

A wee bit of maritime history... 35



FREE

Strangford Lough as a Cruising Ground

This excerpt is from an article of the above name, written by Filson Young, and published in the Chronicle on 2nd June 1923. Born in 1876, Young, whose family came from Portaferry where he spent his childhood summers, became a world famous journalist who attended the launch of Titanic and later, to great acclaim, wrote the first book on the sinking.



'I have known Strangford Lough all my life, and only really know half of it now; but any yachtsman who will spend a fortnight there will learn enough about it to be at home in it and yet leave enough to be learned to furnish a dozen seasons of such cruising with endless harm and novelty.

The entrance is supposed to be extremely difficult; even those daring explorers, commanders of destroyers in his Majesty's service, prefer to give it a miss when they are cruising off the east coast of Ireland...

Any yacht drawing less than eight feet of water can comfortably make Portaferry her headquarters; in fine weather she can lie to the north-westward of the Quay in a comfortable anchorage and be within two minutes' row of the beach. If there should be anything like a blow, or indeed any wind from the southward, you will be more comfortable across the water behind Swan Island in Strangford, or in the absolutely sheltered anchorage of Audley's Roads. As I have said, for exploration of the Lough proper you must get a local hand who knows the tides and the many isolated and hidden dangers with which the Lough is strewn, both on the east and west sides.

The fascination of this place lies partly from its beauty, which is beyond description - beauty of colour, beauty of climate and atmosphere, beauty of scenery and beauty of solitude.

From the purple of the Mourne Mountains the land rolls down in soft, green hills and slopes to the deeply indented shores. Save for the demesnes of Portaferry, Strangford, Castleward and Mount Stewart, and the mouth and shores of the Quoile river, which winds its salt and hidden way from Downpatrick to Killyleagh, the shores are not wooded, but are generally covered with that short, sweet, wiry grass, that in sheltered places is visited by the salt tides, grows so sweetly and pleasantly down to the steep rocky shore with its golden girdle of seaweed.

There is hardly a spot on the hundreds of miles of miniature coastline of this Lough where you cannot step ashore from a dinghy and in two minutes be seated among turf and wild flowers.

The villages and towns on these coasts are few and far between but Portaferry will supply you with all the necessaries and many of the amenities of life. And whichever way you go you can, barring accidents, always get home there at night if you trust to the tide.

As a place for racing this Lough has many advantages; it is always possible to get a triangular course of varying length, and you can always sail in deep water. But it is to the heart of the cruising man that the place should specially appeal. To me, the two chief joys of cruising are setting forth and making land-fall.

To anchor in some delightful sound and, in the dinghy, to take oneself ashore, and, sitting on the beach just above the crackling line of dried wrack, smoke a pipe and admire the perfections of one's craft; row off again, get one's anchor, and feel her alive again to one's touch - this is the kind of thing that you can do all day long, and, in summer, week after week in Strangford Lough.

You can spend a month there and visit a new harbour every day and leave unexplored one-tenth of its possibilities.



If you are a fisherman, or fond of the open sea, you will go out over the bar and fish for mackerel in the Race. But it must be remembered that, even in calm weather, there is often a heavy sea on the bar, and when there is any south in the wind the yachtsman is advised to remain in the Lough. Particularly must he avoid such a wind on the day of his departure, however convenient it might be to him once he got outside. When the wind is south a really heavy sea breaks on the bar which might well prove disabling, even to a stiff craft.

But no bad weather ever lasts for long there, from May to September; and in all the years I have known it I have never heard of anyone being prevented from sailing for three consecutive days in the summer months.'

Alexander Bell Filson, Filson Young's grandfather, born in 1797, set up as an apothecary in Portaferry, and, in 1828, married Jane Dalzell of Thomastown near Portaferry. Alexander was to become one of the Portaferry district's two medical officers. He had trained as a pharmacist in Belfast but did the work of a G.P. for twenty five years before completing his M.D. at the age of fifty five.

Alexander and Jane had three sons and five daughters. He and his wife became highly-respected members of the local community, fearless in the face of such crises as outbreaks of cholera brought by visiting sailors. Nineteenth-century Portaferry, though small, was a port with far-flung connections, stretching as far as Canada. Jane Filson died in 1888, her husband Dr. Alexander Filson Snr. having died in 1866.

Of their three sons, one emigrated to America, another to Australia. Only one stayed in Portaferry. That was Alexander, known as Sandy, born in 1843, who became a doctor like his father before him. He married local girl Jane Warnock and they had two sons, James and Alexander Bell Filson, after his grandfather. Sadly Sandy died in 1882, a very highly regarded member of the community and his widow and sons left the area.

Of their daughters, Catherine married a David Carmichael and moved to Millisle. Their first daughter became a renowned Christian missionary in India called Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur. Another two daughters, Isabella and Mary, remained unmarried.

Alexander and Jane's youngest daughter Sarah was born in 1841 and married Rev William Young, 28-year-old minister of the First Presbyterian church at Ballyeaston, Co. Antrim. They had four children, the youngest of whom, born in 1876, was Alexander Bell Filson, again named after his grandfather, but always known simply as Filson Young who had Titanic connections.

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