Province suffered as the result of terrorism during the 1970s and 1980s, several other violent incidents in subsequent years were to cast a shadow over the town. The most painful event was the murder of two neighbourhood policemen, Frederick Armstrong and Robert McLean, while on evening foot patrol on a busy Main Street on 11 April, 1987. Both were family men in their forties, residing in the town and well known and respected in the community.*

Our thanks to Hugh for allowing us to reprint the above moving text and photographs from his excellent book 'Portrush The Port on the Promontory'. Additional photographs are reproduced with thanks from the archives of Patricia Gray (nee Lee).

20<sup>th</sup> November 2021



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