



Heritage Newsletter



Issue 77

PORTRUSH URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL When Portrush had 'Home Rule' 1892 - 1973

by Frances Wilson

As Portrush developed into a popular holiday resort, local people wanted to take charge of their own affairs free from the attention of outside authorities. The Towns Improvement (Ireland) Act 1854 allowed the electorate of places such as Portrush to establish Town Commissions thus enabling the many communities that had never had municipal status to gain local government bodies. The Editor of the *Chronicle* made a strong case for Portrush to free itself from the authority of the Coleraine Board of Governors which, he felt, did not understand the requirements of a seaside resort -

"The necessity of having some authority to directly represent the inhabitants and attend to the requirements of the place with reasonable promptitude is so obvious that further advocacy would appear to be superfluous."

A meeting of local ratepayers was held resulting in Portrush holding its first election on 1 December 1892 when 112 ratepayers and property owners exercised their right to vote. From 28 contestants they chose a board of 15 to represent their newly-constituted municipality and on 10 December Portrush Town Commissioners met for the first time and elected Mr H A Macaulay of Thalatta House as their first Chairman. Other members included merchants, a boat builder, hotel proprietors and a 'gentleman'.

The Commission met monthly in the Town Hall and their proceedings, often lively, were printed in the *Chronicle*. The reporters attending them are to be congratulated on the interpretation of their shorthand notes as the transcripts of the meetings often ran to several columns of the then broadsheet newspaper. Sometimes the report ended - *'this concluded the business'* but at other times the final phrase was *'the rest of the business was unimportant'* and one wonders whether the reporter was simply exhausted! During their first year the Town Commissioners discussed many different topics, some at greater length than others. The debate about whether Portrush should have gas or electric lighting was reported on throughout the year as was the importance of new footpaths. The Commissioners felt that visitors should be able to walk safely between the station, their hotel and areas such as Ramore Head and the promenades. However, the use of such footpaths for merchants to display their goods was discouraged as it prevented the free passage of pedestrians. The cleaning of the streets and such public toilets as existed was also felt essential for a popular resort. The purchase of an illuminated clock for the railway station was discussed at one meeting. One topic briefly touched upon was that of swimmers entering the water in certain parts of the town *'without drawers'* and it was felt this needed to be strictly discouraged!

Portrush Town Commissioners existed for six years until the Local Government (Ireland) Act was passed in 1898 to incorporate a similar system to that which was being used in England and Wales. The electorate

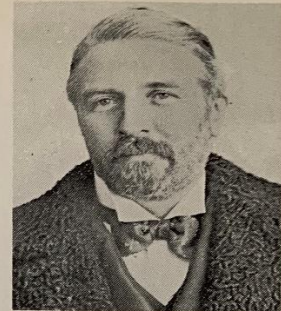


again turned out and the reformed body, known as Portrush Urban District Council (PUDC), existed for just over 70 years during which time it had 26 different Chairmen one of whom, Miss C E Hamilton, was thought to be the first woman in Ireland to hold such a post. Miss Hamilton was obviously held in very high esteem by the rest of the Council as when ill health forced her to retire after 17 years in office, five as Chairman, they sent her an ornate letter of thanks. Alongside this was a list of some 300 names of Portrush residents who wished to be associated with the letter including 26 from The Mother's Union.

CHAIRMEN

YEARS IN OFFICE

H.A. Macaulay	1892-94
Fred H. Watt	1895-99 and 1908
James C. Caldwell	1900-01
John Charles Martin	1902-05
William John Fall	1906
Joseph H. Caskey	1907
Thomas Bamford	1909
William J. Morrow	1910 and 1914
Charlotte E. Hamilton	1911-12; 1915-16 and 1918
James Kelly	1913 and 1921
James McFarlane	1919-20
Andrew Kelly	1922
Robert Alexander Chalmers	1923
Archibald James Whitelaw Christie	1924
Bryce Stewart	1925
John Cromie Lyle	1926-27
George McMullan	1928
Robert Brown Adams	1929-30
Herbert James Black	1931
William Robert Knox	1932-33; 1939-42; 1946-66 and 1968
George Edmund Blakely Pepper	1934
Joseph Henry Seery	1935
Hugh Carson	1936-38
Andrew Stewart	1943-44
Thomas McCandless	1945
Robert Gerald Macauley	1967 and 1969-73



H.A. Macaulay

TOWN CLERKS

YEARS IN OFFICE

M.A. Fleming	1899-1907
W.I. Cunningham	1908-53
S. Cunningham	1954-63
C.C. Marshall	1964-73
H.M. Alexander	1973

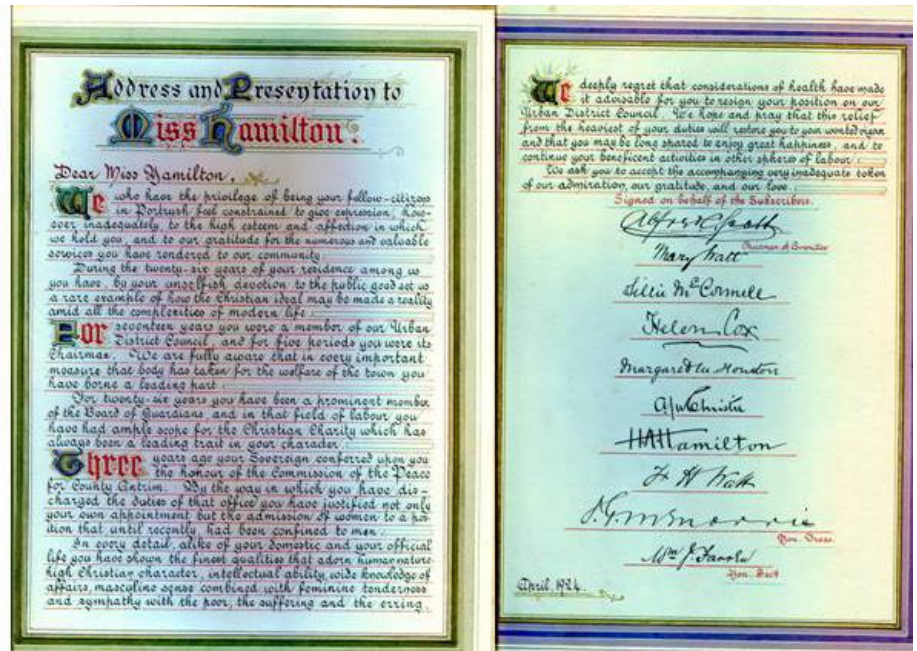


R.G. Macauley

List of PUDC Chairmen



Miss Charlotte Hamilton



Letter of Appreciation to Miss Charlotte Hamilton

The newly elected PUDC acted on behalf of the citizens of Portrush as well as the increasing number of visitors. During the next 20 years it was responsible for providing new waterworks, improved sewerage, a housing scheme and, in 1916, for bringing the Town Hall into public ownership.

Post-war the town underwent great development including the opening of an electricity generating station in 1922, and the purchase of Ramore Hill and the opening of the Recreation Grounds in 1923. The PUDC decided that entertainment needed to be offered throughout the summer months if Portrush was to be successful in attracting large numbers of visitors. To achieve this they appointed a Recreation Officer, Captain Shutt, whose organisational ability was such that Portrush became a magnet as a holiday resort. A golden era followed with open air entertainment of many kinds such as carnivals, concerts, firework displays, aquatic events and military tattoos. Sports tournaments such as tennis and bowls were also introduced and saw large numbers of entrants. The success of all this was shown by the fact that in 1931 the number of visitors to the town had reached such a level that the PUDC felt the need to introduce car parking. All these matters and many others led to longer and longer Council meetings which often lasted well into the night.

During the Second World War there were restrictions to development but post-war was a very busy time for PUDC with an increase in housing. Holidaymakers returned in even greater numbers and the Council re-introduced entertainment. The building of a second seafront promenade, sea defence works, a new bus station and more houses occurred in 1950. During the 1950s the Council was engaged in discussions on using film to promote the town as a holiday destination. The result focused on colourful scenes of idyllic family holidays with donkey rides, pleasure gardens and beaches. In 1964 it was involved in negotiations regarding the opening of a second university in Northern Ireland and its possible location within what is now known as the Triangle area. The Council promoted Portrush as being able to offer accommodation for students and staff, outstanding countryside and recreational facilities.



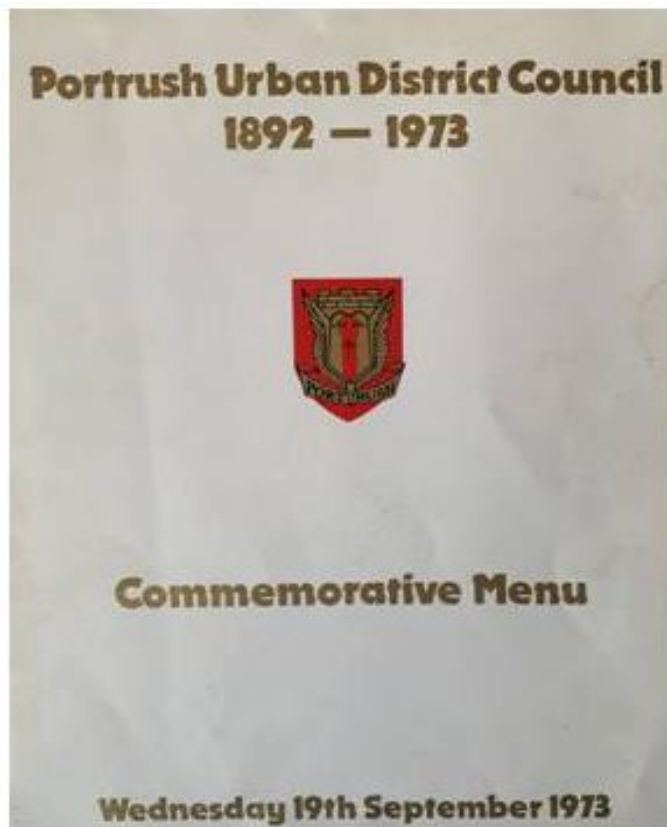
However the days of PUDC were numbered as regionalisation took place throughout Northern Ireland and Portrush was subsumed into the new and much expanded District (later Borough) of Coleraine. The final PUDC took office in May 1967 and their last meeting was convened on Monday 24 September 1973 under the Chairmanship of R G Macauley. During his time as Chairman Mr Macauley had worn a Chain of Office which included a badge, shown here, designed by local artist Mr George Lyttle. At the end of his term this was handed to Coleraine Borough Council for its archives.



Crest from Chairman's Chain Of Office

During September and October 1973 the *Chronicle* carried many photos and articles on the disbanding of the local urban and rural councils and the formation of the new District Council of Coleraine. For PUDC, Wednesday 19 September was a day of celebration although it was also tinged with sadness that local government would never be the same again. The day started with an inter-denominational service in the Council Chamber followed by a luncheon at the Northern Counties Hotel for the Council's outdoor staff. An afternoon buffet was held at the Skerry Bhan Hotel for the many volunteers who had helped the Council in various ways over the years.

However the highlight of the day was the dinner held at Fawcett's Hotel and presided over by Mr R G Macauley. After a sumptuous dinner, there were many toasts and tributes paid to staff and other townspeople who had helped the PUDC in so many ways such as Mr Ken Hill, the Borough Surveyor,



Commemorative Menu 19 September 1973





Wray & Baxter Solicitors, the Northern Bank Ltd, the RUC and finally, the Town Clerk, Mr Harold Alexander, who in addition to all his other duties had organised the farewell events so successfully. Mr Macauley spoke on behalf of the Council and hoped that the residents of Portrush would feel they had been served well throughout the 80 years of the PUDC. Special tributes were paid to W R Knox, a longstanding member of the Council, who as both a member and its Chairman on many occasions had served for 44 years and was regarded by most as the 'father' of PUDC. Unfortunately he was prevented from attending the dinner due to ill health although he had been in attendance at one of the events earlier in the day. The evening was rounded off with a cabaret entitled 'Cavalcade of Song from 1893 - 1973' organised by William Loughlin and the Ronald M'Cully Singers.

RING OUT THE OLD . . .

The dramatic switch-over in local government, which sees the end of county, borough, urban and rural councils, and their replacement by district councils and area boards, takes effect on Monday next.

And, apart from a change in set-up, there will also be a massive change in personnel. Never before can there have been such a simultaneous fade-out of so many prominent personalities—both members of disappearing authorities and senior officers.

A great many members of the old councils did not go forward at the recent local government elections to seek seats on the new bodies, and a marked number of senior and experienced officers have chosen this time to retire from public service.

Now it is the turn of the new blood, whether members of the district councils, area boards, or officers.

They will be the first to acknowledge that their task in getting the new format into smooth running order will not be an easy one.

The gratitude of the general public is due to those who have shouldered responsibility in the past, and their best wishes and support must surely be offered to those who will be taking it on in the future.

The front page of the *Chronicle* of 29 September 1973 paid tribute to all those who had served in the Councils over the years as the area entered the new era of local government.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Roberta Knox for providing the Chairmen and Commemorative Menu images and Hugh McGrattan for providing the Portrush Crest and allowing The Heritage Group access to the text in his excellent book “Portrush The Port on the Promontory”.

SOURCES

Coleraine Chronicle 1892 and September and October 1973.

Coleraine Museum Service - Photo of and letter of thanks to Miss C E Hamilton.

McGrattan, H. 2015. *Portrush: The Port on the Promontory*. Impact Printing, Ballycastle.

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Frances for this excellent account of “When Portrush had Home Rule”.

2nd April 2022