



Heritage Newsletter



Issue 64

The Skerries

(by Paul Ross)

Extract from “A Guide to Portrush, Giants Causeway, Ballycastle and Neighbourhood” by Rev. A. Richardson, dated 1913, price 1/=-.

You may find the phraseology very dated!

“The Skerries. *The Skerries are a long range of small islands lying off Portrush, about a mile and a half long, running from west to east. They are 17 in number. There is vegetation on four of them. viz. the Winkle Isle, the Small Isle, the East Isle and the Large Skerrie.*



Image courtesy of the John Moore Collection

The westernmost Island is called the West Isle and that furthest east is called Island Dubh (Dhu). It is probable it is named after Tavish Dubh (Dhu) a pirate who once frequented the Skerries, and died in his ship here and was there buried but the place of his grave is unknown. It is said that Tavish Dubh (Dhu), in 1315 (when Edward Bruce invaded North Antrim with the object of winning Ulster) waylaid four English ships bound with provisions for Coleraine, held by an English army, and took their provisions up the river Bann to Bruce, who was in sore straits and soon afterwards abandoned the attempt. On the east side of the largest of these islands there is good shelter, with



an anchorage of six fathoms, a place often made use of in later times by smugglers. In 1782 a French brig carrying provisions for the French army at Pondicherry in the East Indies, having been taken by an English privateer off the coast of Donegal, both ships encountering a terrible gale, they made for this shelter, which the privateer with the French captain on board reached successfully, outriding the storm, while the French brig, taking a too easterly course, sank in a sandbank. The cargo was, however, saved and taken by Lord Antrim to his house at Ballymagarry. It is said that a chest of money stored under the captain's cabin was lost, so rapidly did the brig sink in the sandbank. It is also related that the French captain with some money tied round his waist swam from the large Skerrie ashore and escaped."



Drawing by Brian Willis for Pirates Off Portrush Festival.

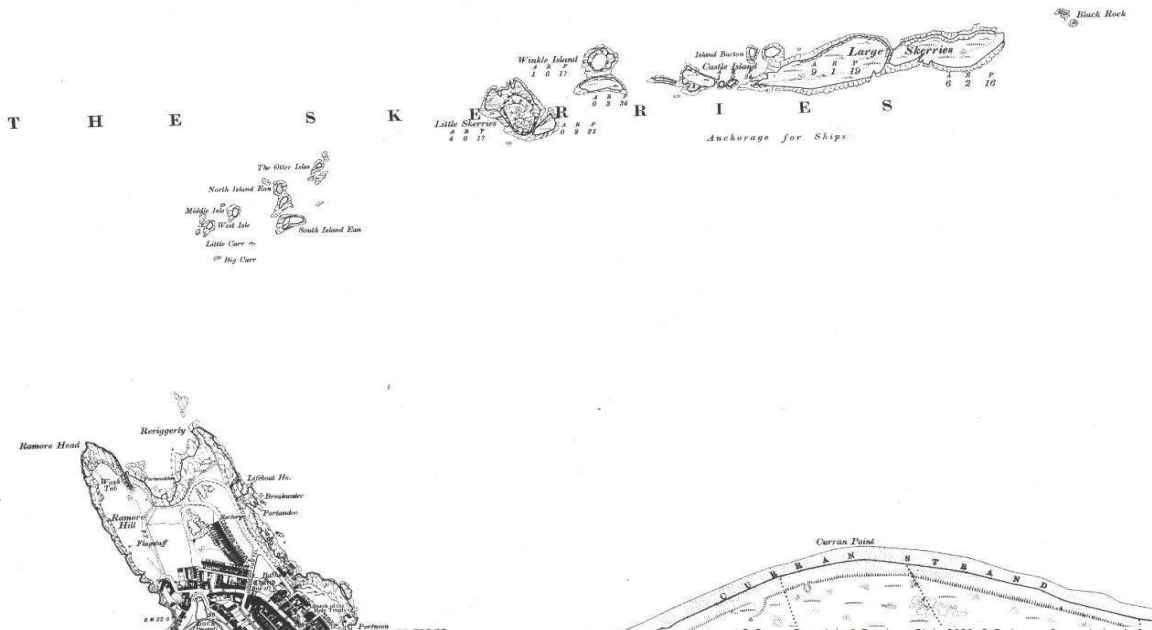
The Skerries narrative can also be found :

- Dalriada or North Antrim by William Adams 1906.
- Sketches of Olden Days in Northern Ireland by Canon Forde 1926.
- Round The Coast of Northern Ireland by Canon Ford 1928.
- A History of the Church of Ireland in The Parish of Ballywillan (Portrush) by T.W.R. Milner 1972.
- Portrush The Port on the Promontory by Hugh McGrattan 2015.

Notes: The whole group of islands covers about 24 acres.

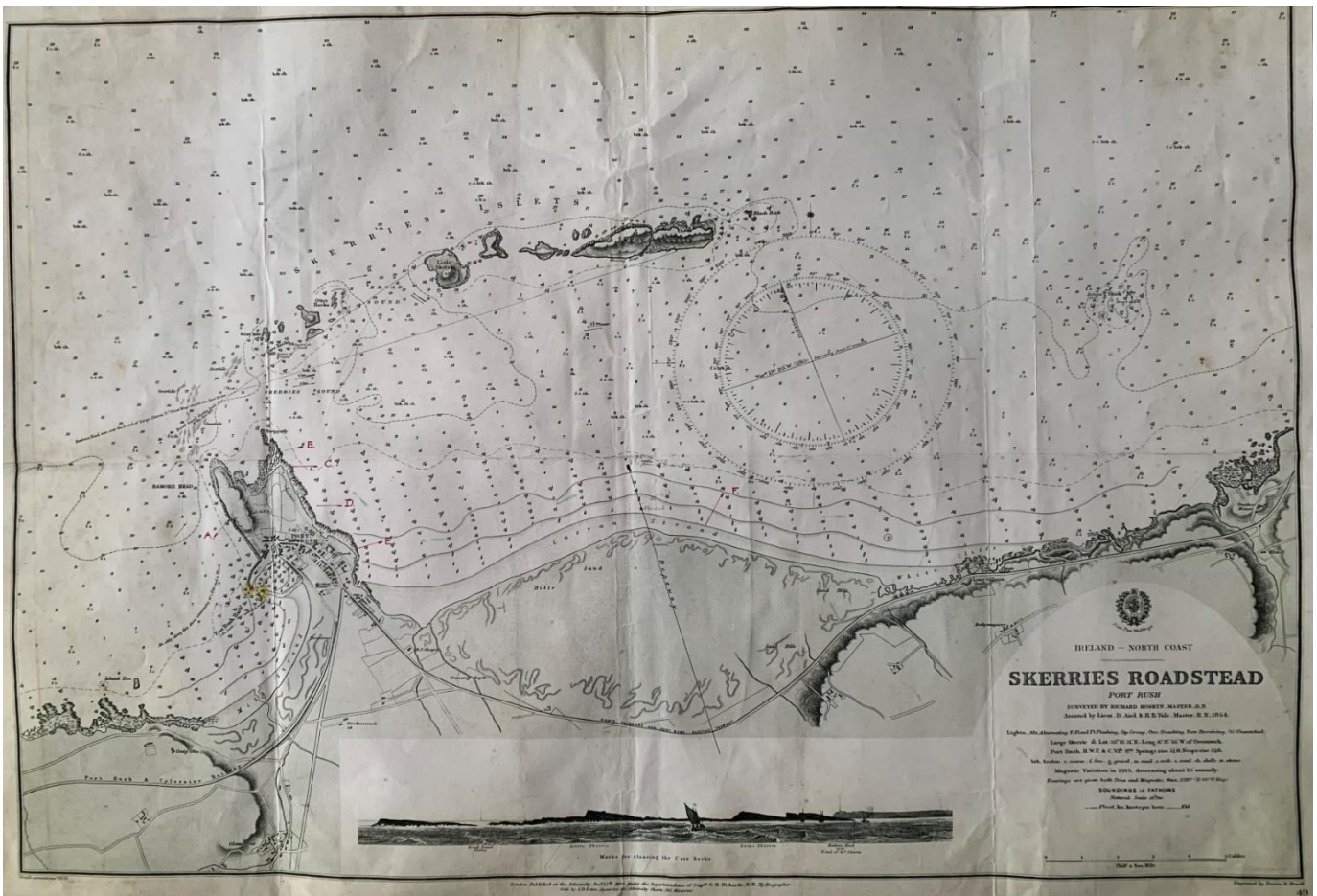
Ordnance Survey Map - 1900 Sheet 7. Portrush & The Giant's Causeway.

Named the various islands in the group as – West Isle, Ean Islands, The Otter Isles, Little Skerries, Winkle Island, Large Skerries and Black Rock.



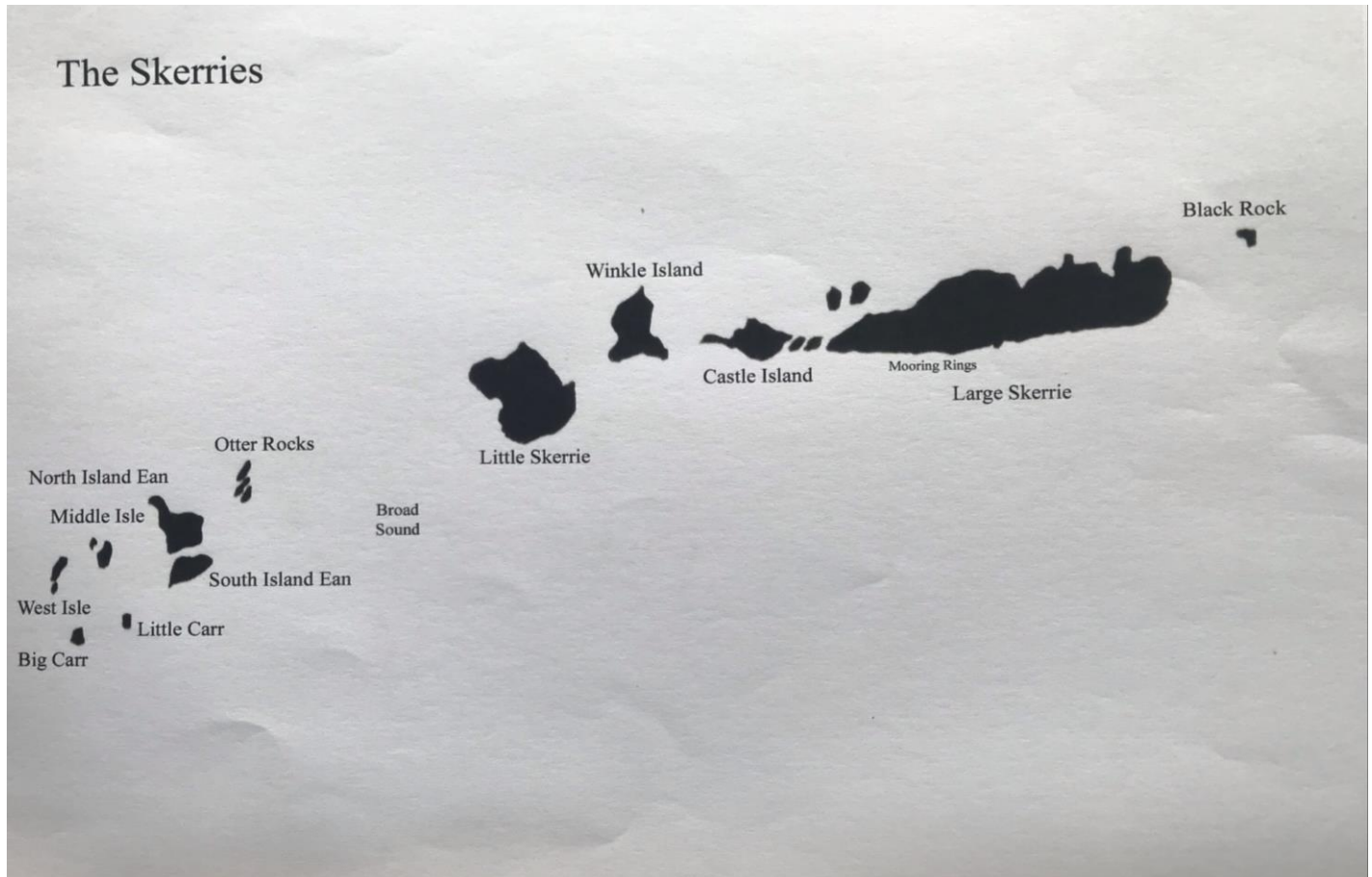
Extract from the Ordnance Survey Map - 1900 Crown Copyright

Admiralty Chart, Published 1865 Ireland - North Coast - Skerries Roadstead - Portrush.



Admiralty Chart 1865: Interesting feature is a Ropeway from the Craighulliar Quarry over Curran Point and out to sea.

The 1865 Chart names the various islands in the Skerries group as - West Isle, Carr Rocks (Big Carr, Little Carr), Middle Isle, South Island Ean, North Island Ean, Otter Rocks, Little Skerrie, Winkle Island, Castle Island, Large Skerrie and Black Rock.



As a young boy growing up in Portrush in the early 1950's I knew this area simply as The Wee Skerries and the Big Skerries. The area between them and the beach I called The Belly or Bed of the Skerries. Some called it the Skerries Roads.

The old Beacon that was situated approx 1 mile off the east end of the Skerries was called The Storks by the O.S. in 1900. The Admiralty chart 1865 call it Skirk Rocks. My Grandfather, old Sammy Ross, nicknamed "The Gannet", because of his long neck, and his brother-in-law, Willie McIntyre, known as "Pants" McIntyre, were professional fishermen in Portrush. They operated out of Port-an-Dhu with a traditional Drontheim boat. For a time they had a contract each summer to row out to and paint this 35 foot high structure known to some as The Iron Man or The Storks/Skirks. In January 2017 it was blown off the rocks in a bad gale and has now been replaced by modern marker buoys.

Our thanks to Paul for this excellent contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters. 1st January 2022