

ENJOYING THE PORTRUSH SEASON

By Frances Wilson

After the eastern part of Ramore Head was transformed into Recreation Grounds in 1923 a Sports Committee was set up with the aim of promoting 'the Season' to prospective holidaymakers. They appointed a Sports Officer whose job was to devise a programme of events then organise and promote it within the town and further afield. From 1923 until 1965 this role was fulfilled by Captain W R Shutt MC, an Englishman with a distinguished First World War Army record. As would be expected from an ex-soldier he went about his job with military precision and nothing was left to chance. His achievements certainly succeeded in putting Portrush on the map with titles such as 'beautiful little watering place' and 'the Brighton of the North'.

DEVISING THE EVENTS

Captain Shutt left no stone unturned in finding a wide variety of entertainment for visitors. On both land and sea there were displays and competitions to suit all tastes. The diversity of these was considerable - some were competitive such as tennis, putting, bowling, athletics, cycling, swimming, diving and water polo. Other events were for spectators and included pageants, fancy dress parades, military tattoos, regimental bands and firework displays all of which were enjoyed by enormous crowds on Ramore Head. Keep Fit and gymnastic displays were common just prior to the war.



L.M.S. NORTHERN COUNTIES COMMITTEE

BIG BOXING NIGHT AT RAMORE HEAD, PORTRUSH
TUESDAY, 10th JULY. at 7-30 p.m.

INTERNATIONAL POLICE TOURNAMENT
GERMANY versus IRELAND

1st Class Rail Belfast to Portrush and Back | Inclusive Ticket
Dinner on Train | **12/6**
Reserved Ringside Seat

BOOK NOW AT L.M.S. OFFICE, 11-13 DONEGALL PLACE.
NO BOOKINGS AFTER SATURDAY, 7th JULY.

SPECIAL TRAIN leaves Belfast at 5-55 p.m., returning from Portrush 11-0 p.m.
TRAIN FARE ONLY: 4/- 1st Class. 2/- 3rd Class.
Passengers from Ballymena leave at 5-52 p.m. and return from Portrush at 11-0 p.m.

FARES: 2/6 1st Class. 1/6 3rd Class.
MALCOLM SPEIR, Manager and Secretary.

Special one-off events included displays by a troupe of Viennese Dancers, the Harlem Globetrotters and the Australian Bowling Team. There were also International Sheepdog Trials and a boxing match between the Irish and German Police (won by the Germans).

Advert from Derry Journal 6 July 1934

PUBLICITY

Advertising for all these events came in several forms and was published throughout Northern Ireland as well as within Portrush.

Captain Shutt ensured that all locals were aware of what was going on by circulating letters requesting their support. This lengthy letter went on to ask residents to decorate their houses to provide a colourful backdrop for the parade, encouraging them to enter one of the many categories and to 'Come in your thousands - the more the merrier!'

To the Residents and Visitors
at Portrush.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

The Portrush Sports Committee request your hearty support and co-operation in the 3rd Annual Carnival and Fancy Dress Parade to be held in Portrush on Saturday, 19th July.

Dates to Remember

April 7th (Fri.)	Recreation Grounds open for Season. Tennis, Bowls, Putting, Swings, etc.
April 8th (Sat.)	Portrush Players present "The Shining Hour" (by Keith Winter) in the Town Hall Theatre.
April 8th (Sat.)	Royal Portrush Golf Club—"The Plunkett Barton Cup" (Open Stroke Handicap).
April 10th (Mon.)	Portrush Players present "The Shining Hour" (by Keith Winter) in the Town Hall Theatre.
April 10th (Mon.)	Royal Portrush Golf Club—"The Alexander Cup" (Open Handicap).

Programmes for the full Season were published in advance and circulated by the Information Bureau of the District Council. A section of 'Dates to Remember' for the 1950 Season is shown. The Recreation Grounds opened on Friday 7 April that year and between then and Monday 2 October a total of 50 events were listed not including two competition weeks at the Recreation Grounds - bowling in mid-July and tennis at the end of August.

The press contained many adverts for Portrush itself as well as the events taking place there.

Holiday Health and Happiness
At PORTRUSH
THIS EASTER
Will give you the NEW LOOK.
GOLF, TENNIS, BOWLS,
PUTTING, BOATING, DANCING.
Details of Hotels and Boarding-houses from — INFORMATION BUREAU, Recreation Grounds, Portrush.

Advert from Belfast Newsletter 19 March 1948 (left)

Advert from Northern Constitution 18 July 1930 (below)

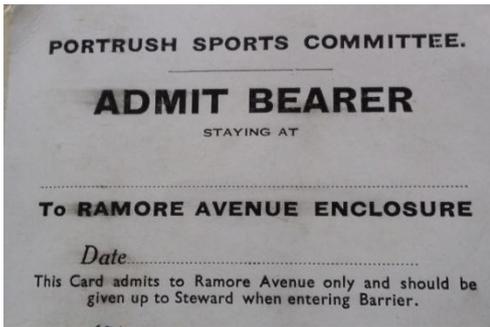
THE JOLLIEST AFTERNOON OF THE SEASON.
Portrush Annual Carnival,
 SATURDAY, JULY 19th, Commencing at 3 p.m.
Grand Fancy Dress Parade.
 No Entry Fee. Entrants assemble Stewart's Garage, Dunluce Street, at 2-30.
 OVER 50 VALUABLE PRIZES FOR BEST COSTUMES. SEE HANDBILLS.
 THE PIPERS OF THE ROYAL INNISKILLING FUSILIERS AND THE BAND OF THE ROYAL ULSTER CONSTABULARY WILL ATTEND.
 WONDERFUL VARIETY PROGRAMME AT RAMORE HILL,
 Admission to Hill, 6d. Reserved Seats, 1s. Can be booked at the Recreation Grounds.
 Judging of Competitors. Band Performances by the Pipers of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Band of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Selected items by Concert Parties. Irish Folk Dancing. Freak Dog Show.
THE BIGGEST SPECTACLE PORTRUSH HAS YET SEEN.

Finally, sandwich boards were used to catch the attention of anyone who had missed all the other forms of publicity as seen in this photo from 1938 reminding everyone to go to Ramore Hill at 8.30pm for the Grand Finale of the Season.





ORGANISATION OF EVENTS



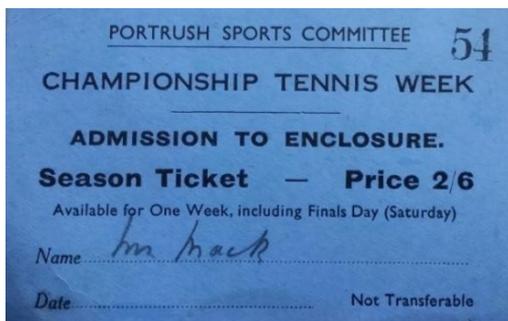
The events mainly took place on Ramore Hill (later called Ramore Head) where the capacity was over 10,000. Entry tickets were issued like this one from the 1939 Season when admission cost 6d and reserved seating 1s 3d. Aquatic events were mainly centred around the Harbour and the Blue Pool.

Captain Shutt's resourcefulness knew no bounds. When the dockers' strike of 1939 prevented fireworks arriving from England for the advertised display, he quickly put together a programme of music, marching and folk dancing so that the holidaymakers would not be disappointed. He also designed the programme for the Season around the family so that there was something for all ages. Mindful of the visitors from England and Scotland, he organised events to embrace them such as 'The Three Nations' concert in the Season of 1939 which 10,000 attended.

As a keen sportsman himself, Captain Shutt was eager to see the facilities at the Recreation Grounds put to good use and he organised a wide array of tournaments there. 1930 saw the inaugural Tennis Week with the Co Antrim Hard Court Championships attracting entries from far and wide. By 1939 there were 787 entries competing for the generous prize monies of three guineas for singles winners and two guineas each for doubles winners - ladies and gentlemen getting the same amount.



Tennis Courts at Ramore Head



Season tickets were available to watch the full week's play from Monday to Saturday. The holder of this ticket would have been able to see all the matches in the Co Antrim Hard Court Championships and Handicap events.

Dinner dances were held the night before and the night of the Tennis Finals in the Louis XIV ballroom at the Northern Counties Hotel - dress was either dinner jacket or tennis wear and the cost 6/6 per person. The swimming pool at the Hotel was also opened each night for an hour at midnight with underwater illuminations



Bowling tournaments were also organised at the Recreation Grounds under the auspices of the local Bowling Club. For many years there was an annual bowling week in July as well as a one day competition in September. Details of the results for both of these were published in the local press and showed that entries came from all over Ireland as well as Scotland, Wales and England with the large number of spectators present being commented on.

Athletics events, which included cycling and tug-of-war, were another attraction with the Portrush Season being described as the 'Mecca for Ireland's athletes'. At the Annual Championship of Athletic Sports organised by the Sports Committee in August 1930, there were 14 events all offering valuable prizes. Of these, eight were flat races including the 440 yards flat championship of Northern Ireland, four were cycle races including the two mile championship of Northern Ireland, there was a tug-of-war and finally a 'Mystery Race' for those who had not won anything in any of the other races.



Aquatic displays included 'serious' events such as swimming, high board diving and water polo. These were organised by Portrush Amateur Swimming Club with many entrants competing for the prizes. There were also 'sideshows' such as climbing the greasy pole and mop fights. The diving events held at the Blue Pool and the swimming races in the Harbour all attracted large crowds of spectators.

High Diving at the Blue Pool

There were sailing and yachting events with keen competition between the local clubs as well as those from further afield such as Co Donegal and Co Down. As the course was usually from the East Strand to the Harbour, spectators were advised to go to the North Pier or the Grandstand at Ramore Head to get the best views of the action. Rowing races were also included in the programme with both ladies and gents competing. For many years Captain Shutt was Commodore of the Portrush Yacht Club and took a keen interest in the competition.

TRANSPORT TO THE EVENTS

During this era, fewer people had cars and the railway network was more extensive so many visitors arrived in Portrush by train. Some events, such as carnivals, firework displays and golf, offered inclusive tickets from all stations with late services being added to take patrons home afterwards.

Advert from Belfast Telegraph 20 July 1938



L M S
NORTHERN COUNTIES
COMMITTEE

★ **FIREWORKS** ★
and
MILITARY PAGEANT
By the Band and Drums of H.M. 1st Btn. The Welch Regiment

At PORTRUSH
On **THURSDAY, 21st JULY, 1938.**
SPECIAL EXCURSION from BELFAST

LATE RETURN TRAIN.		RETURN FARE
Leave BELFAST	5-55 p.m.	3rd Class
Leave PORTRUSH	11-40 p.m.	2/-

Corporation Buses will meet Train at Belfast.

Tickets are valid only by above Trains, and are issued subject to the Conditions shown in the Company's Time Tables and Notices.

MALCOLM SPEIR, Manager and Secretary.



In addition to all the organised events there were plenty of other things to keep the visitors occupied whether they came for a day, a week or the Season. Two beaches, bracing sea walks, two cinemas, dancing nightly and various plays were all on offer along with the Recreation Grounds and the Golf Course. Portrush's slogan in 1950 was 'Portrush provides health, happiness and entertainment for all'.

Putting at Ramore Head

THE SUCCESS OF THE SEASON

The following figures from the 1939 Season show the success of Captain Shutt's campaign to promote Portrush. At one of the many spectator events, 12,000 people on Ramore Head watched 700 people taking part in a Keep Fit display. In the week 12-19 July, 5145 putting tickets were sold with 844 of these bought on 12 July, 534 people played tennis on 19 July and 569 tickets were issued at the South Pier Bathing place on 16 July. The Council, discussing these figures at a later meeting, described them as 'encouraging' and the receipts from them as 'satisfactory'.

The days of the Council providing a Season of entertainment slowly faded during the 1970s as people's tastes changed. Watching swimming races and military bands no longer appealed to the next generation who preferred to jet off to Spain for a fortnight in the sun. Although still a popular destination, Portrush now has far fewer Council-run events compared to the non-stop entertainment of the 'Captain Shutt era'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

History of Portrush Facebook for the pictures of

Diving at the Blue Pool

Putting at Ramore Head

The Tennis Courts at Ramore Head

All unaccredited illustrations are kindly reproduced from the archives of Captain W R Shutt MC supplied by his granddaughters Mrs Antoinette Brown and Mrs Jacqui O'Neill who are honoured to be sharing these memories of Portrush.

Our thanks to Frances for this excellent contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters.

22nd January 2022