

Hidden Gems and Forgotten People

LECALE AND DOWNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



WILLIAM (WILLIE) TWEEDIE | Entrepreneur

William Tweedie was born in Downpatrick the early 1880s, son of Andrew and Eliza Tweedie. Not content to follow his father's trade of plasterer he was briefly an apprentice engine driver on the Belfast and County Down Railway before joining the Royal Irish Rifles where he played in the Regimental Band and fought in the Boer War, acting as valet to Colonel RH Wallace.

On return home he took up a position in the Ulster Club but was sacked for taking a day off to play for Linfield Football Club. He also played for Cliftonville. A keen sportsman in his youth he maintained his interest in sport and kept up a strict regime of walking four miles a day until his death.

In 1907 Willie Tweedie spotted a niche in the market and became the first person to start a car hire business in the town. He got the contract to deliver mail to Ballykinler Army Camp, where the officers became customers for his car hire business.

In 1913 he opened Downpatrick's first cinema, 'The Pavilion', on the Circular Road and ran it until 1926 when he sold it; it remained as a cinema until 1938. Later he built a roller skating rink in Church Street. At the same time he ran three shops, including a tobacconist shop and a bookmakers. Such was his success in business that he was able to retire in the mid 1920s at the age of 48.

Not content to rest on his laurels during the WW2 he was invited by the American Army to run one of their catering establishments in England and was put in charge of 500 staff outside London. He later moved to a US airforce base near Bristol where he worked until the end of the war.

Until he died in 1973 Willie Tweedie was a well-known character and raconteur in the town with stories of his experiences in South Africa and elsewhere.