

Fairhead Photographic Club

Water and Life

In September 2020 the Fairhead Photographic Club became a fully online entity, a decision forced by COVID but addressed by a background of decreasing membership and commensurate declining revenues.

We took on the challenge of the Panel Project as it seemed to be an achievable focus during the year and could help develop the skills of individuals and the Club - our active membership at that point had no experience of creating a panel of images around a theme.

The focus of the Panel, a reflection of the area around the location of the Club, immediately presented problems. Our Club members live in the area of the North Coast, in the midst of world famous scenery and surrounded by iconic venues which have been visited and photographed by thousands. To tell a story and reflect on what may be special around and outside of these icons might not be straightforward.

Since our Club is now virtual we have a wider geographical spread of members than when we were physically based in Ballycastle. Clarification with NIPA regarding the geographic location of members rather than the club enabled us to consider an area from Fairhead west, we have members in Ballycastle, Bushmills, Coleraine and Articlave. We are surrounded by water, and several major rivers flow through the area, so this seemed an appropriate area to explore.

Water of Life, an image by Marie Brennan, provided an initial stimulus. Hundreds of thousands of visitors process annually through the portals of the Bushmills Distillery, yet few people even question why the famous distillery is located there. What creates the unique taste and appeal of the whiskey is the water supplied by St. Colum's Rill a stream that arises from this pool near Bushmills - this image provided a 'working title' and an idea about portraying alternative aspects of our scenery and surroundings. The panel would look at some of the interactions between water and life in our area. The image was subsequently placed in the centre of our panel.

An Bhanna, the Goddess, is a name now anglicised to the River Bann. The River Bann was a source of life to the earliest settlers in Ireland in the Mesolithic Period. The first inhabitants arrived by water and the Bann river and valley provided food and transport into the hinterland. The Cutts still shows evidence of these endeavours 10,000 years later; structures within the image attest to the trapping of fish and eels, and the gates were placed in efforts to harness and tame the river to allow transport by water to and from Lough Neagh.

The Sea of Moyle and the North Channel reflect the nature and reality of life on the North Coast; Fairhead, Benmore, is a familiar site to many. The position of Fairhead appears accurately located on Ptolemy's original map of the world and labelled as Robogdion, possibly translatable as 'the bend' and very obviously on the map a transition between the North and East coasts of Ireland. Ptolemy compiled the map in the second century AD in Alexandria and the accurate location of the headland indicates that seafarers visited the area, possibly Phoenician sailors and traders from times before the map was drawn. People have used the waters of the Sea of Moyle for transport, trade and warfare for a very long time.

A Bush Mill illustrates the etymology of Bushmills - some 12 mills coalesced around the River Bush as the crossing point became a village and town. The mills used the power of the Bush to grind grains for flour, beetle flax, create spades and even generate electricity for the Giants Causeway Tram. The weir that provided the flow for this mill has been re-purposed as part of the Salmon Hatchery alongside the river - fish passing the weir are stunned as they travel upstream to spawn and their eggs artificially hatched and raised under controlled conditions before release.

RRS Sir David Attenborough - Boaty Mc Boatface - appeared briefly in February 2021, a unique presence and a special visitor. She is now amongst the icefloes of Antarctica, taking forward science and exploration in the new century. The ship spent time off the North Coast as the First Mate was so proud of his new toy he wanted his family and friends to see her before she departed south to work. Vital sea trials and checks also took place in these demanding waters - Matt Neil, the Chief Officer was born and raised here and knows them well.

The Hav Marlin is another - more regular - visitor to the area and the Port of Coleraine. She is a scrap boat, removing metal scrap from the surrounding area for recycling in Europe and the Far East. Coleraine is a 'Commission Port' with the River Bann being regulated between the Barmouth and the town bridge by Harbour Commissioners. The role of the port has greatly diminished over the recent years although some may recall that the wharfage alongside Dunnes Store used to be a thriving coal yard. Petrol, timber and agricultural products were also being imported and exported by sea.

The Terry Williams is an example of an indigenous industry, a way of life that has changed and developed over the years. Fishing has always taken place off the North Coast, however our 'new' harbour in Ballycastle has allowed the industry to develop in ways well beyond the Drontheims and fixed nets of days gone by. Lack of shelter before the new harbour and breakwater was completed in Ballycastle meant that boats could not be permanently based here - now a small fleet of local boats can supply Mortons Chip Shop directly with the freshest of catches.

The Turnaround Cloud shows a more recent development on the sea. Sailing has been a way of life for many centuries, for transport and industry; sailing is now also a way of leisure, an important component in our modern lives.

Sailing can provide a method of transport depending solely on the wind, it can also provide sport and relaxation. The North Coast is well connected by recreational sea links to Scotland.

Water continues to provide linkages between our local communities; the ferry to Rathlin has evolved and been transformed within my own recollection - I can still remember vehicles taking the 'one way trip' to Rathlin Island, perched on planks laid across the gunwales of open boats. Tommy Cecil's barge, towed behind the Iona Isle, allowed caravans and agricultural equipment to be taken across the Sound, a great advance. The Spirit of Rathlin is the latest in a line of vessels which service the island community and visitors to Rathlin - vehicles and services can also now travel two ways.

The final image in the panel shows an unusual aspect of a local feature. Everyone has visited Carrick-a-Rede Island, few people have seen this view from the sea. Development of the tourist industry and improvements in harbours and boats have now made the provision of 'trips to Carrick-a-Rede and the Bull Point' available to anyone who has an interest, there are several craft now operating from Ballycastle. A few years ago this would have been unheard of and the only admiration of the old fishery would have been from a passing yacht or kayak.

The panel, when viewed in its entirety, explores some of the aspects of water and life identified by our members - local people who take photographs. The challenge of selecting, editing and arranging images was great however once we started viewing candidate images together the task became more attainable. Individual images that stood out did not necessarily fit together harmoniously within the panel format and so informed selection then took place.

All members of the Club participated. We decided not to identify individual photographers as this was a group effort; eventually five photographers' images were utilised however all members were involved in deciding and agreeing on layouts and formats.

I will conclude by mentioning that the images were finally compiled, agreed and adjusted during the meeting of 14th December 2021. This was the last meeting attended by our longest serving member, Gordon Gray, who passed away later that night. His final advice was on the naming of the panel – we had been working to our original title of 'Water of Life' and Gordon suggested that 'Water and Life' would be more representative of the content.

We accepted the advice and agreed the amended title, I would like to think that this panel will be an everlasting testament to the wisdom of our most senior and founding member.