

A Brief History of Lough Erne Yacht Club

1815 Navy Style Yacht Clubs

After the Napoleonic wars, many officers and men came home with high level skills in everything to do with sailing and navigation, and were eager to use these skills. In 1815, Lord Belmore of Castlecoole was a founder member of the Royal Yacht Squadron, most prestigious of all clubs.

His yacht Osprey was among the 40 yachts owned by members and listed in their signals book. This book was one of many ways in which this and similar clubs emulated naval practice.

Some yachtsmen wear reefer jackets with brass buttons and peaked caps with white tops. Clubs have an admiral, commodore, vice and rear commodore. The admiralty issued warrants so privileged 'Royal' clubs and yachtsmen could fly the blue ensign.

According to Lloyd's Register, Lough Erne Yacht Club had one until the First World War. Its warrant was lost, possibly in a fire at Castle Saunderson.

The Beginning of Lough Erne Racing

Lough Erne was ideal for sailing but Fermanagh's wet and hilly lands did not suit horse racing, the popular racing sport elsewhere, for which Kildare's flat dry lands were ideal.

Instead, Fermanagh boatwrights built fast sailing boats that were well able to go to windward using the war proven gaff cutter rig. These were not yachts for naval emulation and display of status. Simply called Sailing Boats, they were built for sport, only 20 to 30 feet long. To be winner of the race was the status sought.

1822 Willian D'Arcy Irvine

In August 1822, at the earliest Erne sailing races for which a full record survives, a dozen sailing boats took part over three days at the Lough Erne boat races. Big Houses, on upper and lower lakes, sent boats. Three came from Castle Saunderson, and others from Crom, Dromard, Ely, Magheramena, Necarne, Riversdale and Rossfad. A crew from Crom bested Enniskillen to win ten pounds in the cot rowing race after the sailing races, and on the Friday, upwards of 100 took supper, with 'every delicacy of the season', then danced 'till an advanced hour of the morning'.

The Chronicle also reported 'At an early hour countless small craft were plying from all direction to Inisdoney Island, where the gentlemen of the Committee had assembled to

make the necessary arrangements'. Their chairman was William D'Arcy Irvine, of Castle Irvine, also known as Necarne, in today's Irvinestown (then Lowtherstown). The Irvine estates included Inishdoney and he had small lodge there, which is shown in a scenic drawing made for an Admiralty chart in 1836.

For over 40 years, the 'subscribers to the boat races on Lough Erne, for the encouragement of fast sailing boats, and for the improvement of the navigation of the lake' ran the Lough Erne Boat Races. Advertisements and reports in the Erne Packet and Enniskillen Chronicle, and later the Impartial Reporter had sailing boats for sale, notices of meetings, committees, rules, list of boats and results - all the features of an organised sports club.

The subscribers elected chairman and committee at meetings that were advertised and reported in the Chronicle. Spectators, ashore and afloat, games, music and entertainment on the Boat Race Green at Rosscclare's mainland shore, balls in Enniskillen, house parties at Castle Archdale and Rosscfad, the scenic setting and visitors from near and far were all enthusiastically reported. Similarly, the boats, the racing and rules were described in technical terms that clearly were familiar to readers.

Boats came from Sligo, Killybegs and even Derry and Dublin, and there were sailing races elsewhere, including Ringsend, in Dublin and Belfast Lough. However, only the direct descendant of the subscribers, Lough Erne Yacht Club, survives today from the groups who organised those first sailing races in Ireland.

1842

Reports in early years referred to the Boat Races as a manly and innocent amusement and cited scientific and sporting principles. In 1842, the Impartial Reporter supported the 'annual exercise of skill in sailing' saying that, apart from the friendly and convivial occasions thus afforded our gentry and their families for social intercourse, sailing is an amusement divested of the cruel and immoral practices of the horse race - an impartial view, of course!

A report, in 1847, lauded Lough Erne's picturesque scenery - 'not less lovely than Killarney, more noble than Windermere' - the number of splendid yachts, and the spirit in which all pertaining to the regatta is carried out by 'our resident gentry'. Townsman's letter in 1851 added a political twist: 'happy to find our excellent member enjoying our annual regatta, and wish I could say as much for our county members. One came home a day too late and the other, no doubt, was patronising some English race. The men who spend their money at home, and patronise whatever is useful in their native county, are the men to take best care of its interests elsewhere.'

The Lough Erne Regatta attracted a large number of visitors, many from England. Necarne's gentlemen, William and his son Henry D'Arcy Irvine, were listed year after year in key organising roles, variously chairman, clerk of the course, steward (a borrowed horse racing term) judge and secretary.

However, at the 1854 Regatta, Hunt noted 'some mis-understanding between two or three leading members of the club, which seems to have extended its baneful influence over the whole body' with many of the yacht owners of the upper and lower lakes, sulking instead of sailing in the 'honourable rivalry and generous spirit of sportsmen'. Some may have been taking sides in an acrimonious dispute that had followed a letter in the press by his hot-headed neighbour, Mervyn Archdall about Henry D'Arcy Irvine, who had stood against him in the 1852 election.

There may have been less racing on the Lower Lough for a few years. Then in 1865, a widely circulated notice revived its organisation. The senior officer became a Commodore. John Crichton, now Earl of Erne, was elected (as was his successor in 1885). A resolution asked Henry D'Arcy Irvine to join and to help re-establish the regatta with his knowledge of rules and racing. The long title of the early subscribers had become simply Lough Erne Yacht Club, as it is today.

The 1886 sailing regulations booklet listed members from both lakes, including Vice Commodore, Marquis of Ely (lower) and Rear-Commodore, Earl of Lanesborough (upper). The 1868 Regatta was a particular success. 'Tiny craft, close-reefed in the strong wind, were dashing wildly about.' The Rossclare Hotel and grounds were filled with excursionists and sightseers. Likewise were the steamers Rossclare and Devenish, down from Enniskillen. Fifteen yachts raced over the two days, the first stormy the second calmer, on a 25 mile long course from Rossclare and twice round islands and buoys away down the lake. The Breeze won the first cup, and had won it the previous year. Another Crom boat Wizard was third, interestingly entered by William D'Arcy Irvine. Mr Pomeroy's Foam from St Angelo and Charles McCabe's Wasp were there, but no boat from Castle Archdall.

The Crom Era

Lough Erne Yacht Club's first built headquarters was the boat house at Crom, built in 1842 by John Crichton, third Earl of Erne, whose close involvement in Erne sailing boat racing from its very beginning was to last almost 70 years. This elegant working building, design well suited to purpose, may be Ireland's first yacht club building. The Royal St George Yacht Club, the first in Dunlaoghaire, was built in 1843, and there were few, if any specific yacht club buildings before these dates.

Crom boathouse, its structure much as it was in the 1840s, and set today among lakeside trees, is an interesting artefact in Ireland's architectural and yachting history, and a valuable asset to Lough Erne's heritage. A photograph in an LEYC scrapbook, taken about 1900, shows a signal mast, with LEYC burgee flying, and a yard-arm cocked at traditional angle.

On the top balcony, like a poop deck, the fourth Earl, with yachting cap, stands to take in the view. Behind him was a club room, with furniture for afternoon tea, regatta style.

Half-models of fast hulls, pictures and trophies adorned the walls. They were later moved into the Castle, some half-models are displayed today along the west wing corridor. At ground level is an unusual but practical, long, thin side room, with racks for oars and masts, and a fireplace for Autumn regattas. The main space, with a wide door to the slipway, held a lot of boats and their gear.

The big fleet moored off Crom included yachts from Lanesborough Lodge, upstream where the lake was narrower and Castle Saunderson, whence had sailed that squadron of sailing boats reported in 1819 exploring the lower lake, and led by Alexander Saunderson, first secretary of the original subscribers. Edward Saunderson inherited in 1862, and continued the family sailing tradition with great success until his death in 1906.

Other Big House families with yachts in the Crom fleet included the Massey Beresfords at St Hubert's and the Tippings at Rossferry. Two big boat building sheds at Castle Saunderson, were demolished in the mid-1980s, leaving only the stone steps used to embark onto boats a century before. In 1984, the house at St Hubert's was gone, but for floor tiles in a field, and wrought iron gates in bushes near Geaglum. The red brick boathouse walls were intact and ivy hung, with the roof half fallen in.

Two large pictures at Crom depict regattas hosted by Lord Erne in 1850 and 1853, a panorama of flag flying sailing yachts and oared cots competing afloat, watched by high-ranking guests and a fashionable crowd in the gardens, over looked by the castle. By then, the grand Crom era for Lough Erne Yacht Club was well underway. It would last for three quarters of a century, until the Great War's social watershed brought all that, and more, to an end.

1880's and Drainage

In Erne sailing history, this era was divided by a big drainage scheme that took up the whole of the 1880s. There were upper and lower lake regattas in 1880, both run from Crom HQ, and attended largely by upper lake boats, but only an upper lake event in 1881, then none again on the lower lake until 1893.

Before the drainage, many racing yachts were large for a lake, up to 20 tons (a yacht handicap measure, not the same as weight). After it, the Upper Lough being much shallower, large yachts were abandoned and replaced by smaller boats, often with the same name, but now of a new class called Two-Raters, as determined by the Yacht Racing Association's new rating rule introduced in 1887.

Upper Lough Erne was a peculiar place for sailing races. Along any course, the wind was ever changing in force and direction as it flowed round, or was blocked by an island or wood. Channels twisted, wide then narrow, with rocks, mud and sand shoals. A boat taking a short cut at a bend went aground - the deep water was along the outside bank. An LEYC album of press cuttings, 1890 to 1913, has many accounts of races where boats on very long courses ran a gauntlet of calm, squall, wind-shift and shoal, as well as sailing normally on waters like Trial Bay opposite Crom.

Many sailors were very skilled. The Witch was 83 feet overall from the end of her bowsprit to the end of her boom, and Edward Saunderson, sometimes alone, would take her along the twisting channels between Castle Saunderson and Crom for the racing. This difficult and frustrating sailing was very popular among those who lived there and visitors.

1890's

In the 1890s and early 1900s, as summer sailing ended elsewhere, LEYC members gathered for four weeks of autumn sailing, one week for the lower lake regatta then three for the upper. After the Tippings had left, Rossferry was rented by Cyril Ward. His brother Lord Dudley joined him each season. Dudley's huge family fortune came from coal, and he was Viceroy of Ireland. Another example of these very rich, visiting LEYC members, was John Gretton, whose fortune came from Bass beer.

Women Members 1895

Early in those suffragette times, LEYC membership was opened to women in September 1895. The first three were Evelyn Crichton, Alice Massey-Beresford and Miss Dennistoun of Roslea Row, Newtownbutler. In 1918, the first woman elected to Westminster, Countess Markiewicz had canoed at Crom visiting from her girlhood home, Lissadell in Sligo. Her father was an accomplished ocean yachtsman.

LEYC's 1898 booklet set out rules for a new one-design class called Colleens, built by Paddy Doyle in today's Dunlaoghaire and designed by his daughter. Eight of these lively 24 foot boats raced, often with women crew, until 1905, when Maeve, with Mabel Crichton and Lord Dudley, capsized in an Erne squall at the 1905 regatta. The press blamed the boat rather than her prestigious crew.

1898 LEYC and Joshua Slocum

Joshua Slocum, first to sail around the world alone, met LEYC's two most active yacht designers, Edward Saunderson and Jack Tipping in Durban in 1898. They were intrigued by his ocean-boat Spray. Over a merry dinner, Slocum resolved to spend retirement in Cavan sailing with them on Lough Erne - but he was lost at sea some years later.

There are few contemporary pictures of Slocum. The one on the cover of the Slocum Society's journal for his voyage's centenary was Edward's Saunderson's sketch at that Durban dinner-table, found about 80 years later in his papers.

1905 and the Kaiser

LEYC members also sailed elsewhere. Edward Saunderson joined John Gretton on his big schooner Betty to race against the Kaiser in his Meteor and others at Kiel Regatta. This gave rise to a curious enquiry in an Enniskillen paper from the Kaiser about his

friends' results at the 1905 LEYC Regatta.

John Gretton in 1900 and Charles Crichton in 1908 won medals for Olympic sailing. Viscount Crichton was first Commodore of the Dublin Bay Sailing Club, nowadays the biggest sailing club with the largest programme in Ireland, and perhaps in these islands.

The 1905 Regatta, reported at length in the new Yachting World magazine and The Field, both published in London, and in the local papers, was the last of the magnificent four-week-long regattas in LEYC's long Crom era.

In 1905 the last of the Two-Raters, and the most expensive, were delivered: Breeze for Viscount Crichton, and Vanessa for Lord Dudley, both from Scotland, and Foam for Cyril Ward from Southampton. After a week's racing on the lower lake followed by three on the upper, Vanessa bested Breeze overall by one point, with Edward Saunderson's home-built Sprite another point behind, then Foam fourth. Alice Massey-Beresford's Wonderland won among eight Colleens.

The End of an Era 1914

August 1914 brought war, and no more autumn sailing at Crom. Many of the beautiful and brave young men who gallantly raced over the rippling waters of the Erne never returned from the Great War.

1925

In 1925, a detailed table in the Fermanagh Times set out the race results of eleven Fairies (including Petrel) over the years since their first races in June 1906. Storm, owned by Geoffrey and the Misses Irvine, had started 349 races and Phyllis Richardson of Rossfad, continuing the sailing traditions of her father Jack, and grandfather Squire Tipping.

1930's

Also in the 1930s, some LEYC members had Snipe racing dinghies built in Belfast, at £50 each, and based them at Crom Boat House. Sailing was back on the Upper Lough and the Snipes were raced there again after the war in the early 1950s. Today's National Trust display at Crom Estate includes the hull of one of these 15 foot Snipe dinghies.

When Horace Fleming, a Corkman and sailor from Clonakilty, came to Fermanagh in 1937 to be county surgeon, he purchased a Fairy and renamed her Maeve. Her first owner had been Edward Archdale and her name Spook. She ranked ninth in that 1925 table, 10 wins in 142 races. When he reluctantly gave up sailing and sold Maeve, Horace had owned and raced the same boat for 52 years - some kind of record.

In his first full season, he sailed in every race, spent two pounds and eleven shillings on entry fees, won five shillings for second in the Commodore's Cup races, and won 5 of the 6 races for the Points and the R. A. Herbert Cups.

1939 Another War. The Gublusk Era Begins

War was declared in September of 1939, and sailing gave way to a fleet of flying boats from Killadeas and Castle Archdale engaged in the Battle of the Atlantic.

In the winter of 1941, war brought two squadrons of Catalina flying boats from Scotland to set up RAF Killadeas at Gublusk Bay. When their Battle of the Atlantic ended in 1945, left around Gublusk were buildings for 2,800 RAF peronnel, with surplus aircraft, boats, tools and equipment, and all the facilities of a wartime flying boat base.

1950's onwards

Gublusk's wartime relics are still used over 60 years later. LEYC boats are stored in the Hangar, a big tall shed built in 1941 for boats that serviced aircraft. LEYC boats launch down the wartime slipway to lie on flying boat moorings.

Spaces for servicing Catalinas that winter of 1941, now hold the RNLi Station, and racks for children's dinghies. Rings that held down Catalinas in a gale now hold down Club sailing dinghies, and the refuelling jetty is a snug berth for a cruising barge.

Another Gublusk memorial is a stone marked OTU 131 and unveiled in 2000 by returning members of the Canadian squadron 422 - nicknamed the Flying Yachtsmen. Their crews and many others had received operational training at RAF Killadeas. Nearby is a big buoy that had marked race courses on the Broad Lough in the 1930s. Painted with the burgees of EYC and LEYC crossed together, it was erected in 1985 to remember the friendship between these clubs.

Hangar storage helped preserve the Fairies through their second half century, still racing twice a week. Their 75th and 80th anniversary celebrations were in 1981 and 1986. Their centenary celebrations were very special and included a big hundredth birthday gathering of classic boats from all over Ireland in September 2006.

These original Edwadian racing yachts were built in the same times as the first motor cars, of which most that survive are in museums. The Erne Fairy class are remarkable boats, with the same mast and sail rig as a century ago, save for terylene instead of cotton sails today. They are a unique and very valuable part of sailing's world-wide heritage, of the heritage of Ireland's oldest yacht racing club.

Lough Erne Yacht Club Today

Since the 1950's LEYC has continued to serve the people of Fermanagh and elsewhere from it's current base in Gublusk Bay.

As LEYC celebrates its bicentenary in 2018, traditional yacht racing, sail training, powerboat training and now sailing for disabled persons herald a new era for the Club.

Cross community and cross border Club membership coupled with continued development of the Club and its aging infrastructure help make LEYC a valuable asset to the region and Northern Ireland.

The 1822 connection to William D'Arcy Irvine continues to this day. LEYC's lease on the site is with The Irvine Estate.

The future looks bright for Irelands oldest yacht racing club.