

Meeting on 12 September 2018

Talk by Mr. Peter Vannucci

Italian Families in North Down

Ards Historical Society's well attended first meeting of the winter season took place on Wednesday 12th September. The speaker was Mr Peter Vannucci who gave a talk entitled, 'Italian Families of North Down'. Mr Vannucci explained that he had been looking at a photograph of Queen's Parade, Bangor that he believed was taken sometime between 1904 and 1908. In one corner he spotted an ice cream cart with the name P. Vannucci, he then wanted to find out more about his family whom he believed were the first Italians to set up a business in Bangor. However, this was more complicated than expected and his research soon extended to include other Italian families that came to North Down.

Most of the Italians came from either the Serchio Valley in Tuscany or the more southerly Comino Valley. Many of the villages were remote and difficult to access due to the ravine like nature of the terrain, the population was educated but impoverished and work was scarce. Emigration was a choice that many had to make if they were to support their families and hope to prosper.

Mr Vannucci's great uncle Ancetto came from Cardoso a hilltop town in the Serchio Valley, he went to sea and as a sailor he visited Belfast and subsequently moved to Galston near Kilmarnock in Scotland where he married a Catherine Quigley during 1905. They moved to Bangor where 3 of their children were born. They are recorded in the 1911 census by which time he was known as Peter and his employment was listed as a confectioner. Catherine had been born in Scotland. They moved back to Cardoso where 3 more children were born before returning to Bangor. It is believed that the ice cream seller in the photograph is Ancetto. One of his brothers Giosue came to Bangor during 1911, he was Mr Vannucci's grandfather and like other families there was constant movement between Ireland, Scotland and Italy.

There was an established route managed by 'agents' by which these Italian 'entrepreneurs' eventually made their way to North Down and elsewhere in Ireland. Scotland, in particular Galston, was where many of them first arrived spending time learning their new trades. So as to not compete with one and other they would move away to other areas to establish their ice cream, cafes and fish and chip enterprises or join other family members that were already in business.

It was explained that as a rule of thumb family surnames ending with i (Vannucci, Gheradi, Caproni, Morelli, Tagneri, etc.) were from areas further north whilst those ending with other letters mainly a, e or o (Cafolla, Fusco, Forte, Borza, etc.) were from further south.

The link between Ireland, Scotland and Italy remains strong and Barga, another town in the Serchio Valley is described as the most Scottish town in Italy with red telephone boxes, a Scottish pub, named the Shamrock and many followers of the Scottish League.

Mr Vannucci discovered that Enrico Caproni left Barga opening his first business in Bangor during 1900 which was several years ahead of Ancetto. Unlike most of the Italian families, the Capronis were better off and had sold land before coming to Bangor where he opened ice cream parlours, cafes and eventually the ballroom at Ballyholme.

Guiseppe Cafolla left Casalattico in the Comino Valley to escape Italy during WWI. He first lived in 'Little Italy', Belfast just off the York Road before moving to Newtownards where he had a cafe in South Street. He moved to Conway Square and traded as the Premier Cafe. When the annual Ards TT motor race took place between 1928 and 1936, the cafe became a very popular meeting place for spectators and drivers, especially the Italian drivers and its reputation spread far beyond the town.

At the outbreak of WWII Italians that had not naturalised were interned, there were 33 from Northern Ireland that included Guiseppe Cafolla, Enrico Caproni and his brother. Most were sent to the Isle of Man where some experienced better conditions than others.

The presence of the Italian businesses started to decline, the next generation did not want to follow their parents. The advent of package holidays and cheaper travel, American diners and fast food chains and the troubles brought difficulties for many. At one time there were 20 independent family concerns in Bangor, none survived. However the names of some live on under different ownership. Cafollas remains family owned and is now very much part of Newtownards.

To conclude, many literate people made their way to North Down to escape poverty or war. People that were once foreigners with strange names are now locals with foreign names.