

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.

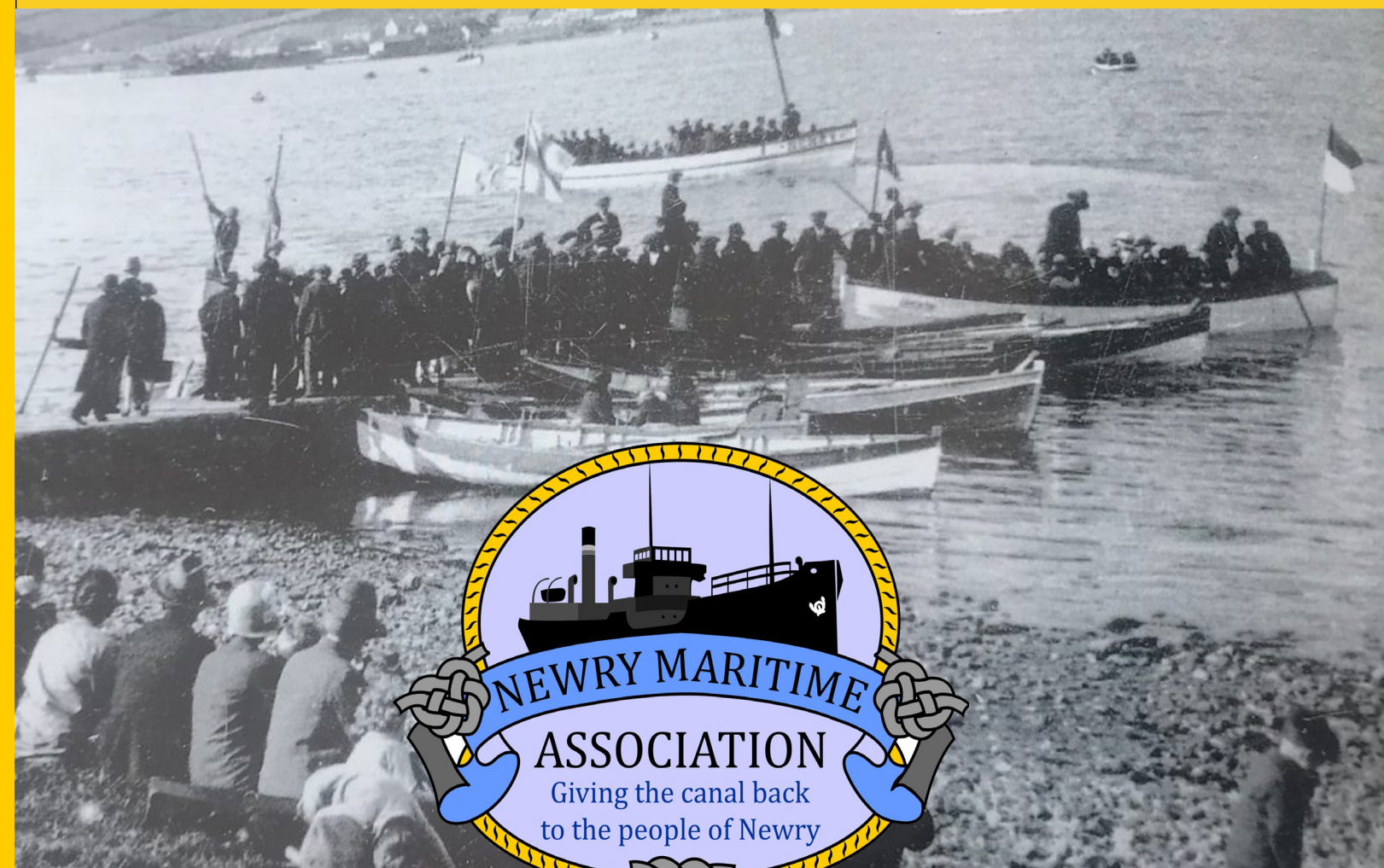
Renowned Warrenpoint and Omeath families enjoyed the work opportunities, the proud ownership of the vessels, and a rich tradition of seamanship that was handed down through the generations.

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-keeled!

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

THANK YOU.

Brendan O'Neill.
Omeath Historical Society
Omeath Tidy Towns Committee



The Omeath to Warrenpoint Passenger Ferry Service.

OUR SHARED HISTORY PROJECT

14th August 2025

Station Road Omeath.

Our event today, in association with Omeath Historical Society and Omeath Tidy Towns Committee, recalls the vibrant history of the iconic passenger ferry service which operated between Omeath and Warrenpoint for over a century.

The Red Star Ferry Combine was established in Warrenpoint, initially with 5 boats, and at the peak of its popularity the fleet numbered 15 wooden boats. This was the largest number of wooden passenger ferries operated on a single coastal route, Warrenpoint to Omeath.

The Blue Star Line was later established on the Omeath side, but not all ferrymen sailed under these flags but rather went out independently.

Compiled by James Mc Arevey.

Remembrance and Renaissance.

The island of Ireland was subjected to seismic change following Partition which was enacted on 3rd May 1921 which effectively created 2 different jurisdictions. The Irish Free State consisted of the provinces of Munster, Leinster, Connaught ,23 counties, plus 3 border counties from Ulster, Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal. The remaining 6 Ulster counties became Northern Ireland, with a parliament in Belfast, which was opened by King George V in June 1921.

When the Frontier was established the social and economic consequences were particularly manifested in the Border areas. Communities were divided and cut off from their natural hinterlands. On the Northern side nationalist towns like Newry were starved of investment and much needed employment. Many large businesses like Fishers Coal and Mc Cann's Bakery saw their traditional Southern trade severely impacted as the Government in Dublin imposed economic tariffs.

Differentials in pricing brought opportunities, particularly during the years of WW2. Rationing was imposed by the British Government and this included the North. Apart from organised smuggling, hard pressed citizens of the North descended on the most convenient location in the South. The resultant Black Economy was a win, win situation for all involved and in this instance Omeath. The village was an economic mecca but sadly as we know, the good days declined with the civil unrest in the North. Omeath became a shadow of its former self.

Today however, there are green shoots of recovery all around. The old stalwarts of commerce, Mulligans, Howes, The Strand and a rejuvenated Grand Central are still to the fore and are now joined by new businesses to push the village forward, socially and economically. Omeath has benefited greatly from a major Environmental Improvement scheme complimented by the opening of the final stretch of the Greenway to Victoria Lock The new bridge at Narrow Water, the first such cross border link to be built since Partition is on schedule for opening in 2027. This infrastructure will be a gamechanger. Omeath is on the cusp of a much needed , and long overdue, Renaissance. The Narrow Water Bridge will be the catalyst.



OMEATH AND ITS FERRYMEN

Róisín Mulligan

Omeath (Oméith Mara), as its name suggests is a coastal village, which has always had an important relationship with the sea that borders it. As a source of food its bounty of fish and shell-fish were caught in great numbers, indeed they served as a source of food to many families during the Famine years in particular.

Secondly, as a means of transport the Lough itself provided a route from Omeath in Co. Louth to Warrenpoint in Co. Down. This route was used by the ferrymen from Omeath quay and vice versa. For hundreds of years the ferrymen rowed their small boats across in the mile long journey. In later years, motor boats were used and the last ferryman Brendan O'Neill from Warrenpoint hung up his boots in 2018, marking the end of four generations of O'Neills who were regular Carlingford Lough ferrymen.

The DGNR (Dundalk Greenore Newry Railway) arrived in Omeath in 1876 and continued until 1951. With the coming of the railway, the area around the train station flourished, establishing a Centre of commerce and tourism. The train station is in close proximity to the quay and so the two modes of transport worked hand-in-hand with each other.

The Red Star Line was established in Warrenpoint as a combine (co-op) in the 1920s. The Blue Star Line was later established on the Omeath side, but not all ferrymen sailed under these flags but rather went out independently.

Here are some of the ferrymen whose families were traditionally ferrymen on the lough.

- | | |
|------------|----------|
| Anderson | Mc Court |
| Bettridge | Mc Keown |
| Boyle | Morgan |
| Killeen | O Hagan |
| Maguire | O Hanlon |
| McCarthy | Quinn |
| Mc Cormack | |

Pictured below, Bobby Anderson, (Blue Star) and "Maggie"



Photo courtesy of Majella Anderson.



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

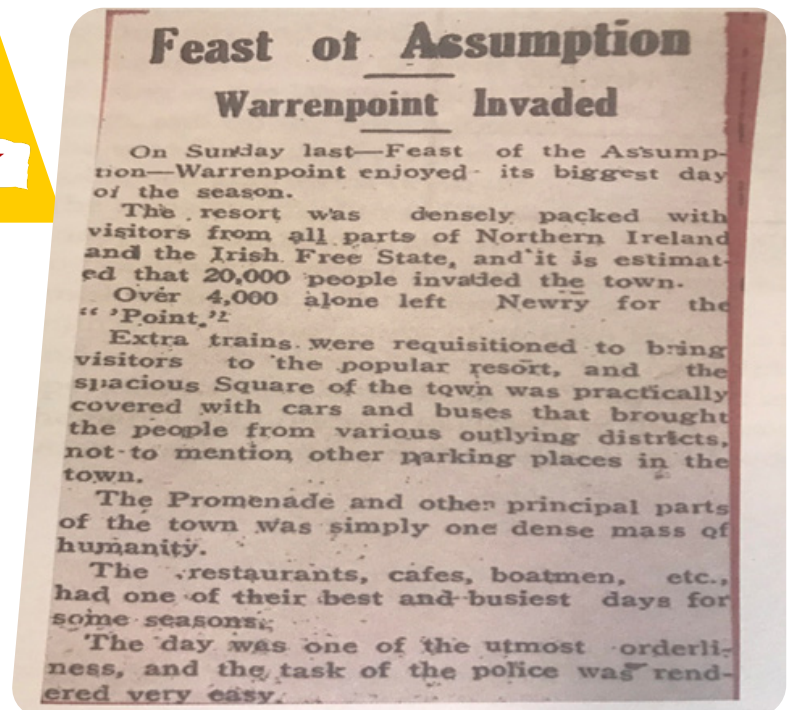
By 1948 the Red Star fleet had now increased by ten boats bringing the total to 15 boats operating the service.

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.

