A wee bit of maritime history... 24

PAST
Portaferry And Strangford Trust
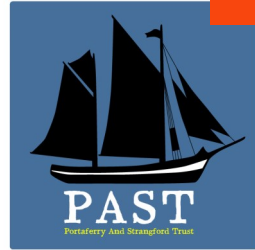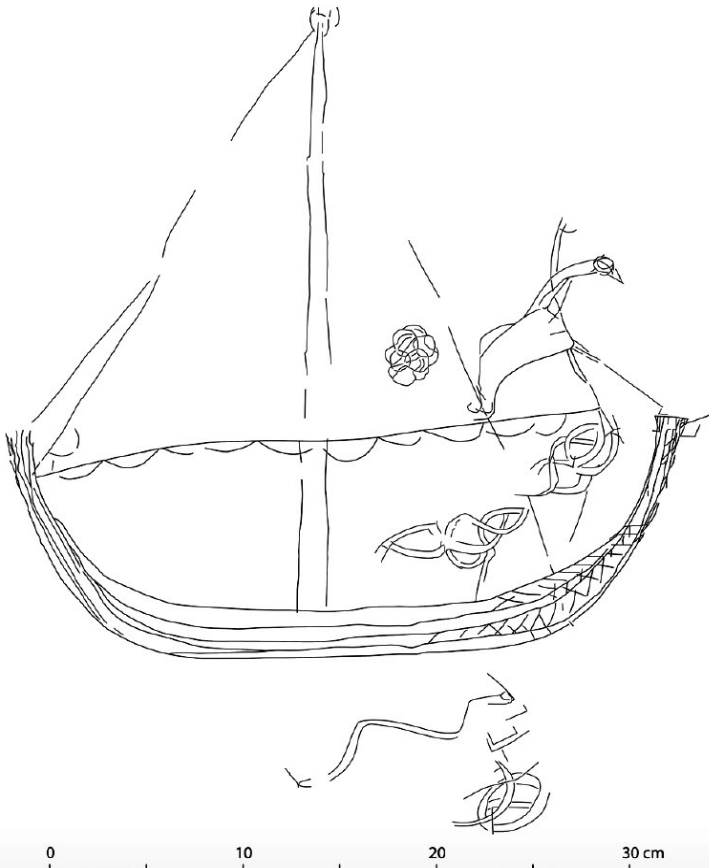
Strangford

The village of Strangford lies at the north-eastern tip of the Lecale peninsula facing its eternal twin, Portaferry, across the Narrows of Strangford Lough. Sometime in the ninth century early Viking explorers experienced the strong currents that flow in and out of the lough. This forceful reminder of the fjords of their own homelands resulted in the name of Strangford.

Upon entering the lough with its rocky and treacherous shores the little cove with its tiny island (Swan Island) and gentle hills must have seemed like an inviting landing-place. One can imagine these fearsome sea-voyagers hauling their clinker-built vessels up the shore, where the Lower Green is today, and assessing their situation. They must have found it congenial enough (as visitors still do today) but nothing remains to attest to this early occupation aside from the name and some Viking graffito in nearby Kilclief. (below)

With thanks to Dr. Finbar McCormick

Strangford probably amounted to little more than this until the arrival of the Anglo-Normans (in the form of John de Courcy and his knights) in 1177. This gave the site a new significance as a vital link between the outposts in Lecale and those in the Upper Ards. A ferry has operated more or less continuously since that time

Among the leading Anglo-Norman families to emerge over the following centuries were the Geraldines (FitzGeralds), earls of Kildare from 1316, who were reputedly descended from the Gheradini of Florence. They acquired many lands in Lecale, including the manor of Strangford, by marriage, in the fifteenth century. Anglo-Norman names, particularly Fitzsimons, are still common in the area.

As Strangford, with its rich agricultural hinterland, rose in significance as a port, a tower-house, Strangford Castle, was built, probably in the latter half of the fifteenth century, and remains the most prominent feature in the village. A quay (at the bottom of Quay Lane) and church (at Old Court) were built by the earls of Kildare in 1629 and they too survive in excellent order today.

A custom house and coastguard buildings also remain as witnesses to the past as does Strangford House, a beautiful and elegant Georgian residence which was built by Mr Norris, Collector of Customs, in 1789 on the hill just behind the castle.

The port's importance declined in the course of the nineteenth century but it still made a significant contribution during the First and Second World Wars when thousands of tons of potatoes were exported to England. Thereafter it became something of a quiet backwater until the coming of the car ferry in 1969. In more recent decades a rise in tourism has also enlivened its streets.

Strangford's charm today lies in its easy acquaintance with the past. It does not eschew modernity, nor has it been diminished by it. It does not bind to itself a joy but rather, as William Blake wrote, lives in eternity's sun-rise. (Colm Rooney)