

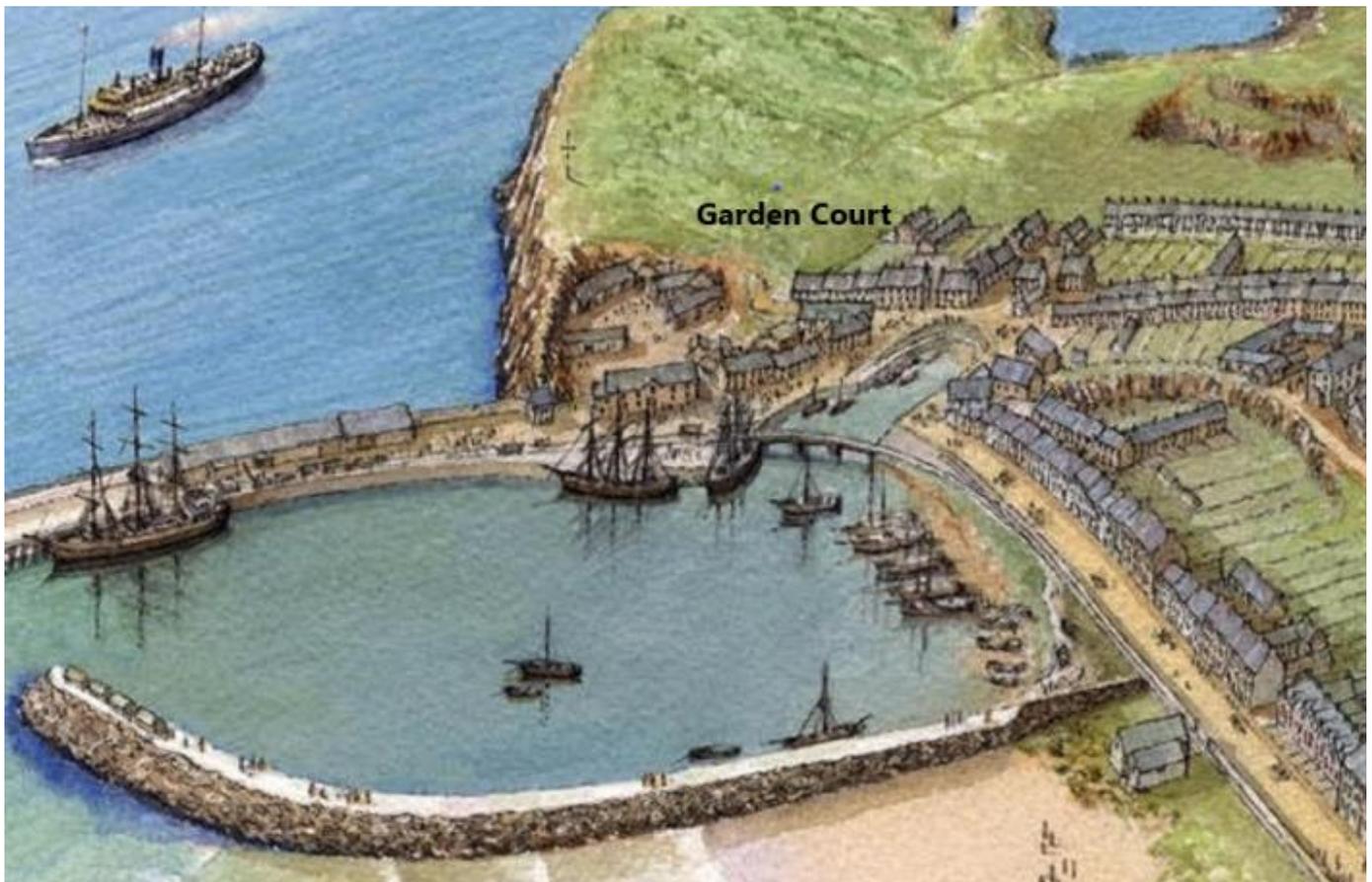
In Search of My Roots

A family from the Land of Giants by Sheila Hamilton Stirrup

My name is Sheila Hamilton Stirrup and I was brought up in London's east end. But my father was a Portrush man, and Northern Ireland is the land I love. Where to start? George Hamilton, my beloved father, died suddenly and tragically when I was a small child. Over years a void widened and my Northern Irish roots became more distant. I needed to rediscover my heritage.

My DNA results arrived in December 2016. There began my search. Following DNA matches, so many questions answered; so many more unanswered. The best outcome by far was discovering my new family. Plus the kindness and support of Northern Ireland's community.

Born in Garden Court Portrush in 1911, my father was one of nine children: Agnes, Archie, Margaret Isobel (Greta), Elizabeth (Lily), James, Thomas, George, Jane and Anna Edith Oulton (my godmother).



Painting of Portrush c1907 by Philip Armstrong: copyright Portrush Heritage Group

I was baptised in Holy Trinity Church, where there is a memorial plaque to Anna Edith Oulton of Kerr Street, who died in 1922. Surely her name was the inspiration for my godmother's? Using

established and well-publicised sources, locating my aunts and uncles was straightforward, and so rewarding.

But the human detail becomes compelling, and my urgent need to create a story beyond the computer. This story will, eventually, become a book. Here are a just few snippets, in embryonic form. My great-great grandfather, William Wilmot, was born in Bushmills in 1831. Griffith's Valuation shows that he leased land from William Trail. William Wilmot married Alice Blair in 1854 in Finvoy Church. Neither could read or write. Their daughter, Nancy Wilmot (spinster), married Samuel Wilson (labourer) in May 1870. Nancy was just seventeen years old. She gave birth to her first child in September. Reverend Alan Buick, who kindly opened Dunluce Church for me so I could peruse church records, drew my attention to this. Samuel Wilson continued his life as a farm labourer, outliving Nancy who died of bronchitis in 1896. My grandmother, Eliza Hamilton, was with her when she died at Ballydivity (possibly in service) and left her mark **X** on Nancy's death certificate.

I knew my grandmother, Eliza, only briefly. How I would love to speak with her now. One year later Eliza Wilson (Ballytober) married James Hamilton (baptised Jameson, though his father was Archibald) from Priestland. The service was in Dunluce Presbyterian Church. James's father was also a farm labourer. His mother, Margaret (nee Ramage) was an embroiderer. My middle name is Margaret, and my hobby? Sewing, of course. At the time of their marriage, my grandfather James was a labourer in Ballyclough. By 1898 his fortunes had changed. He had become a father and moved to the outskirts of Portrush. His job was now a "car owner". James had taken advantage of the burgeoning tourist trade. He drove a jaunting car! Ferrying tourists to and fro in this popular seaside resort. Garden Court became the family home and, later, Ramore Street. The 1911 Census recorded that James "cannot read".

He supported his growing family as a "driver", a coalman, a master carter. Just imagine those packed steamers arriving in the harbour from Scotland. The crowds. The hustle and bustle. I remember family holidays in Portrush. The seasickness especially. But, even stronger, the excitement of boarding a train in Belfast and finally arriving at the chequerboard station. Days spent with family.



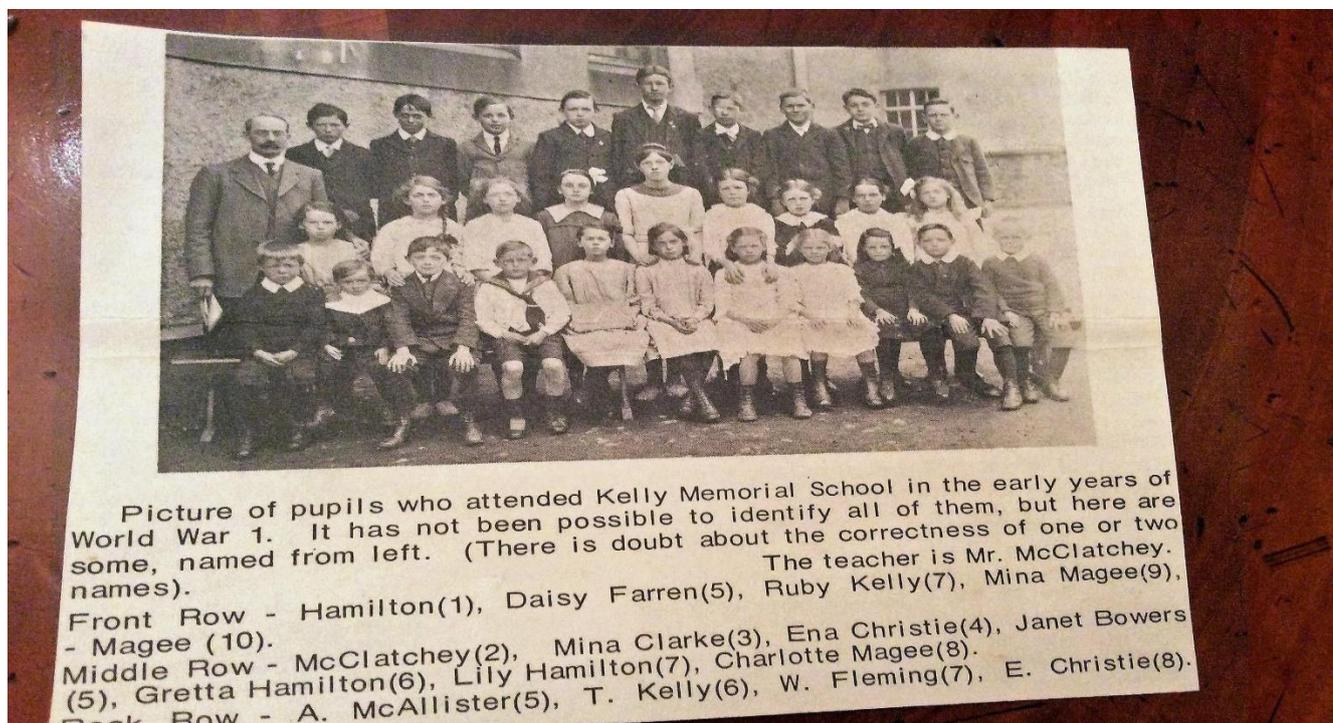
Busy Harbour scene courtesy of John Moore Collection



Sheila, her father George and sister Jo

A rockpool on Ramore Head, where my father gently placed a fish in a rockpool for me to watch while he fished. Huddled on the beach in all weathers. Watching fishermen land their catch in the harbour. The lifeboat with memories of my Uncle Ken McMullan (Auntie Jane's husband). Barry's and the Big wheel. Brandy ball sweets. Scant memories, but happy. James and Eliza brought nine children into this world.

Though uneducated themselves, all their children attended Kelly Memorial School. The school records and registers are stored in Belfast's Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, where I was thrilled to study them. Seven of their children made their homes in Northern Ireland. Only two chose to fly the nest. Aunt Agnes to Vancouver, Canada; George, who travelled the world.



School Photograph

James' and Eliza's son, James, died of diptheria in Ballymoney Hospital on 2nd August 1920. He was thirteen years old. James was buried in the Hamilton family grave in Ballywillan Old Cemetery. My grandfather was buried there in 1942; Eliza joined them in 1959. My godmother, Anna, followed in 1995.

I am slowly getting to grips with the townlands, combining old online maps with present day satellite images. So fascinating. My most recent trip to Northern Ireland, in September 2021, had a definite geographical focus. Surrounded by these familiar names such as Benvarden and Ballydivity, I feel a deep sense of history, belonging and pride in the fortitude of this vast family. My father's story becomes real when I return to Northern Ireland. Meeting a local artist who has painted his grandfather, a Portrush fisherman from Garden Court. A family neighbour. Such moments are precious.

I love pouring over old photographs in family albums and forgotten handbags in garages. I copy them all. I constantly ask questions. I trawl through pages of records, so thrilled to find an answer. Driving through Bushmills on our frequent trips to Northern Ireland, I just knew that the Ramages corner shop had been a family concern. But no proof. On enquiring inside the shop, I was advised to seek out Violet, who lives on the way to Portballintrae. I didn't.

More than four years later, revisiting Ancestry, I noticed a DNA match with the name Ramage on the family tree. So I contacted him. Violet is his grandmother! So, a whole new avenue of research opened up, with the support of a most skilled family genealogist. All this begins and ends with my father, George Hamilton, who died in 1961. His ashes were strewn in City of London Cemetery. Sixty years later I gathered earth from the plot. This I scattered on the family grave, at Ramore Head where he loved to fish, in the harbour and in Antrim Gardens. George Hamilton finally came home. His Irish heartbeat lives forever here.



Sheila Hamilton Stirrup in Graveyard

Our thanks to Sheila for this fascinating and moving account of her search for her roots. If you would like to contact Sheila please email her c/o chairman.portrushheritage@gmail.com.

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