

Hidden Gems and Forgotten People

LECALE AND DOWNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



STEAMBOAT QUAY, DOWNPATRICK

Downpatrick was once a seaside town. Up until the middle of the 18th century, tidal waters stretching from Strangford Lough almost encircled the town and at one time the hill, on which Down Cathedral stands, was virtually an island connected to nearby land by a narrow causeway. In severe weather the town was regularly flooded.

In an effort to reduce the flooding and reclaim land from the sea, local landowner Edward Southwell in 1745 erected the first tidal barrage across the Quoilé River, at a site near the bridge on the old Belfast road. Marshes were drained and ground that was once swamped by seawater was turned into fertile agricultural land.

Below the barrage the present narrow channel at Quoilé Quay used to be a wide estuary filled with seawater at each high tide. The remains of Quoilé Quay reminds us that until the 1940s this was a busy port, with sailing ships and steamers carrying timber, coal and slates to Downpatrick.

A little way downstream, accessed by a pleasant riverside walk is Steamboat Quay, built in the 1850s by David Ker, then landlord of Downpatrick, to assist the operations of the County Down and Liverpool Steampacket Company. During the latter half of the 19th century timber was landed from sailing schooners arriving from Baltic and Canadian ports. Missing now is the timber quay itself which jutted out from the present stone structure. The Downpatrick Timber, Slate and Coal Company imported building materials (mainly slate) from North Wales from its formation in 1895 until 1920. Steamboat Quay has not been used commercially since.

Then in 1934 new tidal gates were built to provide even greater protection against flooding. These gates were equipped with self-acting sluices which closed when the tide of Strangford Lough began to rise and opened again at low tide to release flood water.

In time, however, even this barrier proved to be inadequate and a new barrage was built in 1957 at Hare Island, close to the mouth of the Quoilé River. The permanence of the new barrier meant that Downpatrick was closed off to sea traffic forever.

Quoilé Quay and Steamboat Quay, which once provided berths for visiting ships from across the British Isles, were rendered completely useless by the construction of the barrage. The river now a haven for wildfowl (and fishermen) and a pleasant all-year-round walk for families, with the Quoilé Countryside Centre an interesting and educational stop off.

