

Groomsport Harbour

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Photograph: Amanda McWhinney

A little bit of Groomsport history from



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A sheltered harbour

Groomsport probably developed as a village because of the sheltered harbour created by Ballymacormick Point, to the west and Cockle Island, to the north.



It is believed that a harbour was first built by the Vikings in the 9th century and it is believed that, even at low tide, a longboat could manoeuvre between the shore and Cockle Island.

Thomas Raven's map of 1625, for the landowner, James Hamilton, 1st Viscount Clondeboye, shows Groomsport harbour as having a quay.

The Maxwell family, who purchased 4,500 acres of land from the Hamiltons owned the harbour for over 250 years. In 1901 Robert Perceval-Maxwell gave the harbour to the, recently created, Down County Council which made considerable improvements to the quay the following year.

The harbour is tidal and silt builds up over time. It has had to be dredged on a number of occasions over the years.

In the 1970s major improvements were made to the harbour and waterfront, costing £122,600. A sea wall was built, inside which a new slipway, dinghy park and car park were created. The promenade from Cockle Row to Cove Bay was also built. Before these improvements, the area now enclosed by the sea wall was a rocky tidal area.

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.

The boats used by most Groomsport fishermen were yawls – double ended boats which could be used with sails or with oars. Typically they fished with long lines that were baited every few feet. They fished in Belfast Lough and off the Gobbins, and the Copeland Islands They caught cod, plaice, haddock, rock salmon, skate, crabs and lobsters.

In the middle of the 19th century there was a fleet of about 20 boats and 80 fishermen based in the harbour. In 1886 a Fisheries Inquiry heard from fishermen that catches had greatly decreased over the previous 30 years and that fewer boats and fishermen were employed. In 1901, 33 men in Groomsport, 45% of the males aged 15 and over, in the village were fishermen, or had similar occupations Of those 12 were members of the Waterson family and seven were Orrs. By 1911 the number of men employed at sea had decreased to 23.

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

This is a model of the Annie Waterson, a yawl that was built for Robert Waterson in 1912. It was the first fishing boat in Groomsport to have an engine as well as sails. The photograph was taken by John Gunning, the grandson of the model maker.



Cockle Island

Cockle Island, in the middle of the harbour, 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.

There is a debate about how the birds might be protected from the tides. The National Trust, which owns the island, is reluctant to intervene, believing that, if the unfavourable conditions continue, the terns and other birds may choose to move to the Copeland Islands to breed.

Cockle Island Boat Club

Cockle Island Boat Club, which has members with sailing boats and others with motor boats, was formed in March 1974.



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. Out of season, the club holds a programme of talks in the Boathouse.

Find out more about the history of the village and Groomsport Digital Archive at: www.discovergroomsport.com.

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