

Rathfriland Historical Society

CHARITY No. NIC102927

SECRETARY'S REPORT year ended 30th JUNE 2024

The Society's year began on Tuesday 26th September 2023 with the 50th Annual General Meeting which was held in The Parish Centre, Rathfriland. The chair, Margot Groves, welcomed all present especially Maureen Ervine our newest member.

After the formal business of the Annual General Meeting was conducted Margot introduced the speakers for the evening. Mr Brian Appleton gave a comprehensive talk on the history of the Royal British Legion. He began by pointing out the importance and symbolism of the bright red Flanders poppy which was the only plant that would grow in the fields that had been turned into mud. At the conclusion of the talk Mr Gary Gardiner, a local historian, introduced members to his extremely comprehensive collection of military memorabilia, including guns; hand grenades, knives and other articles of war.

On 5th October 2023 the Society held a very successful trip to Lisburn to visit The Irish Linen Centre in Lisburn where we saw the visiting British Museum Egyptian exhibition. We also saw the 'Flax to Fabric' exhibition and learned how the workers were so skilled in weaving the linen. On the way home a very welcome stop was made at The Angler's Rest where we all enjoyed the usual high culinary standard which has so obviously continued after covid.

The October meeting was a talk by Ciaran Conliffe who had chosen for his topic Horrible Histories. This centred on the Irish Witch trials. Members were treated to some gruesome details including burning at the stake. He mentioned that there were various witchcraft trials but the most famous were those of the Islandmagee witches in 1711.

For the November meeting we welcomed Newry historian Jason Diamond who gave a comprehensive and lengthy talk about the poetess, writer and author, Helen Waddell.

On 13th December 2023 a well-attended lunch was held in the Downshire Arms in Hilltown when 25 members and guests enjoyed a sumptuous repast of seasonal food. The craic was mighty and all who attended agreed that it was a great success.

The January 2024 meeting was a showing of the new Downton Abbey film and this was greatly enjoyed by the large audience present

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The February 2024 meeting was an Olde Tyme Music Hall event held in Chandlers House with the ever popular Strings and Sings ensemble. The MC for the evening was Mr Leonard Anderson who kept the enthusiastic audience entertained with a rich variety suitable introductions to the various participants. Also appearing on the bill were the well-known entertainer and storey teller Eileen McCusker from Hilltown and members of the Banbridge Choral Society. This event was part of our 50th Anniversary celebrations and it was made possible by grant aid from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The March meeting was a talk by Anthony Russell entitled 'Beyond the Battle, Newry and Mourne 1798. In the course of his talk Mr Russell explained how the 1798 rebellion by the United Irishmen affected the Newry and greater South Down area including Rathfriland. The rebellion had been influenced by the French Revolution and the American War of Independence.

On Tuesday 30th April our guest speaker was Hugh McShane from Newry a very prominent historian, writer of several books and an acknowledged expert on the Newry workhouse. His topic was entitled 'Australia Bound' The Female Orphans of Newry Workhouse. Between 1848 and 1850 what became known as the Earl Grey Scheme was in operation. He was the Secretary of State for the colonies and the aim of the scheme was to reduce overcrowding in the Workhouses, provide labour in Australia and reduce the big gender imbalance there. Of the 4000 plus girls sent to Australia 35 were from Newry. One of these girls, Lucy Ellis went on to marry an Australian and died aged 55 in her own home.

The National Lottery Heritage Grant of £9,942 that we had been awarded in September 2022 to be used in furtherance of our 50th anniversary celebrations has now all been spent. It was very welcome and has enabled us to hold various events and functions to a very high standard. There was the Capt. Moonlite prelaunch event held in Chandlers House and hosted by historian Jason Diamond. Following this we were able to run a two-day exhibition in Chandlers House featuring historical memorabilia pertinent to Rathfriland and its environs.

We also updated and completely reprinted the Town Trail booklets giving information on 36 points of interest in and around Rathfriland. We have replaced the existing plaques and obtained extra new plaques all complete with a QR code. New publicity material was obtained and our improved and updated website was launched.

We organised a historical trip to the Ring of Gullion which included afternoon tea and one to the Lisburn Museum which included an evening meal. We were also able to organise a Christmas celebration meal in December 2023.

Finally, we held a very well received art competition for the local primary and secondary schools.

The Rathfriland Historical Society wishes to records its very best thanks to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for making all this possible

Dorothy

Dorothy James
SECRETARY