

Hazel's First Run From Golden Strands by Maurice McAleese

When the s.s. "Hazel" made her initial run from Ardrossan to Portrush on the morning of Thursday, June 13, 1907, the only passengers on board were the directors of the Laird Line and selected guests. The weather was dull and threatening as the sparkling new flag-bedecked vessel slipped her moorings at Montgomerie Pier and slowly steamed towards the open sea. The well-heralded trip to Portrush would take just over four hours and this in spite of the adverse weather conditions - a strong head-wind prevailed that day and the running tide was against the steamer all the way to Rathlin Island. In spite of this, the Hazel made good time, skirting close to the coastline on the run-in to Portrush – crowds thronged the headlands at FairHead and Ballycastle and gave her a rousing welcome as she passed. In return, Captain Hately replied with the traditional nautical salute – a loud blast on the steamer's foghorn.



Courtesy of John Moore Collection

A reporter on board the vessel wrote: "Although the sea was rather heavy between Fair Head and Ramore, the Hazel behaved admirably, and the passengers experienced no inconvenience except from the rain which at times caused their withdrawal from the bracing breezes of the North Atlantic." By now, the steamer was within sight of Portrush where a huge crowd of spectators awaited her arrival.

They crammed onto the main vantage point, Ramore Head, and although it was raining their excitement and enthusiasm were not diminished. The Hazel's "jaunty display of flags" was answered in similar fashion from the Coastguard lookout and as she steamed closer still there was a scramble over the grassy slopes to find better vantage points as she rounded the headland. This is how the last stage of the historic voyage was described in one report: "The run towards Blackrock for the turn into the harbour was promptly

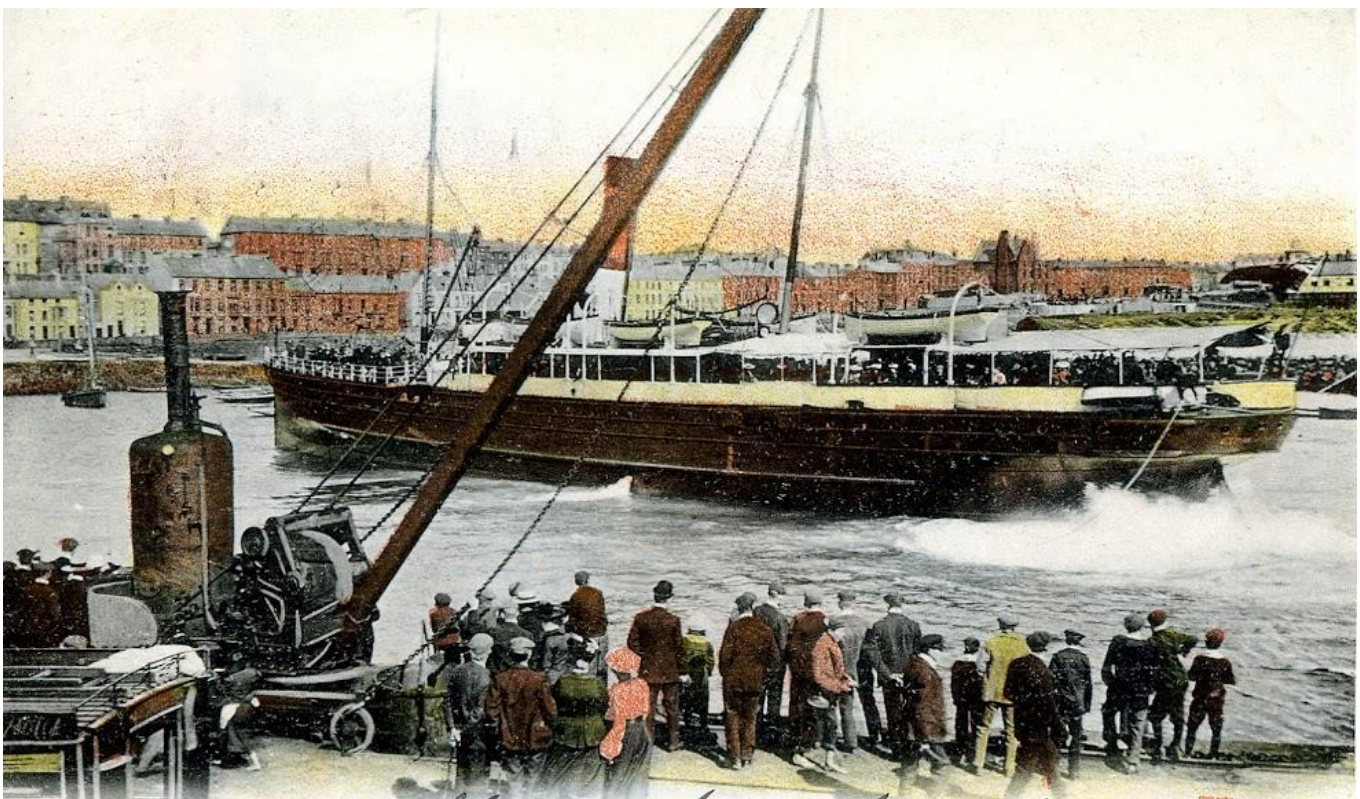


accomplished, and a few moments later the Hazel, under Captain Hately' sunerring guidance, entered between the pier ends amid hearty cheers fromthe crowd assembled on the wharf, the trip having been accomplished within four and a half hours, indicating that on a fine day the steamer will be able to do the run well inside that time."

To celebrate the event, a sumptuous lunch prepared by the Hazel's cateringstaff was served on board the vessel - the special guests included representatives of the Urban Council, Portrush Harbour Company and Coleraine Harbour Board. The menu was mouth-watering and for the record, this was the choice: Soup – Hotch Potch; boiled salmon; Dutch sauce; fillets of sole; Tartare sauce. Entrees – Chicken cutlets; tomato sauce; prawns; Joints – Roast sirloin of beef; roast lamb; mint sauce; roast turkey. Sweet – Swiss tart; green gooseberry tart; orange creams; "Hazel" pudding; jellies; custard; meringues. Salad, Cheese, Ices, Tea, Coffee etc.

A series of toasts followed the lunch and there was much praise for the Laird Shipping Line for having commissioned such a magnificent vessel forthe Portrush-Ardrossan run. The harbour at Portrush had been dredged a couple of months earlier to ensure enough depth of water and the Harbour Company were praised for their efforts in this regard. The work had been carried out with the help and advice of the Hazel's skipper, Captain E. R. Hately and he was also praised for his expertise in bringing the vessel so skilfully alongside the dock.

That was no mean feat because the harbour had been designed to accommodate vessels of about 100 feet in length – the Hazel measured 268 feet and had a draught of just over 23 feet. On trials prior to the inaugural run she had achieved a speed of 19 knots.



Courtesy John Moore Collection

For her day, she was an impressive looking ship "of fine appearance and graceful lines" and she had been fitted out to a high degree of excellencefor the comfort of passengers. There were four decks consisting of the lower, main bridge, and two boat decks. First-class passengers had theexclusive use of the bridge deck amidships. The level of comfort was said to be up to hotel standards and there was a tearoom "neatly finished inlight oak, with tulip wood inlay panels" which would be run "on city lines."



The boat deck was no less impressive; it boasted a large smoke room, finished in oak, with red marble tables. There was also a handsome deck lounge finished in luxurious upholstery, and private state rooms for first class passengers. Second-class passengers were not too badly catered for either – they had a large dining saloon on the main deck, fitted out “in a neat style” and there was an adjoining bar.

On the poop deck was another saloon, described as large and airy for the exclusive use of second-class lady passengers. It also had toilet facilities. The main mid-ship deck, for its entire length, could be utilised as a promenade for second-class passengers and in wet weather it could be used as a shelter.

Hazel was a ship to be proud of and the Laird Line stressed: “In the general arrangements the comfort of the passengers has been made the first consideration; but not the least striking feature of the new boat is the speed, and it is estimated that she will cover the distance between Ardrossan and the popular North of Ireland seaside resort of Portrush, in about four hours. The vessel is also fitted with two bilge keels to minimise the rolling.”



The arrangements were that the Hazel would sail every weekday from Ardrossan at 9.45am in connection with trains from Dundee, Perth, Stirling, Edinburgh and Glasgow and with principle stations in Lanarkshire, Dumbartonshire, Renfrewshire and Ayrshire. It was due to arrive in Portrush at 1.35pm and this, it was felt, would enable ongoing passengers to reach surrounding towns like Coleraine, Ballymoney, Ballycastle, Ballymena, Cookstown, Limavady and Londonderry in a reasonable time.

On the return journey the Hazel would leave Portrush at 3.30pm, reaching Ardrossan at 8.30pm, Glasgow at 9.40 and ongoing passengers to Edinburgh about 11pm.

It was back in the summer of 1902 that the Laird Line decided that its steamship service to Portrush should run from Ardrossan and not, as hitherto, from Gourock, the main reason being that this would reduce the sea passage to just over four hours. A report in one of the Glasgow papers noted that the change would not be so convenient for people in the Greenock and Port-Glasgow areas but to compensate for this very cheap through fares from these towns to Ardrossan had been arranged. The price of a steerage return, it was pointed out, would be only sixpence more than from Paisley, where the return to Portrush was eight shillings.

It had been towards the end of the previous century that the Laird Line had introduced a daylight passenger steamship service between Gourock and Portrush and the undertaking proved very successful. The main ship on that old route was the Azalea. It was “a commodious steamer” and was a familiar sight on the northern coastline for a good few years, operating a daily service. In the summer of 1900, the Laird Line announced that another steamer, the Cedar, a sistership to the Azalea, was also to be put on the route. A newspaper commented: “We hope that this magnificent service will reap its due reward, and convince the company that the public nowadays are not slow to appreciate any efforts made by them to successfully cater for their



requirements.” The steamship passenger service between Portrush and Ardrossan ceased on the outbreak of the Great War and it was not resumed afterwards.

The Hazel was eventually sold to the Isle of Man Steam Packet Company to replace ships lost in the war. For some unexplained reason she was later renamed “Mona” and for many years carried passengers and cargo to and from the Isle of Man. She was only ever involved in one serious incident and that was in July, 1930 when she ran aground on Conister Rock – at hightide she was re-floated with the aid of tugs and was only slightly damaged.



In 1938 she was withdrawn from service and sold for scrap, a sad ending for a once proud old lady of the sea who had played a very important role in contributing to that golden age of seaside holidays in Portrush.

Our thanks to Maurice for allowing us to reprint the above text from his excellent book Golden Strands.

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