

# Sea of Life : Maritime items in the Down County Museum collection

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This article was written to coincide with the opening of our major temporary exhibition for 2003. The exhibition was based on our own collection, supplemented by a few loans from public and private collections. I have used this opportunity to record those items from our collection and included a selection of photographs from our extensive archive, together with some of the most relevant paintings. Neither the exhibition, nor this article, are intended to be a complete study of any aspect of maritime life but rather to put in context the objects in our collection which relate to this theme.

Since people first arrived in Ireland, about 9000 years ago, the sea has provided both a means of transport and a livelihood for many. Our exhibition focused on the boatbuilding and fishing industries in County Down. We also looked at those services which have helped to safeguard our coast and at some of the boats which have been wrecked, despite their best help. We concentrated on the period from the late 18th to the 21st century. Our main objective was to tell the story of once important industries but as our exhibition developed, the crisis in the fishing industry grew worse. It is increasingly uncertain what the future holds for those communities dependent on fishing in the ports of County Down.

Early mariners would have used landmarks on the coastline, the height of the sun on the horizon, the winds and the habits of birds and fish as navigational aids. The introduction of the magnetic compass in the 12th century and from the 15th century, the backstaff, astrolabe, quadrant and sextant were significant developments.<sup>1</sup> Maritime maps were not very detailed or accurate before the mid 18th century. The three charts by Alexander Nimmo in our collection (details in catalogue below) date from the early 19th century and show the developments in this area. In the 20th century, radio and radar made a major contribution to safer navigation.

Harbours were made in natural inlets along the coast, but some in County Down did not have particularly easy access, so that improving them has often been a challenge. Some are still used but perhaps now developed as leisure facilities, rather than for trade. Others have gone out of use. This may be because they were too small or their water too shallow for modern boats. The harbour at the Quoile acted as a port for Downpatrick but was abandoned during the 20th century after the barrage was constructed across the river to prevent flooding in the town. In other cases goods once traded through these ports may no longer be required or are distributed through major ports, such as Belfast.

From earliest times goods have been traded across the Irish Sea to Britain and beyond. More regular and formalised trading developed in medieval times but trading patterns changed according to wider economic forces. Ardglass, for instance, probably developed as a port in the early twelfth century. By the mid fifteenth century it was the major port for Lecale and the Ards and by the end of that century was the largest trading port in Ulster. The town declined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but re-emerged as a major fishing centre in the nineteenth century. Other goods being exported from County Down included granite building stone (from Annalong), pit props (for English coal mines), grain, potatoes, cattle and dairy products. Coal was a major import into Dundrum, where the East Downshire Steamship Company was based. Dundrum ceased to be a commercial port in 1984.

Many people are responsible for looking after the traffic along our coast and in Strangford Lough. They include harbourmasters, pilots and ferrymen. Our photographic project (see Mike King's article in this volume) was designed to ensure we recorded some of the people currently working in this area.

The coastline from Belfast Lough to Carlingford Lough includes some particularly dangerous stretches, while the entrance to Strangford Lough has accounted for the loss of many ships. Bad weather has often stranded vessels onto the shore, particularly in Dundrum Bay, which had a reputation as a ships' graveyard. The earliest wreck referred to in our exhibition was L'Amite. According to tradition, this sailing ship sank off the County Down coast near Sheeplands in 1797. It was said to be bringing in guns for the United Irishmen. A watercolour painting in our collection, by Les Jones, portrays this event.<sup>2</sup> A cannon was raised from the site of the wreck in 1995 and conserved by the Environment and Heritage Service before being presented to the museum.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most famous ship to be stranded off our coast in the 19th century was

the SS Great Britain. This was one of the first iron ships, designed by Brunel. It was on its way from Liverpool to New York in 1846, when it ran aground during bad weather in Dundrum Bay.<sup>4</sup> The captain, James Hosken, miscalculated the steamer's speed and did not recognise St John's Point lighthouse. It took a year to re-float the ship but it continued in use for many years before being installed as a visitor attraction in Bristol, where it can still be seen. Living on an island, we are still very dependent on ferries to take us to England, Scotland and the rest of Europe. Many people remember the loss of the Princess Victoria, which was blown off-course sailing between Stranraer and Larne and sank during bad weather in 1953. 135 people died.

There are four main lighthouses along the County Down coast, at Mew Island, Donaghadee, Angus Rock (at the entrance to Strangford Lough) and St John's Point. There are three others at the entrance to, and in, Carlingford Lough and also a lightfloat at South Rock. The earliest of these lighthouses is St John's Point, where a station was established in 1844. The tower was originally 45 feet high but increased to 102 feet in the 1890s when various improvements were made.<sup>5</sup> The lighthouses were manned until the 1990s when they were switched to automation. A former member of our museum staff, Pat Power, had previously been a lighthouse keeper, as had his father before him. They were photographed in their original uniforms as part of our photographic project (see Mike King's article).

The Coastguard Service had its origins 200 years ago during the Napoleonic Wars when the Preventive Water Guard was founded to combat smuggling. The name was changed to the Coast Guard in 1822.<sup>6</sup> Its role has changed over the years but from early on was responsible for taking charge at wrecks and saving lives. Today the service is dedicated to search and rescue. Its headquarters in Northern Ireland are in Bangor.

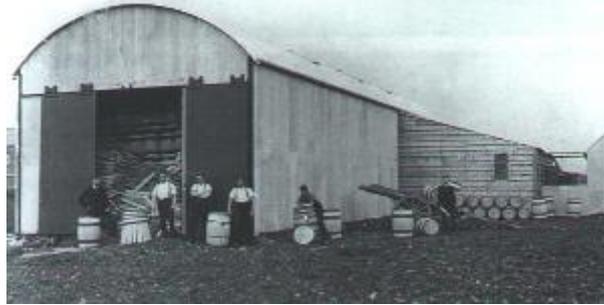
The lifeboat service was started in 1824, by Sir William Hillary, as the National Institute for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck. It changed its name to the Royal National Lifeboat Service in 1854.<sup>7</sup> Today the crews are all volunteers, and the boats paid for by voluntary donations. There are five boats stationed along the County Down coast, at Bangor, Donaghadee, Portaferry, Newcastle and Kilkeel. The earliest was actually established at Rossglass in 1825, but closed in 1845. In 1856 a boathouse was provided at Newcastle and a new lifeboat stationed here.



*Newcastle lifeboat on the Central Promenade, c 1920s*



*Bill Quinn and Harry Mackintosh, boatbuilders of Kilkeel*



*McKee's Cooperage, Kilkeel, c 1920*

Before the mid 19th century, many small inshore boats were made locally while larger vessels were built in Britain. However, when William Paynter came to Kilkeel from St Ives in Cornwall, he established what became a thriving industry, building superior vessels for local fishermen.<sup>8</sup> His boatyard was taken over by the Mackintosh family later in the 19th century. Bill Quinn, of Kilkeel, began working as an apprentice for Harry Mackintosh, the third generation of that family, and later took over the yard himself. We are very grateful to Mr Quinn for the many useful photographs relating to boatbuilding in Kilkeel, which he has given to our museum. Today, the decline in the fishing industry has reduced the need for locally built boats. But there have also been changes as a result of different materials being used, such as plastics and fibreglass.

In the days of sailing ships many other industries developed alongside boatbuilding. Nets, ropes and sails all had to be made and repaired. Thomas Chambers of Kilkeel was the proprietor of a sail making business as well as the owner and skipper of several vessels. Many of the tools as well as the machinery from this business are still in Kilkeel, looked after by Thomas Chambers' grandson, Merwyn Hanna. Nowadays many of those items still required are imported, rather than made locally. Another almost vanished industry is barrel-making. These were required in large quantities for storing fish and one of the firms producing them was McKees Cooperage of Kilkeel.



*Herring Girls at Arglass, photographed by DJ McNeill, 1950*

The lives of fishermen have been affected by changing technological, environmental and economic factors. The series of photographs taken by Pat Hudson, formerly of Kilkeel, and copied for our archive, shows fishermen out ring fishing in 1945. Changes in diet have also had an effect. DJ McNeill's photograph of herring girls recalls an industry which once brought girls from Donegal and Scotland to work in Ardglass, while Bill Quinn remembers how trawling for prawns in the Irish Sea only began in 1954. Today, it would be hard to find a restaurant which did not serve prawn cocktail or scampi! Pat Hudson's photographs also illustrate the cleaning, sorting and finally selling fish, in the 1940s. It is particularly interesting to see the photographs showing fish processing today in the series taken by Fiona Clarke as part of our project.

One of the most traumatic events to have occurred in recent years was the burning of decommissioned fishing boats. These images will stay with those living in our coastal communities for a long time to come. The purpose of many of our exhibitions has been to commemorate anniversaries of people or events, such as, in recent years, Queen Victoria, the 1798 Rising, Edward Hincks, the Second World War, Frances Hutcheson and the National Health Service, to name but a few. The Sea of Life exhibition and this article commemorate all those who have made their living, or continue to do so, from the sea.

If anyone can help us to fill in gaps in our collection of maritime related objects or photographs, or has further information about anything noted in this article, please let us know.



*'Friday morning', John Donnan selling fish from his donkey cart in Kilkeel, photographed by Pat Hudson, 1940s*

### **Catalogue**

Maritime chart, 'The coast of Down from the Lee Stone to St John's Point, surveyed for the Commissioners of Irish Fisheries by Alexander Nimmo CE etc' (no date). 48.5 x 33.5 cms.

Maritime chart, 'Strangford River or entrance into Lough Cone, surveyed for the Commissioners of Irish Fisheries by Alexander Nimmo Civil Engineer FRCE MRIA etc etc 1821'. 46.5 x 29.5 cms. DCM 1990-6 and 1990-7

Purchase; conserved and framed with assistance from the Northern Ireland Museums Council. 'Plan of the proposed Addition to the Pier of Killough by Alexander Nimmo Civil Engineer FRCE MRIA etc etc 1820'. 51 x 46.5 cms.

DCM 1990-5 Purchase conserved and framed with assistance from the Northern Ireland Museums Council.

Double ended clinker built boat, 'The Marion'. This was built in 1924 by the Murnin family of Cloghy, Kilclief for Robert Taylor, fisherman and harbour pilot, of Killough. It was bought by Robert Fitzpatrick of Minerstown in 1924 and used for lobster fishing until 1988 (full details in Madill, 1998.<sup>9</sup>) DCM 1998-5

Gift of the family of the late Robert Fitzpatrick of Minerstown.

46 boat building tools, used by the Murnin family of Cloghy, Kilclief.

Two Jack planes.

Smoothing plane.

Four hollow planes, one with parts missing.

Three round planes.

Spokeshave.

Grooving plane.

Moving fillister plane.

Sash fillister plane.

Rebate plane.  
Tonguing plane.  
Teak moulding plane.  
Nine moulding planes, four with parts missing.  
Adze.  
Sliding bevel.  
Keyhole saw.  
Small mallet with oblong head.  
Multi purpose gauge.  
Router with four double sided blades.  
Grapnel hook head.  
Wooden adjustable marking gauge.  
Brass and ebony adjustable marking gauge with inch rule.  
Three wooden clamps.  
Screw auger with wooden handle.  
Screw auger with metal handle.  
Wooden mallet with round head.  
Wooden pulley block with brass wheel inserted. Wooden pulley block.  
Steel calipers.  
Carved wooden roller for making patterns. Plough plane, parts missing.  
DCM 1986-449/1-46  
Gift of Mrs Mary Murnin, Downpatrick.

Boat builder's template. This half hull template is for a 15 fast dinghy. It was carved by the donor at a scale of 1 inch to a foot, about 1960.  
DCM 2003-3  
Gift of Mr James P Mahood, Portavogie.

16 boat building tools and equipment, used by the donor's wife's family, the Andersons of Killyleagh.  
Packing needle, whipping needle and two sail needles; latter in wooden container. The packing and whipping needles were used for the end of ropes to keep them from unlaying.  
Sailmaker's palm (for left hand), worn when sewing sails.  
Two fids, large and small, used for splicing rope. Five caulking irons, used to harden in the cotton or oakum to seal between planks or boards which were then filled with putty or white lead.  
Ball of caulking cotton and oakum, used to fill the seams between the planks of wood. Cotton was used for yachts and small boats and oakum for larger vessels.  
Reel of cotton on wooden stand.  
Ice pick, used to cut ice to cover fish.  
Adze, used to shape the knees, stems and frames (known as timbers).  
Two draw knives, used for removing the bark from trees to make masts for boats and keels.  
Three augers.  
Wooden plane.  
Adze.  
Spar knife, used for cleaning the bark off trees.  
Tool, unknown function.  
DCM 2003-6 to 30  
Gift of Mr J Hunsdale, Ringhaddy, Killinchy.

Seven boatbuilding tools, used by the McMullen family, marine merchants, of Portaferry.  
Gauge, brass and ebony.  
Adze or 'foot edge', iron with wooden shaft. Screwdriver, wood and brass handle.  
Four squares, one small, three larger, all with brass and ebony handles.  
DCM 1994-315 to 318/1-4 Purchase.

Boatbuilding tools used by the Murnin family  
Sailmaker's needles ( 14).  
Sailmaker's (for right hand) palm, worn when sewing sails.  
DCM 1990-86 and 2003-31  
Gift of Mr Harry Burnett, Ballygally, Downpatrick.

Lobster pot and prawn pot. DCM 2003-4 and 5  
Gift of Mr T Burke, Ardglass

Four net floats, two green glass, one with original rope; two aluminium, one marked 'Le Cooville', one painted red. DCM 1995-118 to 121  
Cork, for threading on rope between floats. Fishing line 'crop', made in traditional way from horse hair.  
DCM 1995-1995-122 and 123  
Gift of Mr JD and Mrs ME McCord, Ardglass

Herring scoop and 'quarter cran' herring basket. The basket was used for measuring herrings. Normally measurements were marked on a piece of wood on the side of the basket; this one is not marked. DCM 2003-1 and 2  
Gift of Mr Willie Williams, Ardglass.

Two lifebelts, from fishing boats, the Saffron (Portavogie) and Golden Fleece (Kilkeel).  
DCM 2003-50 and 2003-51 Purchase.

Modern herring scoop, aluminium, handles covered with blue rubber.  
DCM 2003-52 Purchase.

In addition to the items listed above, the collection includes a number of paintings with a maritime theme as well as numerous photographs. Only a small selection has been used to illustrate this article.

### **Lesley Simpson is Keeper of Collections at Down County Museum**

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#### **Notes and references**

- ▶1. Tom McErlean et al, Strangford Lough, an Archaeological Survey of the maritime cultural landscape (Belfast 2002). This book is a wonderful new resource for all aspects of the archaeology and history of Strangford Lough.
- ▶2. DCM 1998-67.
- ▶3. DCM 1999-255.
- ▶4. Ian Wilson, Shipwrecks of the Ulster Coast (Coleraine 1979).
- ▶5. For further information about lighthouses see the web site of The Commissioners of Irish Lights, [www.cil.ie](http://www.cil.ie).
- ▶6. For further information about the history of coastguards see the web site of the Marine Coastguard Agency, [www.mcga.gov.gov.uk](http://www.mcga.gov.gov.uk).
- ▶7. For further information about the RNLi see their web site, [www.rnli.org.uk](http://www.rnli.org.uk).
- ▶8. Sailing Ships of Mourne, Mourne Observer, revised edition (Newcastle 1995).
- ▶9. Harry Madill, 'Yawls at Killough, County Down', in Down Survey (1998), 41-50.

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