

Portrush - The Brighton of the North

Had its heyday in Victorian and Edwardian times

The Arcadia Complex

Miss Rebecca Rice was responsible for this kick start to tourism - she organised the East Strand meets the old Salmon Fishery **promenade**. Construction was a scheme to provide work for local fishermen experiencing hard times. Rebecca's father had owned several sailing ships and a local salt manufacturing business. When he died she built several holiday villas including Rock Ryan. RR was an eight bedrooms and live in staff rental. She built Strandmore House in 1860. Strandmore House off Causeway Street was demolished about 2020. She built a girls' school and a Sunday School. Rebecca died in 1874. RR was demolished to open up the green space and then accommodate the Arcadia Cafe. The Arcadia Cafe was built in 1911, was one storey high and had a flat roof. Madame Levante's Ladies Orchestra entertained the crowds each summer season.

Thanks to Rebecca Rice, the Arcadia promenade was now well established as a popular attraction. This popularity lasted until about the 1960s.

Craigvara Terrace

Kelly had a boat building business here on the corner. He could build DRONTHIEMS – yawls - boats of wooden construction: the GARAVOGE was commissioned 1903 and still in the water today! Kelly used larch, pine, cedar, teak and elm. Dublin Sailing Club ordered two boats. The yard closed in the 1930s.

The Skerries

There are 17 of them - Big Skerries and Wee Skerries. The most easterly is Island Dhu. Only four have vegetation - Small Skerry; Winkle Isle; Large skerry and Castle Isle.

A local man – Hugh Black – had modest success growing potatoes on these and the crop was called Skerry Blacks. There have been several proposals to use the Skerries Road as a springboard for joining the Islands to Portrush. None of the projects have been developed.

The Three Harbours

PORTEEN harbour is identified at the salmon fishery storyboard and just beyond the Arcadia. It was used by the drift net salmon fishermen during the short June July season when salmon were coming in from the ocean on their way to the rivers to spawn. Men went out at night to set their nets - four men to each yawl / dronthiem. The fish went to local markets and freshly caught salmon was on the menu at the hotels and guesthouses. Many of these brave fishermen served as lifeboatmen.

PORT-AN-DHU (Black Port) round at Lansdowne was popular with summer season lobster fishing men who liked the proximity to the Skerries. A breakwater pier was established but later damaged in a storm of 1908. A lido enterprise - early 1980s was popular but short lived.

THE HARBOUR

In the 17th and 18th centuries this tiny harbour was popular with traders and fishermen from many lands because of the high quality fish eg salmon and ling. In the 18th and early 19th centuries there was a modest activity rowing emigrants out to the "coffin ship" transatlantic sailing vessels anchored in the West Bay or in the shelter of the Skerry Islands. Look for the **Pilgrim Steps**. Portrush was the least important of five North of Ireland ports used to collect emigrants. One of the last Portrush collection stops was recorded - 1834. The ship developed a leak whilst leaving the harbour and all passengers had to disembark.

1827 work began on a proper harbour: Cranach Hill the highest point of Ramore Head was quarried using pick axe and gunpowder - for North Pier. A west facing hillside (behind Kerr St) created South Pier. The evidence is there today.

The Scotch Boats

The **Portrush to Ardrossan** steamboat service - Laird Line - four hours crossing - established Portrush as a tourism hot-spot. Many Scottish holiday makers travelled over on *The Hazel*, *The Olive* and *The Lily*. Boats carried up to 25,000 passengers each summer. This all finished in 1914.

The Portrush Picture Houses

The **Pavilion Picture House** was inside a large pavilion built by The Winter Gardens Company around 1910. This Pavilion complex comprised three large halls. The picture house was in one of the halls and proved very popular.

The main activity in the Pavilion complex was roller skating and the official name for the whole complex was **The Roller Skating Rink Pavilion**. The rink had a 15 foot wide promenade running all the way round the rink, a bandstand, accommodation for six shops, cloakrooms, toilets, and later a space for dancing. The rink could take 400 skaters and a speed limit was imposed. It took 40 seconds to do a full circuit of the rink. The floor was maple wood laid over spruce. Elsewhere in the Pavilion there was a variety theatre space. The RSRP was flattened in 1920.

The **Picture Palace** was situated in the Town Hall. Mr Sheridan the manager used a new innovation - the Vivaphone - to synchronise sound with motion pictures. The Picture Palace finished in the 1930s.

The **Picture House** opened in Main St (now Sportsland) in 1912. It was popular with the American Forces during WW2.

The **Palladium Cinema** - opened in April 1939 - was in St Patrick's Hall Causeway St - but not for very long. A businessman - James Menary - opened cinemas in all three triangle towns.

The **Majestic Cinema** - below The White House - Main St. opened in 1938. It is the one remaining cinema and now called **The Playhouse**.

History of St Michael's Church Hall, Causeway Street

The ballroom opened in June 1939. Dick Love and his Dance Orchestra played here.

This is where the American soldiers danced when they were stationed in Portrush for some months: 1943-1944. The hall was called **The Palladium Ballroom** and had an excellent sprung floor. Later the hall was renamed the **New Theatre**. Edwin Heath the hypnotist entertainer was a big attraction post war - in 1964 he moved to Bangor. Dana and her older sister Susan were popular artistes in the sixties. Frank Carson performed here. The hall hosted Portrush Summer Theatre Season productions during the five years whilst the Town Hall was being renovated. The hall was sold to Jack Fawcett the hotelier and he used it as a storage facility. In 1980 the hall was bought by St Patrick's Church for their use as a church hall. This has proved a great success.

Entertainment for both tourists and excursionists

Uncle Joe entertained adults and children - mainly outdoors on the green space - in front of **Lansdowne Terrace** known as the "square" and at **Craig Vara** green space above the Arcadia beach. Harry Lauder was one of his visiting artistes. Joe had a supply of 300 deckchairs and, for lighting needs at night, a 500 candle-power lamp.

Henry Ireland's donkeys provided donkey rides on the East Strand.

There were numerous **band music performances** around the Port every summer.

By the 1890s Portrush summer season could claim a music hall appeal. **Minstrel** shows were booked and **Pierrot** shows were very popular. Pierrot Troupes wore black and white costumes and presented themselves as entertainers, particularly in holiday resorts. Sir Tony Blair's grandfather was an entertainer in this tradition.

Evangelical Mission males and females preached at the Lansdowne Terrace "square".

There were itinerant street musicians eg Italian organ-grinders.

Madame Levante and her Band of talented young ladies played at the Arcadia restaurant. There was dancing on the flat roof.

The Scottish visitors had a reputation for raucous sing songs late into the night.

Circus troupes came to town. Hanneford Circus toured Ireland on a regular basis between 1903 and 1912. They came to Portrush at some stage each summer. They liked to introduce themselves with a grand parade of animals and performers round the town. The Hanneford Family Circus has been based in America since the late 1920s and is still in business.

The Circus Ginnett was another big circus that came to Portrush - still in business. The Lloyd's Mexican Circus also came to town. When in Portrush the circus troupes usually camped in a field at Cloughoor just off the Bushmills Rd.

The Northern Counties Hotel orchestra was well established in the ballroom. They hired German musicians. The hotel organised summer bandstand performances out front in the Antrim Gardens – these were very popular.

In 1923 the **Recreation Sport Grounds** facilities at Ramore Head were developed.

In the early Fifties **Bert Blundell** an entertainments promoter from Bournemouth decided that Portrush needed a new show piece vibrant ballroom. His business on Main St became Sportsland, and this business still owns the car park behind. He extended the Arcadia complex by adding an upper floor and hired the **Dave Glover Band**. They soon became his resident act and were a huge success. His Arcadia Ballroom became known all over Ireland.

Diving displays were very popular - Blue Pool and Murtagh's Mouth.

In 1928 Evelyn (Chipperfield) and Francesco Trufelli agreed to set up a permanent site on the flattened recreation ground beside the railway station. They had established their reputation as a successful touring circus and entertainment company. The invitation came from the railway company. **Barry's Amusements** was run by the family until 2020.

The Portrush amateur drama tradition flourished for many years. The Portrush Players finished in the 1980s. The Portrush Music Society and the Ballywillan Drama Group continue. The Town Hall hosts an annual Portrush Summer Theatre.

Ramore Head

It is a large block of volcanic dolerite. The watch tower, the shelter, the Coastguard look-out (including a Y station with 24 hour surveillance information conveyed to Bletchley Park) have gone. The ancient Crosby Stone or Crow's Stone was pushed over the cliff about 1985.

Originally owned by Lord Antrim, whose seat was Glenarm Castle.

Captain Shutt was born in Staffordshire and excelled at schoolboy sports. He won a Military Cross in WW1. After that he tried to settle to farming in Co Fermanagh after marrying a lady from Irvinestown. When Portrush advertised a new post of "Sports and Entertainments Officer" Shutt's application was successful. He stayed in post until 1965. He became a Portrush character - nicknamed Tiny - he was six foot four inches tall - solid build – and he wore white suits in summer. He organised tennis and outdoor bowling **weeks** each summer. His end of season **Military Tattoo** and **Fireworks Display** were extremely popular. He died in 1966 and is buried at Ballywillan. The townspeople named a street after Shutt.

Hotels and Boarding Houses

Leander House has been demolished - now an apartment block situated between Blue Pool rocks and Coastal Zone.

The old house was a training centre for waitressing in 1970s and early 1980s. They offered an eighteen week course and practical experience took place in a special training hotel on Kerr St.

Separate from **Leander House Catering College** was The **Hotel and Catering College** which opened in 1950 and moved to Ballywillan Rd in 1972. This college offered a two year training course. It was very successful there but has now moved to Belfast – part of Ulster University.

Temperance or non-alcoholic hotels enjoyed some success but have now disappeared.

In 1908 there were twenty four hotels in Portrush.

Lansdowne Crescent - Temp? - Metropole - Temp? - Lloyds Commercial Temp - Blacks Trocadero restaurant – Temp. Admire the Trocadero pavement beside the White House.

Other hotels include The Windsor, The Northern Counties, The Eglinton, The Golf, Fawcett Royal. Fawcett's Hotel was opposite the Northern Counties and is now apartments.

The **Golf Hotel** was a majestic building above Dhu Varren and now demolished for housing. At one time it was bought by the Christian Endeavour organisation and renamed Castle Erin.

Christian Endeavour held a tradition of buying old hotels and then renaming the hotels using the CE initials.

The salt water **bathhouse** was built in 1834 by Kerr of the Lord Antrim family. The building is now Coastal Zone. It was for the people of Portrush but much used by Northern Counties Hotel guests. The Bathkeeper's residence was built in 1884.

In 1912 the bathhouse baths were removed and the building became a coach house / stables / motor car garage for Northern Counties Hotel guests. During the Second World War when the Americans were in town it was used their cookhouse.

The **Northern Counties** was developed by The Belfast and Northern Counties Railway after 1885. They developed the Royal Portrush golf club around the same time. Fortunately, extensive water main and sewerage schemes were carried out around Portrush in the 1880s. In the 1890s the first bathrooms were provided inside The Northern Counties Hotel. In the 1930s the hotel's first en-suite bedrooms were opened. The hotel indoor swimming pool opened in the 1930s.

In 1973 the Northern Counties Hotel is recorded as hosting a farewell lunch for outdoor staff when Portrush Urban District Council was absorbed by Coleraine Borough Council. This was the end of 81 years of local government in Portrush.

Jack Fawcett bought the Northern Counties Hotel in 1976. The hotel had a beautiful ballroom.

In December 1989 Roy Crawford bought the hotel. In February 1990 there was a small fire in the hotel - some damage. In March 1990 a large fire demolished the hotel and the site was flattened. This was now a police matter.

The **Antrim Gardens** at the front of the hotel remain intact for all to enjoy.

A new hotel was built - The Atlantic Hotel.