FREE

PAST

From Ferry Street to New Zealand

Portaferry has a long history and for over eight hundred years a ferry has plied back and forth between it and Strangford. Until the 18th century the town mostly consisted of thatched cottages, but at that period the town began to prosper. Development was rapid up to, and including, the first half of the 19th century when many wooden sailing ships were built in Portaferry and many new industries sprang up.

By 1780, when the Methodist Church was founded, Portaferry was a thriving town centred around the harbour and the Market Square. In the same year that ground was acquired for the building of the church, many substantial houses were also being built.

Most of the inhabitants were connected with the sea; as fishermen, sailors, ship owners, ship builders and coastguards. Land surrounding the town was used by farmers. At that time roads were bad, so almost all heavy transport was by sea, even to Belfast. This trade by sea with Belfast continued until the end of WW1. Portaferry also traded with the west coasts of England and Scotland.

Two or three horse-drawn carts or drays, in the charge of one man, conveyed urgent supplies to and from Newtownards and Belfast. Often the driver slept as the horses did not require guidance. Passenger transport to and from Newtownards, which had a railway connection with Belfast, was by horse-drawn vehicle known as the 'long car.'

Methodism in Portaferry began during the lifetime of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. In the minutes of the Methodist Conference of 1786 the question was asked 'What houses are allowed to be built?' Portaferry was given permission to build a church so we may conclude that Methodism had already been in the area for some time. Hence the date 1780 on the outside of the church.

When John Wesley paid his second visit to Portaferry in 1789, he recorded in his diary that the service was held in the Presbyterian Church since the Methodist Church was too small for the crowd wishing to attend.
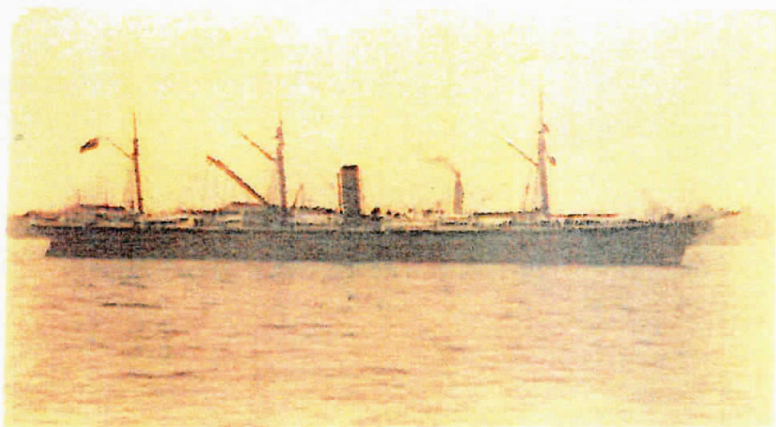
After preaching in Newtownards in this, his last visit to Ireland, Wesley wrote:

"From hence we had a pleasant ride to Portaferry, a pretty large seaport town and one of the quietest I ever saw. Here I preached in a large Meeting House to a serious and well-behaved congregation on 'stand ye in the old paths' and many seemed determined to walk therein. The following day we had twice or thrice as many people in the morning as our house would have contained. We then had a lovely passage to Strangford where I was inclined to preach in the open air as I did eleven years ago till the Vicar invited me to preach in the Church. As we walked through the stree the people gathered from every quarter so that the Church was over-filled, many being constrained to stand outside."

Andrew Clarke Caughey, son of James and Jane, was born in Portaferry in 1849. He was a staunch member of the Methodist Church in Portaferry. After serving his time in Belfast in the drapery trade, he worked in Limerick and London before returning to Belfast. For health reasons he decided to emigrate to New Zealand, which, according to historian Jim Blaney, was a popular destination for members of Caughey's Methodist church in Ferry Street.

In 1879 he arrived in Auckland on the sailing ship *Aconcagua*. (below) Soon after his arrival Mr. Caughey was appointed Wesleyan minister in Pukekohe.

His sister, Mary Anne (Marianne) Caughey, had been born in Portaferry in 1851 and was the youngest of the seven children of the grocer, James Caughey. In 1874 she married one of her brother's colleagues, William Henry Smith, and sailed to New York where William had a job in a drapery firm. Marianne helped at the mission in Water Street and at the *Door of Hope*, a refuge for single mothers. In 1879 the couple returned to Belfast where they started a charitable mission, before deciding to emigrate to New Zealand in 1880.

Marianne opened *Smith's Cheap Drapery* in Auckland while William worked for another draper. By 1881 Marianne's store was doing so well that William was able to join her in the business. Early in 1882 her brother Andrew decided to give up the Ministry and join his sister and brother-in-law in business too. The firm was then named *Smith and Caughey* and its success was built on a policy of high turnover through low retail margins and sourcing goods from overseas. By 1884 *Smith and Caughey* had moved to a prime site on the western side of Queen Street and finally became one of the largest retail drapery businesses in New Zealand.

When the former Marianne Caughey died in 1938 she left a huge estate of £325,000, most of which was to set up homes 'for aged, infirm or impecunious women.' The trust she established holds nearly half the shares in Smith and Caughey Ltd today and administers the Caughey-Preston Rest Homes and Geriatric Hospital in Remuera, Auckland.

Marianne's brother, Andrew, married Lucy Hannah Rainger in 1886 and had a family of seven. In 1906 he visited Portaferry with two of his sons and gave a lecture in the Orange Hall describing commerce and industry in New Zealand.

His visit, and his generosity in helping renew Portaferry Methodist Church, 'inside and out,' is commemorated by a plaque which can be seen today.

With thanks to Donald Elliott for permission to use the Methodist Church bi-centenary leaflet and to an article by Jim Blaney in Issue No 12 of the Upper Ards Historical Society's journal.

ERECTED BY THE CONGREGATION
IN
GRATEFUL APPRECIATION
OF THE BENEFICENCE OF
ANDREW C. CAUGHEY, Esq.
OF AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND,
TO WHOSE GENEROUS GIFT
WE ARE CHIEFLY INDEBTED
FOR THE RENOVATION & BEAUTIFYING
OF THIS SANCTUARY,
HALLOWED TO HIM AS THE CHURCH
OF HIS EARLY DAYS, MAY 1904.

The
Community Foundation
for Northern Ireland

Supported by
Ards and North Down
Borough Council

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This leaflet is produced
by Portaferry and Strangford Trust
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