

ASPECTS OF NEWTOWNARDS LIFE FROM 1918 TO 1970

This paper discusses some aspects of Newtownards life in the decades after the First World War.

Newtownards Council refused to pay for a war memorial to the 300 men from the district who had lost their lives in the First World War. In the 1920's, frustrated ex-servicemen made their own memorial out of snow, with the inscription 'LEST WE FORGET' in the square in front of the Priory. Their motive was to shame the Council into building a memorial to honour the fallen. The only action that was taken was against themselves. The police were called and each man was fined a shilling for loitering. The Council did not get around to building a War Memorial until 1934. Meanwhile ex-servicemen built their own memorial of wood in the grounds of their premises in Victoria Avenue.

Instead of being heroes, the veterans returned to unemployment and hardship. Jobs were difficult to find even in a thriving manufacturing town like Newtownards. However Lady Londonderry announced plans to build an elaborate series of gardens at Mount Stewart. These gardens were built with ex-service labour and the various stone figures were worked by local craftsmen. This was an example of benevolent paternalism.

Newtownards Airport

By the 1920's aviation technology had advanced to the stage where passenger flights were possible. In 1933 the Marquess of Londonderry said that he would build an aerodrome on some of his land which had formerly been a racecourse at Newtownards. On 31st August 1934 the airport was officially opened by the Governor of Northern Ireland. The airport was "designed to meet the terminal needs of airline companies today, while providing for rapid expansion to satisfy the requirements of years to come". It was the first civil airport in the province. Because the airport was located at the top of Strangford Lough and the runway was only 18 feet above sea level, landings could take place in thick fog. Apparently in stormy weather one person would grab each wing and another the tail until the plane came to a standstill!

The services were soon running at a profit. Planes flew to all the major cities in the British Isles. Airline companies operating out of Ards in the 1930s included Isle of Man Air Services, Blackpool and West Coast Airways, and Northern and Scottish Airways. The Royal Mail was also brought to Ards. Passengers travelling from Belfast to London were collected at 8.00am at the Midland Hotel at York Road and driven to Ards Airport. The flight began at 9.00am sharp. There was a fifteen minute stop at Liverpool where passengers could get off. The plane then flew south to Croydon where it landed at noon. The passengers were driven to Victoria Station.

Ards Airport flourished from 1934 to 1938. It was considered to be the seventh busiest in the British Isles. However, when Belfast Harbour Airport opened in 1938, business collapsed. The airlines transferred their flights to Sydenham. Ards Airport never really recovered from this event. Its remaining significant customer was the Northern Ireland Flying Club which ran pleasure trips and gave instruction.

The Public Bus Service

The majority of the people of Newtownards could not afford planes; however they could afford the public bus service – and there were plenty of buses to choose from. By the mid-1920s there were three companies operating on routes down the Peninsula, six to Belfast and two to Bangor. The principal operator on the Peninsula was the Ards Motor Transport Company. It ran from Newtownards to Portaferry via Kirkubbin and Portavogie, and from Newtownards to Donaghadee via Bangor. Its buses were primrose yellow with solid tyres and had an entrance platform at the rear. The company did not always have a monopoly on the peninsula.

The Ards TT

In 1928 the first Ulster Tourist Trophy race on the Ards circuit was the most significant sporting event in Ireland since the Gordon Bennett 1903 motor race. Arguably it was also one of the biggest events in the British Isles to that date. Crowds were estimated in excess of 250,000 as Kay Don won the race in a Lea Francis from Leon Cushman in a FWD Alvis after a thrilling battle to the chequered flag. Household names such as Sir Malcolm Campbell, Tazio Nuvolari and Rudi Carraciola would compete in this and subsequent years. Harry Ferguson's vision for the Ulster Tourist Trophy resulted in a not to be forgotten nine races, international motor racing for production sports cars on a real road circuit. A memorial to those who died as a result of the TT races has been erected recently near the Town Hall.

The Second World War

About 800 local people joined the Armed Services at the start of the Second World War. Unlike the First World War they were distributed throughout the three services and fought on different fronts. However one person deserves particular mention. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blair Mayne was one of the six co-founders of the Special Air Service Regiment. He was also one of the most highly decorated soldiers of the war with four Distinguished Service Orders and the French Legion D'Honneur and Croix de Geurre. He was one of the outstanding military heroes of the Second World War. In one of his first raids behind enemy lines, he destroyed a plane with his bare hands. He was a larger than life character, but his temperament and moods made him a difficult subordinate. A statue to him has been erected beside the Town Hall.

People in Newtownards were very active in support of the war effort. Many served as ARP wardens, joined the Red Cross, the St. John Ambulance Brigade or the Women's Voluntary Service. The Council organised the collection of scrap metal, waste paper and books. Newtownards aerodrome was hit by explosives and incendiaries on the night of the Easter 1941 attack on Belfast - and about 13 people died. Prior to the bombing incendiaries were dropped on Scrabo Hill. Ards Airport was the only specifically military target outside Belfast. In 1940 it had been taken over by 231 Squadron of the RAF as a reserve for Sydenham. Two tarmac runways were constructed for Westland Lysanders on patrolling duties.

After the Second World War

The treatment of veterans at the end of the Second World War was much better than after the First. £10,000 was collected locally for a Peace Celebration and a 'Welcome Home Fund' to enable 500 servicemen to be given money.

In the early post-war years Newtownards could claim more diversification of industry than any other town in the province apart from Belfast. It was hoped that existing industries could be maintained and extended and new enterprises introduced. They participated in the province's postwar boom. It was hoped that it could become a centre of aircraft manufacture. Shorts had a factory in the town and Miles Aircraft of Reading built a new factory to produce the Miles Messenger, a small single-engined communications aircraft.

The airport's fortunes seemed to revive in 1955 when Silver City Airways said that they would be running a daily air car-ferry service from Newtownards to Stranraer. However its initial success was short-lived.

The Belfast and County Down Railway was in its heyday at the start of the 20th Century, and there was much army traffic during the First World War. After the First War the railway had difficulty competing with the unregulated competition from bus operators. The Newtownards line closed in 1950 for this reason and because of increased car ownership.

In 1958 the Queen Mother laid the foundation stone of a new Civic Hall known as 'The Queens Hall' in Regent Street. Among other things it includes the town's Library and a main hall for concerts, conferences etc. It is still in full operation.

Long-established textile businesses survived through the 1960s. They were joined by newer companies such as Crepe Weavers and the Ards Manufacturing Co.

Old Newtownards gradually faded away in the 1970s. Most of the mills and factories were gone, unable to compete with the man-made chemical fibres such as nylon and terylene which were introduced in the 1950s.

Some changes were for the better however. Slum dwellings were pulled down as the town was able to benefit from subsidies to local councils to build new houses. Large scale building was undertaken by the newly-formed NI Housing Trust.

Eric Browett

15/09/08