

Captain W R Shutt MC - A Man of Many Parts

By Frances Wilson

For the younger generation in Portrush the name 'Captain Shutt' relates to a street in the town but to the older generation it conjures up the man who organised all forms of summertime entertainment on Ramore Head.

Captain William R Shutt was a native of Aldridge in Staffordshire and attended Sandhurst before being posted to the South Staffordshire Regiment. He was a great athlete playing football, tennis, cricket and rugby as well as being a proficient boxer and horse rider. During the First World War he served in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery.

When his Army career ended, he farmed at Irvinestown, Co Fermanagh, the birthplace of his wife, but after a life of travel he found this a little tame and on reading a newspaper advertisement that Portrush required a Sports and Entertainments Officer for the summer season of 1923, he immediately sent in his application. He was successful and was appointed in July of that year initially for seven weeks but he was told that if the season was successful it would be extended by a further two weeks.



Captain W R Shutt MC

The *Chronicle* on 13 July 1923 introduced him to the local population with the following words: "*Captain W R Shutt MC who has been appointed Sports Manager of the Recreation Grounds arrived on Thursday. Captain Shutt is 6ft 4in in height, 15st 7lb in weight and is a splendid athlete.*"

His employment coincided with the transformation of the eastern part of Ramore Head into Recreation Grounds with two bowling greens, tennis courts, 18 hole putting green, running track and pavilion tea room. As well as managing the Recreation Grounds he also organised various events to keep tourists entertained over the summer season. It soon became obvious that his first season was going to be a success for 'Tiny Shutt', as he was nicknamed, set about his job with great vigour and within a week of his appointment the receipts at the new Recreation Grounds had amounted to over £80 - as his salary at that time was £5 per week the Council were certainly getting good value for their money!



Ramore Head and the Recreation Grounds

His contract finished in September and he returned to his farm in Irvinestown not expecting to see Portrush again. However the following Easter the Council asked him to return and repeat what he had done so successfully the previous year. Thus started a long involvement with Portrush which lasted until 1965. He still went to his farm in Irvinestown during the winter until 1939 when he moved to Portrush.

During the next 40 years Captain Shutt was a familiar figure about the town in his trademark white suit. He continued to run the Recreation Grounds and to organise the bowling and tennis tournaments which were held there. These were both very popular with large numbers competing each year. He even found time to teach children to play tennis and, as the years went by, taught their children in turn.

He attracted tourists to Portrush with events like Military Tattoos, Fancy Dress Carnivals and Concerts. There were numerous yachting races, aquatic displays and athletic competitions with participants coming from all over Ireland. He organised visiting teams, such as Australian Bowlers and the Harlem Globetrotters, to come and play outdoor matches. All this entertainment led to the numbers in Portrush at the height of the season being anything up to 14,000 swamping the resident population which at that time was around 4,000.

The Second World War reduced the numbers but by 1946 Captain Shutt was back at his job ensuring that visitors to Portrush were kept fully entertained throughout their stay whether it was for a day or a week. The firework displays that he organised were legendary and the audiences at these just after the Second World War surpassed anything seen in Portrush. He always liaised with the Ulster Transport Authority to ensure that excursion trains were timed to bring day trippers to and from his events. As well as organising and running the events he also compèred and commentated at them often not getting home until 2am but as long as things were going well he was happy.

One of his greatest gifts was his outstanding memory and even infrequent visitors to Portrush were greeted like old friends. It was due in no small part to Captain Shutt's organisational skills and personality that Portrush developed from a 'quiet watering place' into one of Ireland's leading holiday destinations tagged 'the Brighton of the North' with many families returning year after year.

Other Interests:

Prior to the Second World War he was appointed as ARP Warden for the Portrush and Coleraine area and during the early part of the War he was Civil Defence Officer for Fermanagh. In his spare time he was involved in various societies around the town. He joined the British Legion and, over the years, occupied the posts of Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary.



Captain and Mrs Shutt at the Tennis Tournament in 1939

In 1959 he was awarded the Legion's Gold Badge and the Northern Ireland area Certificate of Appreciation in recognition of his "*voluntary and devoted work for the benefit of the ex-Service community in Northern Ireland and the Portrush branch in particular*". The awards were presented to him by the President Dr Sloan M Bolton.

He was also Commodore of Portrush Sailing Club for many years as well as Chairman of the Sea Cadets. His hobbies included gardening - he was particularly fond of geraniums - and painting. He designed his own Christmas cards as well logos for some of the local clubs such as hockey, sailing and bowling.

Retirement: Captain Shutt retired in November 1965 at the age of 70. He was still working right up until this time in spite of the poor health which was the reason for his retirement. Heartfelt tributes were paid to him by the Council including that of the Chairman, Mr W R Knox OBE, who said

"Captain Shutt has served Portrush faithfully and well and we sincerely regret that ill-health has forced his retirement. He has been an outstanding official and over the years has built up a tremendous reputation in tourist circles. He was the guiding force behind some of our most successful entertainments and carried out his duties in this capacity in a most excellent manner." The Vice-Chairman, Mr R G Macauley, said *"Captain Shutt's retirement will mark the end of an era and he will be sadly missed by both the Council and also by thousands of holidaymakers"*.

As a tribute, a street in the town was named after him.



Captain Shutt died on 2 April 1971 aged 76 and is buried in Ballywillan Cemetery. His wife, Elizabeth, predeceased him in 1963 and he was survived by his two daughters, Mrs Gerry Hunt of Portrush and Mrs Margaret Warren of Cambridge.

Acknowledgements: History of Portrush Facebook for the image of the Recreation Grounds Photographs are kindly reproduced from the archives of Captain W R Shutt M.C supplied by his granddaughters Mrs Antoinette Brown and Mrs Jacqui O'Neill who are honoured to be sharing these memories of Portrush.

Sources: Photo of Captain Shutt - Discover Portrush, Photo of Captain and Mrs Shutt - *Londonderry Sentinel* 24 August 1939

Our thanks to Frances for her work in researching Captain WR Shutt MC a man of great stature and presence. 18th December 2021



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