

Cockle Island, the harbour and fishing at Groomsport



Photograph by Amanda McWhinney

It is believed that the village initially developed beside the natural harbour that is created by the shore, Ballymacormick Point and Cockle Island. It is possible that, before the first harbour was built, probably by the Vikings, there was enough water, even at low tide, for a Viking long boat to shelter behind Cockle Island.



Cockle Island at low tide
Photograph by Amanda McWhinney

Cockle Island

Cockle Island varies greatly in size, depending on the tide. During the highest spring tides very little rock is visible. In the breeding season it is home to hundreds of nesting birds, including Arctic Terns. However, in some years, the high tides have washed nests away. The National Trust, which owns the island, expects that, if these unfavourable conditions continue, the terns and other birds may choose to move to the Copeland Islands to breed.

The harbour

It is believed that a harbour was first built by the Vikings in the 9th century. The map of Groomsport which Thomas Raven produced, in 1625, for James Hamilton, 1st Viscount Clandeboye, shows Groomsport harbour as having a quay.

The Maxwell family, who purchased 4,500 acres of land from the Hamiltons in 1647 owned the harbour for over 250 years. In 1901 Robert Perceval-Maxwell gave the harbour to the, recently created, Down County Council.

GROOMSPORT HARBOUR.
The council having confirmed the rate levy for the current financial year, received a letter from the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, wherein it was stated that Major R. Percival Maxwell, D.L., had offered to hand over to the county Groomsport Pier and Harbour, which were his private property, and to contribute £200 towards the cost of the present necessary repairs on the conditions that no further charge should be levied on the locality of Groomsport or the parish of Bangor, except as a charge on the county at large, and that his contribution be paid on the completion of the repairs.

Irish News 03 May 1901

The County Council drew up plans for the improvement of the harbour. The work was carried out by John Graham of Dromore a few years later.

In November 1976, after a two year project, Enterprise Ulster, a government employment training organisation, handed over the harbour improvements to North Down Borough Council. The improvements included a new slipway and dinghy park and a new sea wall surrounding the car park. An old anchor was placed on a rock to mark the end of the project which had cost £122,600. (*Belfast Telegraph*, 11 November 1976)

The first photograph, on the left below, an extract from an aerial photograph taken in 1929, shows the pier and quay which had been built in the 1900s. The second photograph shows the extent of the improvements which were completed in 1976.



www.britainfromabove.org.uk/image/XPW02869
© Historic England



Photograph from www.marinas.com

During the work in the 1970s which created the car park, green space and the sea wall to the west of the Boathouse, an anchor was placed on the top of the only rock which was left protruding in the newly-landscaped area. The rock was the top of the “Tarred Rock’ where, in earlier years, fishermen would sit and tar their nets and ropes. The following photograph shows John Waterson (1841-1922) sitting on the Tarred Rock with his dog, Diver.



John Waterson on the Tarred Rock with his dog, Diver
Photograph supplied by Roberta Waterson Fraser, his great-granddaughter

The anchor was caught in a fishing net and landed by John Waterson (the grandson of the man in the photograph) in the 1960s. The origin of the anchor is not known.

Ards and North Down Borough Council, which manages the harbour, describes it as follows, at:

<https://www.ardsandnorthdown.gov.uk/resident/harbours/groomsport-harbour>

“Groomsport Harbour is a small amenity harbour accommodating an inshore fishing fleet of 2 under 10m boats annually on fore and aft moorings and up to 80 under 7.5m pleasure craft. The majority of pleasure craft are berthed on swinging moorings with a few fore and aft against the quay wall.

The harbour has facilities for slippage, drying out berth, hard standing, electric, water, waste collection, and waste oil can be collected by arrangement.

Groomsport harbour is tidal with a max speed limit of 4 knots.”

Cockle Island Boat Club

<https://www.cockleislandboatclub.com>

Many of the owners of the pleasure boats in the harbour are members of Cockle Island Boat Club, which, out of season, holds a programme of talks in the Boathouse.

The sailing season runs from May through September and includes regular weekday and evening races, races to Portpatrick and Glenarm, as well as an annual Regatta.

Fishing

Historically, fishing was a major source of employment for people living in Groomsport. The long back gardens of the houses on The Hill were used to spread out nets to dry.

In the middle of the 19th century there was a fleet of about 20 boats and 80 fishermen based in the harbour. However, by 1885 it was commented that “fishing was not as enviable as it once was” (W G Little, quoted by David Irwin).

In 1901 33 men, 45% of males aged 15 and over, were recorded as being fishermen, sailors, seamen, mariners, yachtmen or had retired from those occupations. Of those 12 were members of the Waterson family and 7 were Orrs.

By 1911 23 men, 28% of males aged 15 and over, were fishermen, sailors, seamen, mariners, or had retired from those occupations. The number of Watersons had increased to 14, but there were only 3 members of the Orr family.

Fishing has continued to decline as source of employment of local people and today there is accommodation for only 2 commercial fishing boats in Groomsport.

Peter Gibson

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Sources: Those referenced and

“Tides and Times in the Port” by Rev Dr David Irwin

Newspaper reports accessed at the Irish Newspaper Archive of www.findmypast.co.uk