

The Last Passenger Ferry to Omeath.

By the early 1970s the halcyon days were over for the Red Star Ferry. The troubles in the North were beginning, seriously affecting English and international visitors to the island of Ireland. Ireland and Britain joined the European Common Market in 1973. Tourism was in decline.

Licensing laws changed in the North and brought almost parity with the Republic of Ireland. The growth of the motor car as a means to get from one place to another, and all the flexibility and convenience that went with it, became more popular and available. The Republic of Ireland was not as cheap as it used to be.

Open boats were no longer an attraction for day trippers to the region. Cheap fares to Europe with almost guaranteed sunshine and idyllic beaches became the alternative destination for the new mobile tourist.

The last remaining operating wooden boat belonging to the Red Star Combine, was the Mary Og operated by Brendan O' Neill, later to be replaced with the more modern



MV. Seascapes, the first fibreglass vessel on the route. Gone was the era of the wooden ferry boats operating a passenger Ferry service from Warrenpoint to Omeath.

The Red Star Ferry service was part of the very soul and fabric of Warrenpoint and Omeath. Micro economies developed between the two locations offering employment and financial wellbeing for many local families. Generations of people from Belfast and neighbouring counties visited Warrenpoint, contributing to a vital part of Warrenpoint's social and economic history for well over 100 years.

Renowned Warrenpoint and Omeath families enjoyed the work opportunities, the proud ownership of the vessels, and a rich tradition of seamanship that was handed down through the generations.

Throughout the colourful and vibrant history of the Red Star Ferry, not one fatality occurred on the passenger ferry service between Warrenpoint and Omeath. This unique passenger ferry era is now over (for the time being) and Warrenpoint and Omeath are all the poorer for it..... but the memories are well-heeled!

THANK YOU.

We wish to express our sincere thanks and appreciation to the BRAHAM GROUP, WARRENPOINT for their kind and very generous sponsorship of this critical maritime heritage project.

This NMA project has been delivered in association with Brendan O'Neill, the last "RED STAR FERRY" operator.



Thanks

Councillor Valerie Harte, Chairperson, NMDDC
Brendan O'Neill.

Seamus Crosssey, NMDDC Capital Projects Officer.
Sheila Kieran, NMDDC Democratic Services Officer.
Kerri Morrow, Newry DEA Coordinator.



The Red Star Passenger Ferry.

OUR SHARED HISTORY PROJECT

18th August, 2023

Havelock Place Warrenpoint.

Are event today, in association with Brendan O'Neill, encapsulates the history of the iconic Red Star Passenger Ferry service which operated between Warrenpoint and Omeath for over a century.

At the peak of its popularity the Red Star Fleet numbered 15 wooden boats and this was the largest number of wooden passenger ferries in a single coastal route - warrenpoint to omeath.

The O'Neill Family was one of the founding members of the enterprise and the O'Neill Family was the last of the Red Star operators when the service ceased in 2018



Supported by
Newry, Mourne & Down District Council.



Compiled by James Mc Arevey.

THE STORY

With Brendon O'Neill

The above photograph captures the moment the foundation stone for the Warrenpoint pier was laid, on 13th August 1906. Part of the old sea wall on Warrenpoint promenade is still there today. The female and male apparel encapsulates a colourful period of a bygone era. On the extreme right hand side of the photo is the top of the derrick of Wilson's crane, complete with the cables and braces, though faint in definition, can be seen. Wilson's were a prominent construction company based in Warrenpoint with their head office located in Post Office Street, now Mary Street. The laying of the pier foundation stone on the front shore promenade spawned a rich history of a passenger ferry service that was to last for over a hundred years – the Red Star Warrenpoint to Omeath passenger ferry service.



In the 1920s Warrenpoint had become an exceptionally popular seaside resort for holiday makers and day trippers. Evidence of the town's popularity is referenced in a document from the "Reside Collection". It listed passenger numbers from organised excursions to Warrenpoint by the Great Northern Railway (GNR) in the summer season of 1923. A total of 39,145 passengers were recorded as having visited the town of Warrenpoint by train during that season. The visitors came from Belfast, Derry, Dundalk, Dungannon, Dublin, Lurgan, Newry, Omagh, Portadown and beyond. Warrenpoint was heavily promoted by the GNR as an excursion destination.

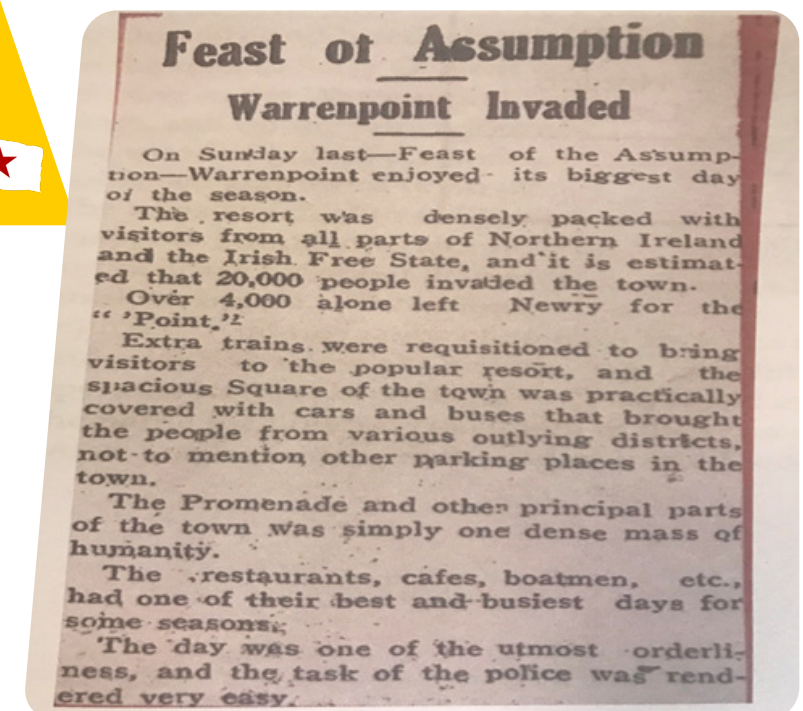
By the late 1920s such were the visitor numbers and popularity of the resort, a decision was made by Stevie Bradley and four other local boat owners to form a combine, a Co-op, to work collectively to operate and organise a passenger ferry service between Warrenpoint and Omeath. For identification purposes the founding members agreed that each of the five ferry operators had to fly a flag with a Red Star on a white background

By 1948 the Red Star fleet had now increased by ten boats bringing the total to 15 boats operating the service.

N.B. The Red Star Ferry service had the largest number of organised small, wooden passenger ferries on a single coastal route – Warrenpoint to Omeath. Indeed, no other passenger ferry service in England, Scotland or Wales operated with more boats on a single internal route, than that of the Red Star Ferry. Lake Windermere passenger vessels numbered nine, but operated inland and on fresh water. The Mersey Passenger Ferry had no more than 7 ferries (steel and wooden construction) at any given time. The Thames Passenger ferries, whilst owned and operated by multiple companies, no one company exceeded 11 vessels. The nearest comparable multiple passenger wooden vessel ferry service on the island of Ireland, was the ferry service to Ballylumford Power Station. It consisted of 5 wooden boats and was for commerce not tourism. It ferried shift employees to Ballylumford Power Station pro bono to enable them to go to work at a remote headland. It was primarily run for the workmen in both the power station, and the Larne docks.

Ten Thousand Passengers 1956 – a record number!

"For the Ferry, the weekends were particularly popular, and the ferry service was part of the patrol for the CMP (Customs Mobile Patrol) Kilkeel, who had an office in Dock St. In the 1950/60s there were fourteen boats operating at peak periods running a shuttle service, carrying 60 to 70 passengers on each trip. Indeed, in 1956 a record 10,000 passengers were carried in one day, challenging, however briefly, the Hollyhead – Dun Laoghaire passenger service."



Omeath Attractions.

The boat trip to Omeath was popular with the visiting day trippers, and the Newry trains to Warrenpoint were full to capacity at the weekends.

Two Belfast trains also operated on Saturday and two on Sunday. The crowds on Newry Street, heading to the ferry, were a popular sight at weekends and mid-mornings. On the trip to Omeath, passengers would enjoy accordion players who frequented many of the vessels.

Percy French's Mountains of Mourne, and Star of the County Down, were popular tunes. Jackey Hearst was a popular accordion player on the boats during the 1960s and 70s.

The sound levels increased substantially on the return journey, courtesy of some well lubricated vocal cords. For thousands it couldn't be a more perfect day in the town of Warrenpoint, and the picturesque village of Omeath.

The visiting families and their children were eager to enjoy the sea, the freedom of the open space, the beach and maybe an ice cream before their boat trip. While the Omeath stall holders were popular for the visitors, others took the journey for more devout spiritual reasons – a visit to St. Jude's Shrine, Calvary. The views from Calvary certainly enhanced its attraction, as one of the most scenic places of Christian pilgrimage on the island of Ireland. Jarvey operators parked outside on the main Carlingford Road waiting for their customers at the shrine. Visitors sought peace, and serenity of the Shrine and the attractive Lourdes Grotto. Devotion to St. Jude attracted large crowds to the Grotto. (Grotto photo below). A fleet of Jarveys offered trips along the scenic road to Carlingford and beyond.

