

Meeting on 9th January 2019

90 Years of Ards Rugby Club - Ivan Coffee

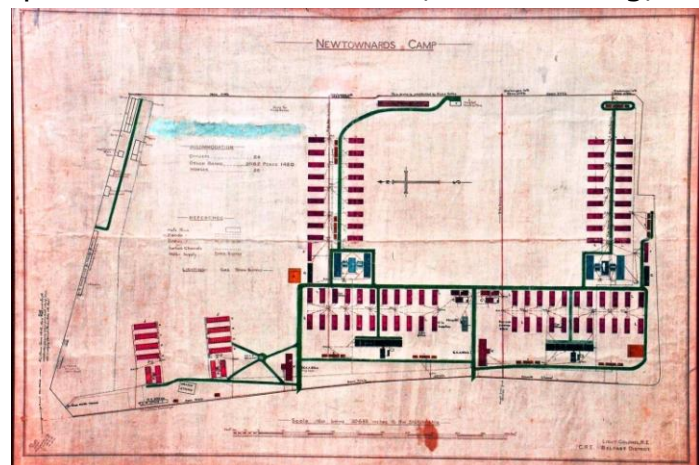
Ards Historical Society's first talk of 2019 was given by Ivan Coffee; the subject being "90 Years of Ards Rugby Club". The story of the club reflects the way that the town and community have developed during the 90 years since the club's formation in March 1928 when the town's population was approximately 10,000. At that time the main sport was soccer with both Ards Football Club and Ards United, other organised sports were hockey (men & ladies), bowls, cricket, golf, table tennis, pigeon racing, indoor air gun shooting with Gaelic football (Portaferry) and swimming at Barr's Bay. Rugby was played in Bangor and Donaghadee but in Newtownards it was only played at the Academy, the boys school that later amalgamated with Miss Brown's school for girls to form Regent House.

Rugby had been played in the 1888/89/90 seasons but ceased due to lack of support. Lacrosse was the main spectator sport and Newtownards dominated winning the all Ireland championships on 3 consecutive years. They were so successful that all other teams refused to play them and the popularity of lacrosse declined.

There had been periodic attempts to revive rugby and in 1928 a group of young men got together to play, some had learnt to play at the Academy, a few were trainee teachers or teachers with others from business, legal, academic and farming backgrounds, many from well known families within and around the town. The first game took place at the Academy grounds on the 24th March; the opposing team was King's Scholars (Stranmillis). 2 further games were played and on the 7th April 1928 an advert appeared in the Newtownards Chronicle giving notice of a meeting on the 11th April for those interested in rugby football, the purpose being to form a rugby club in Newtownards. About 40 people attended and the Ards Rugby Football Club was born with affiliation to the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union playing in the Minor League. The club crest that was selected depicts a hand holding the fleur de lis (lily) adapted from the crest of the Montgomery family that founded the town around 1608. *Fidelis Atque Fortis* meaning "brave and faithful", the motto of the Savage family that had come from Normandy with John de Courcy.



On the 3rd October Ards played and won their first league game at the Camp ground which was sited off the Comber Road within the area of the present day Bowling Club, Crepe Weavers and much of the airport. Originally known as Ards Recreation Ground where games and sports took place as well as athletics, horse racing, agricultural and trade shows, the army had commandeered the grounds at the outbreak of WWI and established a training facility erecting rows of huts to provide accommodation for soldiers; it became known as the Camp. When the State of Northern Ireland was created the newly formed RUC moved to the site which became a college for new entrants so it was also referred to as the Depot.



Layout of Camp /Depot Grounds →



1928-29 Ards in the beginning

Under his captainship Ards again won the Junior League section but once again lost the Ravenhill final, however they were promoted to the top level of Junior rugby. (The next youngest captain was David Coffey in the 1959/60).

In 1934 the club had to leave the Camp/Depot grounds as Lord Londonderry began the construction of the aerodrome, with the cooperation of the Londonderry Estate a new ground was leased behind Raceview Terrace, off the Comber Road. The cost of moving was £143 that included the acquisition of a small pavilion from Ards United Football Club. These grounds were never given a formal name but the club was based there for 37 years before moving to Hamilton Park in 1971.



John P Hamilton

The period leading up to WWII was uneventful; Ards continued to play for the first 2 years of the war after which all games ceased. Play resumed in August 1944 with Frank Dorman as captain, the Leagues and Cups were reactivated at the end of the war and the 1945/46 season ended with Ards again losing the Junior League final at Ravenhill. There were no significant successes during the 1950s but the club was getting stronger and 2 or 3 teams regularly turned out, the first breakthrough was on Easter Monday 1962 when Ards won the Towns Cup, the most prestigious trophy that could be competed for at the level at which they played. More success followed and by the end of the decade 5 or 6 teams were playing and the grounds could no longer cater, the decision was made to move, 9 acres of agricultural land was purchased and developed into Hamilton Park that formally opened on 10th September 1971.

Ards was becoming a dominant force in Junior rugby being overall Junior League champions in 1971/72; runners up the next year and champions again the following year. On 21st December 1976 they won the Boston Cup beating Bangor the leading team in Ulster at that time. 1977/78 was a glorious season with 7 winning teams and promotion to Senior rugby. Ards win the Senior League 3 times during the 1980s and Phillip Matthews became the first club member playing in Ards colours to win an International cap for Ireland against Australia, followed shortly by Nigel Carr. 2000/01 Senior status is lost to be regained the following year. Support was declining and only 2 sides were playing regularly, Senior status was lost at the end of the 2014/15 season and has not been regained. Focus is very much on younger players, under 20, 18 and 16 sides were introduced in 1995 and success continues at all youth levels, Mini rugby began a year later and is still popular and growing.



1930-31 1st XV



1945-46 1st XV



1960-61 Towns Cup Winners



1970-71 1st XV



1983 - 84 Winners of Senior League



1984 - 85 Ireland Triple Crown



2002-03 - Towns Cup Winners



1 - Blair Mayne



1 - Blair Mayne 3



2 - Phillip Matthews 1



3 - Harry Millar



4 - Nigel Carr 1



5 - Kenny Hooks



6 - Scott Robertson



11 - Robin Cole



7 - Budge Pountney



12 - John P Hamilton



8 - Barry Calvert



10 - Philip Orr



10 - Philip Orr 1



10 - Philip Orr 2



4 - Nigel Carr



1930 - 31 1st XV



1976 - 77



Camp Depot Grounds
Police Photo



Old Hut and Adjoining
Tea Room



Map of Hamilton Park



Spirit of Ards Rugby