STRANGFORD LOUGH AND LECALE

By Bob Brown

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in association with

Strangford Lough & Lecale Partnership
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References include ‘Strangford Lough- an Archaeological Survey of the Maritime Cultural Landscape’ by Thomas McErlean, Rosemary McConkey, and Wes Forsythe.
You’re standing on a rock outcrop along the shores of Strangford Lough, or the open exposed coast of Lecale. It’s dark, jagged, multi-layered, maybe slippery with seaweed, and you might lose your balance. The chances are you’ll be standing on a piece of seabed that, 500 million years ago, was lying at the bottom of an enormous shallow ocean. And this piece of giant history belongs to each one of us, as well as to the planet.

Our restless planet never settles for long. Just when the ancient seabed was consolidating into rock, shifts in the earth’s crust forced up mountain ridges in what we now call Scotland, Wales and the Lake District. Our seabed sediments were lifted, compressed, tilted and folded. They cracked, producing faults and joints and over a wide area they formed a depression, creating a basin for today’s Lough. Some think that the deep cut we call the Narrows between Portaferry and Strangford village was created during this momentous era.

The tremendous events that lifted these muddy silts, compressed them into hard rock, grits and shales, fractured and folded them, continue to shape YOUR life today, and the landscapes that we all enjoy. Almost all the stone buildings, castles, harbour walls, dry stone walls, especially in the south of the Lough and Lecale, are formed from this ancient rock. It often splits naturally, forming flat pebbles - spin one into the sea, and the chances are you are tossing 500 million years of history back into its origins. Walk along the Lecale Path or any of our rocky outcrops and you’ll be striding along ancient pre-history.

About 340 million years ago our landscape submerged into a warm sea rich in corals, early species of shellfish, and primitive sharks. Over millions of years, microscopic life in grew and died, settling billions of tiny calcium shells on the seabed. These slowly formed the deposits we call limestone. Subsequent geological events have swept most away, but there are exceptions. Limestones at Castle Espie near Comber were mined for building stone and agricultural lime, and the resulting pits are now an outstanding Wildfowl and Wetland Trust nature reserve.

The stone’s attractive purple colour meant it was often used in prominent parts of buildings. Our more recent ancestors sought out remnant drifts of limestone for collection and baking in lime kilns to make quicklime which was slaked to make the main ingredients of lime mortar and to ‘sweeten’ acid farmland. If you go boating in the Lough today you’ll see the navigational chart marks numerous features with ‘limestone’ in the name.

Eventually the rocks of Strangford and Lecale were raised above the sea once more, this time to be greeted by desert, with harsh winds, shallow stagnant lagoons, thickly accumulating dust and sands. Occasional rain storms brought flash floods followed by long periods of drought. The area was not devoid of wildlife however – sandy foot prints of a small
deep forces opened cracks and splits in the earth's crust through which molten lava flowed, creating a number of massive volcanoes, but for us the most conspicuous legacy is Scrabo Hill. A split in the earth's crust allowed molten lava to well up through the soft sandstone of the Scrabo area. As it cooled it formed horizontal “sills” of hard dolerite within the sandstone, protecting the soft rock below from subsequent erosion. This left a prominent outcrop perched high over the farmlands around Newtownards. Today we enjoy its dominance of our scenery, its tower of local dolerite with worked sandstone detail, the fantastic views down Strangford Lough - and who knows, if you forage in the sandstone quarries below the outcrop, you might just find more dinosaur footprints.

One last major phase in the history of our landscape took place – the Ice Age. We don't know the precise reasons why our planet cooled, but they are likely to be associated with variations in the sun's strength and oscillations in earth's orbit. At all events they had a profound effect on County Down which at various times was covered in ice sheets thousands of metres thick, slowly flowing from a variety of sources towards a distant, chilled sea. Think of Greenland today, with Arctic foxes, musk ox and polar bear.

Much of our familiar landscape, coast and the nature of our farmlands are a legacy of this period. The ice ground across the rocky landscape, eroding limestones and sandstones in any area where they weren't protected by harder rocks. It scraped out the Strangford Lough basin, and plucked rocks from Leacale. It flowed over and around Scrabo. Where Strangford Lough joins the Leacale coast, a melting glacier edge deposited a mass of sands, clay and stones forming Killard Point. Near Newtownards lies the famous Butterlump Stone dumped there by an ice sheet a mere 12,000 years ago but standing on the remains of a desert (the red sandstone) some 225 million years old.

The biggest legacy of this frozen period is our drumlin scenery. The name drumlin derives from the Gaelic and means “little back (or ridge)”. These mounds of boulders and clay piled up behind underlying obstructions as the ice sheets moved and were revealed when they melted. This pattern of tiny rounded hills or little islands ‘basket of eggs’ covers much of the Strangford and Leacale area and has few parallels anywhere on earth. It supports our livestock pastures, shelters farmsteads and small villages, provided defensive sites in troubled times and together with our criss-cross pattern of hedges gives us very distinctive scenery. We've lived with it so much that we take it for granted – but how would we feel if we lost that landscape? It's worth remembering that this landscape is so special that it has been declared an “Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty”.

When all the ice eventually melted some 12,000 years ago, it released vast quantities of water causing a rise in sea level. However, our landscape, released from its burden of ice, also lifted and eventually reversed this effect. These oscillations have left us with a distinctive coast. A clear notch in the profile of our coastal hills, especially the drumlins, reflecting former, higher shore levels, has been used to develop coastal villages, shore roads, and several yacht clubs. Most of our shoreline communities are living on a beach some 7,000 years old.

Compared with this momentous history, our own period of residence around Strangford and Leacale is only a blink in a planet's eye. But the various periods that our landscape has experienced have furnished us with today's benign climate, rich farmlands and productive seas. We are not the first to recognise this! Our first settlers arrived some 10,000 years ago. They and succeeding generations felled most of the forests to till the land and dig the peat as fuel when wood ran out. The drumlins and islands provided defensive sites in troubled times. Since then we too have enjoyed these environmental riches, and shaped them to our needs. The drumlins now support our livestock pastures, shelter farmsteads and small villages. But we ourselves have also been shaped by the ancient history of our landscape – we are part of its history, ... and part of its future.
Everywhere we look, we see landscapes and seas that have been the birthright of thousands of years of hunters, farmers, fishermen, clerics and poets, and yes, a fair share of villains! We are just the latest generation of peoples and we’ll have a brief time in which to take Strangford and Lecale into the future, but there’ll be a much longer time for future generations to approve or regret our actions.

Our first residents may have arrived by boat or possibly via a land bridge between Ireland and Britain during periods of low sea level. We do know that up to 10,000 years ago folk were encamped in the Rough Island area near Newtownards, probably enjoying many of the food resources that we can find in the Lough today. They have left little evidence behind, though traces of their hearths have been found, as well as numerous flint implements – indeed, to this day implements can sometimes be found in freshly ploughed fields – pale speckles of stone against the dark fertile soils. But we can’t be sure that they all lived on the coast – the sea level was much lower for a time, as we can tell from partially fossilized tree stumps under today’s waters.

Hunting and gathering, our first residents would have lived off shoreline fish and shellfish, whilst the forests – dense in places, scattered and grassy in others, would have been territory for hunting deer, hares, and birds. They may have had different encampments for different seasons, and we can imagine groups meeting.

Some 5,800 years ago new ideas arrived with new people. We have many signs of the new lifestyle, and they all point to the then novel technique of retaining seeds to plant in cleared ground, and nurturing food crops. Husbandry of animals would also have been part of that scene. New tools such as skilfully crafted arrow heads were employed (some imported), and pottery made its first appearance. There are few traces of their scattered farmsteads seen today, but their tombs like that at Audleystown near Strangford and Millin Bay Cairn near Portaferry and the mysterious stone circle at Ballynoe near Downpatrick give us a sense of their strength, spiritual awareness and their organisational skills. At Greyabbey Bay the remains of a dugout canoe testify to their use of our coastal waters for travel and probably food.

By about 4,500 (to 2,300) years ago new technologies were developing. Copper was being mined, and this, relatively soft metal, was soon being hardened with tin and lead to create useful bronze implements and weapons. Skilled craftsmen created gold ornaments and fastenings. We have evidence of a number of communities in the Strangford and Lecale area and it is clear that what attracted the people to these places still keeps us going there too. There were settlements at Conlig near Newtownards, possibly in the Mount Stewart area, and in the northwest of the Lough, with another concentration in the south in Lecale, around Castleward, and Cathedral Hill in Downpatrick. These places have seen the rough and tumble of
human life from the Bronze Age right up to
the very moment you read these words.

From about 2,600 years ago, increasing
use was being made of iron, the strongest
of the available metals, but requiring a
higher temperature for processing. The
need for higher temperatures led to the
felling of woods and coppicing to produce
charcoal which provided greater heat.
People manufactured iron implements and
robust weapons, managed livestock and
grew crops. They improved their pottery
and used querns for grinding cereals. At
Scrabo there was a hill fort and clusters of
huts. Increasingly we find evidence of trade
and communications with the European
Continent, and increasing influence of
Celtic traditions, including greater impacts
of politics and conflicts.

The ancient kingdoms of the early
medieval period still exert a profound
influence on us today! It is often referred
to as the age of heroes. The overall
influence was of the Dál Fiatach tribe
who dominated the countryside between
Dundrum and Belfast Lough including
the Ards Peninsula and the adjacent seas.
Those ancient territories are still to some
extent reflected in our local authorities
and districts today – so we have the Arda
(no prizes for guessing where they were
based), Dubhthrian (Dufferin), Leth Cathail
(Lecale) and the Uí Blathmeic for which
there is no modern word, who dominated
our north Down area, extending to Lisburn.

Added to this we have the legacy of the
early Christians. St Patrick clearly was one
of the most important figures in these early
years and we still celebrate his minstry
from ca 432AD in Downpatrick where
he is said to be buried. If you discount the
myth that he first preached to the seals
on Rock Patrick off Killard, the site of his
first ministry was at Saul just near to the
enormous St Patrick’s monument with its
panoramic views of Strangford and Lecale.
He wasn’t the only missionary however,
and throughout our area we have ruins of
early Christian churches, and healing sites
like Struell Wells and Templecowey where
people prayed and took the kindly waters.

However, there are many sites from this
period for us to enjoy and ponder over.
Places like Movilla Abbey, Ardthle Church
near Ardglass, Nendrum monastery on
Mahee Island, the scene of St Mochaoi’s
work as Abbot. Recent excavations have
demonstrated a high level of technical
expertise at this monastery in the form
of a tidal mill for grinding corn – dated
to 619AD, making it the oldest known
tidal mill in the world. But throughout
Strangford Lough and Lecale there are
many other traces, most notably the
hundreds of small raised enclosures, raths,
that signify the widespread settlement of
our ancestors.

Having visited Nendrum, our thoughts
can now appropriately turn to the Vikings
who came to trade but also began their
forays into our settlements some time after
800AD. In some cases they failed – the Dál
Fiatach beat them several times in battle.
They targeted our monasteries for their
wealth, foods and probably as a source of
slaves. They made successive attempts to
establish bases at various sites, but these
were short lived.

These early peoples built the foundation
of what we are today. But there is much
history that follows them that takes us
to today’s world and our lives as current
caretakers of this landscape. Almost
certainly we will not be the last people to
live here. But for the moment the Lough
and its surrounding coasts are ours,
hopefully to use as wisely as possible. What
sort of heritage do we want to leave to our
children – will they enjoy the same riches
that we enjoy? And what sort of traces of
our own presence will we leave behind?
Wild open coast with Irish Sea swell crashing over the rocks; sheltered creek and bays of mud and sand - almost lake-like in their tranquility; powerful tidal surges and currents, whirlpools and danger; scatters of rocks and islands, reefs and shoals. These are the defining features of our coast, formed over some 500 million years.

The open Lecale coast has a bold rocky outline facing the Irish Sea, where waves drive in through clefts and gullies, in stormy weather forcing spray far inland and affecting our plant life, gardens and farms. But it also has deep inlets, cutting into the Lecale landscape, where our boats may find shelter and where landings of shellfish and fish can be processed, as well as where sea travellers embarked, avoiding hazardous land routes. These inlets are backed by sheltered muddy strands, home for wintering wildfowl and waders.

The northern end of Lecale’s coast curls round past Ballyhornan, where the Irish Sea meets the entrance of Strangford Lough, with the powerful tidal currents of the Narrows surging between Killard and Ballyquintin Points. In the centre of this channel lies Rock Angus, both a hazard and a beacon for shipping, with its bold white lighthouse. This area can be unusually dangerous when an ebb tide meets wave action surging in from the open sea creating high standing waves, the Strangford Bar, and a scatter of shipwrecks in the area is testament to the dangers.

Stretcing far inland from the Narrows lies the main body of Strangford Lough, some 150 square kilometers of reefs (‘pladdies’ from the old Norse), islands, sheltered shores and open waters. With every turn of the tide a vast amount of water has to ebb and flow between the Lough and Irish Sea, creating fierce currents – some 350 million cubic metres of water each tide – that’s enough for nearly two thousand million baths! At either end of the Narrows, as the channel opens out, the currents ease off and the rushing waters, whirlpools and upwellings gradually diminish.

These extraordinary tides have also attracted experimental work to develop marine current turbines to test how we might use the sea’s currents to generate electricity and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. SeaGen, installed in 2008, was the world’s first experimental commercial device to operate anywhere in the world.

These currents are both a danger and the lifeblood of the Lough. They scour, sift and sort the sediments, creating a patchwork of habitats throughout the Lough from current-swept areas of bare bedrock and giant boulders in the Narrows, through a succession of smaller boulders, gravels, sands and silts, through to soft muds in the most protected corners. Very importantly, they sweep in nutrients and microscopic life creating an unusually rich and diverse marine life.

This patchwork of habitats, changing sediment and current conditions,
supports a spectacular array of marine life. Strangford Lough has some 2,000 species listed, and we are still finding more. Whilst the waters off the Lecale coast don’t have the same variety they are rich in commercial species like haddock, Nephrops prawns (scampi), crabs and lobsters, many of which find their way on to our dinner tables.

Our shores are perhaps one of the greatest legacies of our coast, defining its character through great sweeps of colour and form, constantly changing with season, wind and tide. They range from rugged outcrops with deep pools and gullies to sheltered weed-covered boulder shores rich in kelps, wracks and other plants. Every fold of rock, every boulder, has its community of inhabitants that feed, breed, eat each other and shelter from danger.

For thousands of years we’ve used our shores as gathering grounds for food and for trapping fish. They’ve been used to collect and even cultivate seaweeds. They have provided fording points at low water and places to beach small boats. They have provided rich areas for hunting wildfowl, and we still hunt them, some of us with guns for the pot, and others with binoculars and bird books. In addition to foraging for wild food, we have used our shorelines to cultivate shellfish. And perhaps most special of all, our shores offer a unique adventure and exploring ground for our children!
Variety is the spice of life and our waters and shores have wonderful riches. Nutrients and microscopic life swirled and churned around through tidal currents, whirlpools and waves support rich marine life, which enriches our own lives. Our marine life is a treasure in its own right, but it also supports species and communities of species that contain and support our foods like crab, lobster, scampi and various fish. It also feeds the internationally important populations of birds that visit our shores both in summer and winter.

Most life is dependent on the sun. Our marine life grabs this energy via the microscopic plants and animals of the sea, or plankton, often swept down to depths where the sun’s light never penetrates. Dip a jar in the seawater anywhere along our coast and see the speckles of life, food to vast numbers of filter-feeding animals on the seabed and in its waters. They range from the truly massive basking shark, through to tiny molluscs and other creatures living in the sediments. Despite their differences in size and life styles they employ similar techniques – filtering the water out through gills, retaining plankton as food. Others, like brittle stars, extend mucous covered arms into the current, trapping plankton whilst sea squirts have siphons that operate a pumping system to obtain the precious food.

With this drifting food now trapped within vast populations of filter feeders spread over the seabed, it’s the turn of the predators. Crabs, starfish, sea slugs and various worms feed on these filter feeders. Starfish prise open shellfish, inserting their stomachs and digesting their victim. Crabs, with powerful claws break up bottom dwelling animals, and smaller predators – and each other. Octopuses lurk in rocky crevices waiting for the chance to seize small species like squat lobsters. Then there are the more mobile bottom dwelling fish like cod and small sharks like tope or the skates that used to achieve angling records some years ago. Some anglers have reported signs that the populations of small sharks may be recovering at present.

Our marine life isn’t randomly scattered on the seabed. The pattern of tides and sediments has given us a rich matrix of different animal and plant communities, each composed of certain species that thrive in certain conditions.

Many of these habitats depend on the interrelationships between species. The lough is home to the horse mussel (distantly related to the shore or ‘restaurant’ mussel) and this species, living in mud mixed with shell debris, is the foundation of a complex reef community consisting of over a hundred member species.

Sadly, the horse mussel reefs have been drastically depleted by trawling and dredging (now banned) for just a few commercial species. And just because our marine life is hidden beneath the waves does not mean that it is not important to us.
The trick is to allow these habitats to recover – if we do, they will reward us with a greater harvest to eat in the future and the hope is that traditional pot fishing will continue. A restoration programme for horse mussel reefs has been started. This may take decades to take effect and it is a salutary lesson about how easy it is to destroy natural habitats and how difficult it is to regain them.

If you’re out on the Lough in summer, perhaps on the ferry, look out for shoals of little silvery, finger length fish – sand eels. These arrive in the Lough in their millions, flickering through the dark green waters as the sunlight catches them. They too are plankton feeders, and in turn they are hunted by the terns or ‘sea swallows’, arriving each summer from Africa, diving for fish all around the Lough. Perhaps one of the best places to see them is in Strangford harbour where they nest on Swan Island near the quay – watch them chasing each other between the masts and around the island.

There is an equally diverse array of marine life along our shores. Different species occupy different levels according to their ability to survive exposure during low tide. Habitats are distributed variously depending on the levels of exposure to wind and wave, and these also vary with the types of shore, whether rock, boulders or soft sands and muds. It is possible to see many of these zones just by looking along the shores, and many of the animals and plants can easily be found. It is important, when looking under boulders and weeds to replace these afterwards so that their inhabitants aren’t exposed to desiccation or predators.

This marine life has been supporting human life here for some 10,000 years. If you don’t dive you can see much of it at the Exploris aquarium in Portaferry. This exotic life is regarded as internationally important, but it is important for us too. It can provide us with food, it helps keep our waters filtered and clean, and it offers a foundation for a number of activities that bring visitors to our area, like diving and sea angling. In turn for these ‘services’ we need to ensure that it is maintained for future generations – and ourselves.
Stand on the shores of Strangford Lough, or around the harbour in Ardglass, and the chances are you'll see one or more heads peering out of the water, looking at you, before they do a leisurely, rolling dive into the depths. There are few people who don't enjoy seeing seals in their natural environment, and there are few places that present such good opportunities for this as along our coast.

Whether we are out on boats, or taking a winding shore road, or visiting a local harbour, they are usually there.

We have two species of seal in our waters, both thriving on an eclectic diet of fish, both large and small bottom dwelling species, and a range of small shellfish and octopus. Common or harbour seals, probably still the most numerous although their numbers have much declined, tend to use the more sheltered waters of Strangford Lough and off Rosglass, Minerstown and Tyrella. There they can be seen, hauled out on the rocks and offshore pladdies. They give birth during the summer – look for the little head of the youngster bobbing alongside its mother, even soon after birth because the youngsters quickly enter the water.

The larger grey or Atlantic seal is more an inhabitant of open rocky coasts, although one of the best places to see them close up is in Ardglass Harbour where they hang around for ‘tips’ from the trawlers. These give birth to creamy coloured pups in the autumn. This early, pale fur is eventually shed, and only after that do the young seals enter the sea. As a result they spend some time high and dry up the beach, giving us the impression that they are stranded or abandoned by the mother. In reality the mother may be a short way off, waiting for us to depart. On most occasions it is best to leave the pups alone, and it is also worth remembering that despite its cute appearance, a frightened seal pup has a very good set of teeth!

Sometimes however, seals get into trouble, and experts in the Exploris Aquarium go to investigate. They have now acquired considerable expertise in rescuing and nurturing seals, bringing them up to full body weight and eventually releasing them. Visitors to the aquarium have the opportunity to see the seals close up and learn about the work to rescue them.

Seals are not the only large mammal species in and around the waters of Strangford and Lecale. The commonest cetacean - a cousin of the whale - is the harbour porpoise which are probably present in our waters in all seasons. They are relatively shy, but sometimes accompany our boats. The best time for seeing them is when the weather is settled, clear and calm, and they usually appear in twos or threes; look for small triangular dorsal fins briefly breaking the surface as they take breath for another fishing dive.

Occasionally we have other visitors. Killer whales have visited Strangford Lough on occasions and have been seen migrating past Lecale. They are almost unmistakable with their black and white markings and high dorsal fins (the latter particularly so...
in the males). Minke whales, a plankton feeding species, and pilot whales, which are noted for their appetite for herring, also visit on occasions though these are more frequently seen off the open Lecale coast.

All these species are indicators of the health of our marine environment, the environment that helps to support us and supply us with food and many other services. Common seals suffered from a viral epidemic in the 1980’s that spread across from the continent, but their continuing low numbers and further decline should give us cause for concern, even though some factors may well lie outside our own waters.

What is clear though, is that with care we can support our seal populations and in turn they will reward us with interest and spectacle and bring in visitors. We can work to return our waters and the seabed habitats to good condition and we can ensure that whilst enjoying views of the seals from either land or sea that we don’t cause disturbance to them, particularly when they have young.
We’ve been fishing, and collecting shellfish along our shores ever since our Mesolithic cousins set up cautious encampments near the shores of Strangford and Lecale thousands of years ago. Probably they were taking much the same species that we can enjoy today. And since then, our waters and shores have fed Celtic tribes, early Christians with their fish traps, murderous and not so murderous Vikings, medieval barons and hosts of folk who have left no record in the history books. Seafood has supplemented farmers’ diets, and fed fishing folk themselves, in an unbroken tradition from prehistory through to today’s chippy at the street corner.

Tied in with that tradition, are our harbours and slipways. Sometimes these are tiny affairs, a mere track of stones cleared away to help drag a boat up the shore to a farmstead. Others are substantive stone quays and slipways, built in the last three centuries, often with public funds, and there are many of these about the harbours and other areas of coast, tucked in out of the weather and surrounded by our attractive little villages.

The largest harbour is Ardglass which is an important centre for the fishing fleet with its massive harbour wall and fish processing sheds. In former times there was often an intermix between fishing and transport, since travel by land was both hazardous and slow, so these harbours were vital facilities for local communities.

Our inshore waters are notable for the quality of their seafoods. The most significant is that of Nephrops (Dublin Bay prawn or scampi) which makes its way to most hotels and restaurants. These live in extensive burrows deep within soft muds. Edible crabs and lobsters are also easily obtained although the latter rarely live long enough to reach their true size. In an attempt to reverse the decline in lobster stocks, a scheme for ‘V-notching’ females’ tails has been established, ensuring that they are returned to the sea and left to breed. Scallops are also extensively fished and very popular, and work in the Isle of Man has shown that catches can be improved by setting aside unfished areas of seabed so they can settle and breed.

Some of our older traditions from the sea appear to be suffering from neglect! Dulse, a lower shore species of seaweed, collected by hooking from a boat, seems to be eaten only by dedicated souls, yet it is an astoundingly healthy food and used to be served in many shore-side pubs. Seaweeds, mostly wracks, were also used extensively as fertiliser and as a source of soda for the glass industry and soap industries as well as for bleaching linen. In some places, lines of boulders were set out on the shore to encourage and cultivate these weeds.

Today, new sources of seafood, for example cultivated oysters, have now established a firm foothold in our menus – perhaps establishing a tradition for the future? Only time will tell.

Along our shores there has been a long tradition of collecting shellfish ‘for the pot’.
These have included, cockles, mussels, winkles (locally called ‘wellicks’) and even sometimes oysters in the low tide areas. Increasingly however there have been concerns about the commercial scale harvesting of tons of these little snails to the detriment of other aspects of shoreline wildlife, and those who genuinely want to continue the tradition of collecting just enough for home use.

Despite the wealth of our waters, some fisheries have proved fragile and stocks have been over exploited. We used to take enormous herring catches for granted until a combination of factors, probably climate change and improved fishing vessels caused stocks to crash, and only now are they making some recovery. In more recent years cod has experienced a similar fate, whilst some fisheries like that of the queen scallops has always been regarded as being on a ‘boom and bust’ cycle. If we want to enjoy this outstanding quality seafood in the future we need to look after the habitat and lifestyles of the very creatures we want to harvest. Getting this right could result in a lot more boom and a lot less bust.

It would be tragic if we lost our maritime and seafood inheritance, and cast away thousands of years of tradition and healthy diet. Enjoyment of our seafoods is part of our inheritance, but equally it’s part of our responsibilities if we want our descendants to have the same variety as we enjoy, for diving and angling, a trip to the local chippy, or a blow-out in a fancy restaurant.
Strangford Lough and Lecale lie at a crossroads for global travellers. Birds from the high Arctic in Canada and Siberia cross paths with visitors from southern Europe and from as far as South Africa and Brazil, and there’s never a time when we aren’t hosting some long-distance migrant. Sometimes our visitors arrive by chance, driven by storms and opposing winds, but more frequently it’s because we are part of their yearly pattern of life: breeding, overwintering, and using our coast and waters as a staging post.

These visitors are part of our pattern of life too. Swallows, swifts and house martins dart round our houses and streets during the summer, and as autumn arrives, a drive along the coast can distract us (hopefully not too much) with sweeping clouds of wildfowl and waders moving across the shores and mudflats in response to the tides. Even if we take these spectacles for granted, they enliven and enrich our lives. Few people can ignore the sad rippling call of the curlew at dusk over the mudflats, and there are opportunities a-plenty for viewing birds at hides, reserves and other locations in Strangford and Lecale.

Birds are part of our seasons. Summertime brings the raucous calls of the terns diving for small fish, or the persistent piping of oystercatchers escorting their young in forages along the shoreline. Into autumn and winter we see the arrivals of vast flocks of light bellied Brent geese from the high Arctic of Canada – Strangford Lough and places like Killough Harbour and Inner Dundrum Bay host almost the entire world population of this bird at some stage of the winter, arriving to feed on the nutritious eel grass. Often they are accompanied by waders – shoreline feeding birds that probe for small food items amongst the stones, weeds and muds. These may arrive from places as distant as Greenland, Iceland, Norway and Russia, while birds like curlew arrive from our own uplands.

For all these birds, our shores, islands and waters are a resource. Like us, terns need healthy and productive coastal waters for a secure food supply, but they also need the scatter of tiny islands for safe nesting sites away from foxes and other predators. We should avoid these breeding islands if they are to nest successfully, but this shouldn’t be a problem – there are plenty of islands to go round!

For wintering birds, eking out diminishing food resources during cold and stormy weather requires complex feeding strategies involving selection of the right foods in the right locations and moving on to other locations as food runs out. Other species stop-over briefly, resting and restoring body weight before the next energy-sapping stage of their journey.

We also have many maritime species resident the year round. Herons, those lonely sentinels along our shores, can be seen everywhere around the coasts of Strangford and Lecale where they congregate in early spring to nest atop the trees (mainly Scots Pines). Out on open
waters, shags dip and dive for fish amongst
the fringes of reef and kelp nesting on the
cliff on the east of Guns Island, whereas
cormorants, their larger relatives, breed on
Bird Island off Kircubbin and Black Rock
off Ringdufferin. Year round residents
of many of our harbours are the black
guillemots, or ‘tysties’ (from the old Norse),
confiding little seabirds that nest in holes
along sea walls, and whose favourite food
is the slippery little butterfish living in the
weeds and stones just below.

Further in from the shores, in the farms
and small woodlands of Strangford and
Lecale we host a further range of bird
species. Our hedgerows, where they are
thick and well managed, support species
like tree sparrow and yellow hammer,
whilst open country sees increasing
numbers of buzzards soaring high above
our farmlands. Even our gardens, with
a minimal amount of work can support
nesting tits, robins, or overwintering
thrushes like fieldfare and redwing,
arriving to avoid winter freezes
further east.

This wealth of bird life has, over centuries,
inspired our artists, writers of poetry
and fiction, and those who have sought to
document the beauty and romance of our
bird life. A classic is Edward Armstrong’s
‘Birds of the Grey Wind’ which evokes
Strangford Lough’s bird life in summer and
winter through his visits to the islands and
mudflats. He himself borrows from an early
Irish writer: “On the little company of the
birds has broken forth / keen wind and cold
ice / the blackbird cannot get a lee to her
liking / shelter at the side in Cuan-woods”.
It’s a plain, simple truth that, over the
centuries, our birds have provided us with
practical essentials like food and down,
but perhaps more importantly, they’ve also
greatly lifted our spirits!
Beautiful mystic healing, so easy

These days we spend most of our time whizzing through our countryside, rushing for work, collecting the kids, or countless other errands. We have little time to spend looking at some of the smaller jewels of our landscape, the wild flowers, fruits and trees that grow along our roads, the coast and throughout our farms and woodlands. This is a shame – they are as much part of our heritage as any other feature of Strangford Lough and Lecale.

The most obvious place to start is along our roadsides and hedges – find a safe place to pull in and just stop! All across our landscape criss-cross patterns of hawthorn and blackthorn, sometimes dotted with whins, follow the lines of our lanes and field boundaries. In spring they burst into a succession of colours, rich gold whins, the star-like white flowers of the blackthorn, followed by just a hint of pink in the hawthorns. And below them, a scatter of primroses and with celandine flowers, yellow against the silvery leaves. As the season evolves into summer the hedges come alive with wild roses, honeysuckle, vetch, and bramble flowers, finally with spikes of yellow toadflax towards the end of the season. As if that all wasn’t enough, we then have a generous harvest of fruit – blackberries often accompanied by slightly drunk late summer butterflies, sloes, rose hips and elderberries (handy for keeping witches away).

Our coastline offers the greatest variety, because of the basic diversity of rocks, sheltered inlets, steep banks and shingle headlands. In the most exposed areas we find the bobbing blue heads of scabious, often mixed with black knapweed, and harebells. Often these occur amongst small stretches of coastal heath, in late summer with deep purple heather flowers. Our headlands are especially rich – places like Killard Point where the banks turn blue in May with the stars of spring squill, then yellow with birdsfoot trefoil, later pink with wild thyme dotted with orchids of various species. At Ballyquintin point the raised beaches are graced in May with wind dwarfed burnet rose whilst closer to the water the rocks are clothed with drifts of pink thrift and dense tufted growths of grey-green delicate lichens.

As we move into more sheltered areas, the scene changes. In the inlets around the Comber River, Salt Water Bridge, Bishops Mill and other places where the land slopes gently into the sea, we find salt marshes – a rare habitat in Northern Ireland. Here our terrestrial plant life meets the marine, in a series of zones reflecting the amount of air and rain, or salt water. It’s a rich and complex habitat supporting many colourful and hardy species like sea campion, sea aster and lax-flowered sea lavender - a Strangford Lough speciality. In late summer, colonising the bare salty mud, we may find sea glasswort like a tiny stalked cactus. In times past this salty little food was eaten in salads and made into a sort of pickle.

Woodland is not plentiful anywhere in Northern Ireland but we have some

CATCHING THE SUN

1. Carpet of bluebells
2. Yellow flag iris
3. Spring squill
4. Lichens
5. Sea pinks and other coastal flowers
significant patches in Strangford and Lecale. Most notable perhaps, are the ancient oaks of Rainey Island still, after centuries of life, producing a rich harvest of acorns. But the old estates have woodlands of beech, ash, sycamore and Scots pine – planted to enhance the landscape surrounding great houses such as Mount Stewart and Castle Ward. Many of them have wonderful drifts of wood anemones and bluebells.

Don’t forget our wetlands either – damp hollows between drumlins, or the fringes of water bodies like the Clea Lakes, Lough Money, or Lough Cowey. Stretches of reeds rustling in the breeze, and in the spring the wetter meadows will come alive with the pale mauve lady’s smock, often accompanied by the brilliant orange tip butterflies. Later in the summer we find purple loosestrife, the eccentric flowers of ragged robin and yellow flag iris, which also thrives where ground water seeps from springlines across the raised beaches of the coasts and islets.

All these plants and many more were valued even by our most recent ancestors for their beauty, various traditional and mystic attributes, for food and for their healing powers. Today we tend to pass them by, but in doing so we are in danger of losing part of our heritage. Agricultural improvements, hedge removal, roadside spraying and cutting, pollution and infilling of wetland areas are all taking their toll.

It doesn’t mean we have to stop improving or developing. It just means working with nature, not against it. But if we want to renew contact with the plants that have sustained folk for thousands of years, and enjoy them for the future, we need to start thinking about this now.
From the first arrivals in Strangford and Lecale up to 10,000 years ago to the present day, we’ve built structures for housing, defence, commerce, religion, field boundaries and gates, housing livestock, for our harbours and even for navigation. Whilst the prehistoric and early Christian times left robust ceremonial and religious stone buildings and structures that we can appreciate, most actual homes were transient affairs of wattle and daub, sod and thatch, and today there is little to see.

Not so with the folk who came after them. Throughout our whole landscape there are numerous small churches, many extremely old and some possibly built on former pagan sites. The oldest ruins include St Tassach’s Church at Raholp, Derry Churches at Portaferry, the monastic site at Nendrum and the tiny St John’s Point church. Later medieval settlements, to the 16th and 17th centuries, through to the Industrial Revolution and Victorian times, right up to our latest housing estate, have left, and are leaving, built heritage of many different types, some good, some bad.

Particularly interesting is the intimate relationship between land and sea, throughout the winding shores of Strangford Lough and Lecale. The mix of good farmland but poor transport by land, sheltered bays and creeks, political and religious intrigue, have meant that our peoples have always been lively and creative builders, furthering their own interests but also leaving us with a diverse architectural heritage.

At the most basic, there is built infrastructure, much dating from the 18th century, though some stone and earth walls, particularly along the Lecale coast may be earlier. In the southern parts of Strangford Lough boundaries extended over shorelines to retain livestock and mark various seaweed and shellfish rights. Some of our towns, like Killyleagh, Portaferry or Downpatrick still retain their medieval street patterns, whilst early settlements at Comber and Newtownards grew substantially in the more recent plantation era of the 17th and 18th century. In the countryside, old tracks, laneways and loanens flanked by dry stone walls, can still be found leading to forgotten clusters of ruined cottages, clachans, now the home of ivy and jackdaws.

Still thriving, indeed developing, are the many farms operating today in our drumlin landscape, many of which owe their origins to farmsteads established several centuries ago. Often they are on slopes or drumlin peaks to avoid the wetland risks of flooding – a danger to home, livestock and crops. Where you find the word 'Inis' or island on the map reflects a time when the surrounding land was poorly drained even though there may be little evidence of this today.

THE PAST BUILDS OUR FUTURE

1. Castle Ward House
2. Sea wall
3. Tower house at Mahee Island
4. Apartments, Killyleagh
5. Ardtole church
6. Strangford shorefront
The politics through the area has also left its mark. Robust tower houses were built, with government grants, from the 15th century onwards from the local stone as marks of status and defence – there are some twenty of these through Strangford and Lecale, some open to the public.

Kilclief, perhaps the oldest dating from the 15th century, is among the best preserved and enjoys some notoriety because its builder, Bishop John Sely, was dismissed for living there with Lettice Thomas, a married woman. It is worth climbing to the top of one and trying to think your way into the mind of its first owners – what would they have been seeing in the landscape below you? The finest castle is that at Kilbyleagh. It dates from the early 17th century and its multiple turrets appear on Thomas Raven’s 1625 pictorial map. It was extended and remodelled in the 1850s by famous Belfast architect, Charles Lanyon, resulting in its present “fairytale” profile. Large religious centres of power left wonderful buildings like Inch Abbey and Greyabbey before Henry VIII stripped them of their authority and lands.

The evidence of the importance of our coast for shipping, fishing and personal travel is everywhere. Heavy stone-build quays and slipways of remarkably skilled craftsmanship continue to resist the sea’s hammering, and many are still just as useful today as 200 years ago. Navigational beacons, many built during the 19th century following public outrage at the number of shipwrecks, deaths and lost cargo, still offer guidance to boating folk, most now equipped with some type of guiding light. The largest of these is St John’s Point lighthouse, and its beams guide ships some twenty miles or more offshore. In some places old boat houses can be found, some converted for modern purposes, but often signalling their original use by the presence of a cleared slipway across the adjacent shore for launching boats.

As the economy developed so did the architectural heritage. Merchants of small ports like Ardglass, Killough, Strangford and Portaferry left fine houses and elegant squares and streets which are still with us today, their classic designs reflecting the wealth that developed in the 18th and 19th centuries. These times saw the construction of fine houses on old estates like Castleward near Strangford, Portaferry House and Mount Stewart, and many can be visited today in a way that was prohibited for most of the contemporary folk. Often these estates were almost self contained economic units so they come to us accompanied by old stables, water mills, barns and other facilities.

Sadly, we continue to lose much of this heritage. Whilst ancient stone cottages are sought after and restored in many countries, here we have knocked down most of them to replace with bungalows. Bungalows too will form part of the inheritance of the future and maybe some day they will form desirable historic acquisitions. But in losing the stone cottages of our immediate forbears, we are losing an important part of the rural culture of our landscape, and the memory of a time when the majority of us were thrifty rural dwellers whose circumstances didn’t prevent them from having a strong and vibrant culture. Indeed, it could be argued that this is what kept them going.

These industrious folk were ever keen to improve on nature to their own advantage. While rivers and estuaries were arterial routes inland for shipping they were also barriers to overland transport. The largest – the Quoile – was first crossed by ferry at Portullagh, then by a wooden bridge built around 1640 and succeeded by the present fine stone bridge in 1679. As this prevented large ships from reaching Downpatrick, a new quay was built in 1717 and another for steamboats in 1832.

Many muddy inlets and saltmarshes around the Lough were ‘reclaimed’ from the sea for agricultural use by the building of ‘battery’ sea walls and embankments. The largest such scheme involved the building of the first tidal barrage across the Quoile in 1745, reclaiming some 500 acres of estuary to form grazing marshes. When the wetlands upstream were drained, rainwater entered the river more quickly, flooding Downpatrick at high tide. This problem was solved by building in 1957 a tidal barrier with new floodgates two miles downstream at Hare Island and creating the Quoile Pondage basin where floodwaters gather safely till the tide falls. Though this barrage finally ended the days of Dowpatrick as a port, the area is now managed as a nature reserve where thousands of waterfowl overwinter and breed.

We therefore have received a fine legacy of artistry, craftsmanship, and sheer hard labour that has delivered an outstanding mix of built heritage. Some of it is artistic, political and religious. Other parts, of no less value, reflect the practical realities of life and trade in earlier times. It is easy to take this for granted, let them deteriorate, and walk past without even noticing, but to keep doing this would be a grave mistake. These buildings, quays, streets and monuments, bridges and barrages are part of the fabric of our lives today, and we’d be infinitely the poorer without them.
It would be easy to dismiss Strangford Lough and Lecale as an extremely interesting assemblage of natural and historic features, and one that as far as possible should be preserved. It probably should be preserved, but that doesn’t mean it has to be set aside as a museum exhibit. Whilst the ancient geology, prehistory and history of the area have provided the foundation for today’s inheritance, there is another matrix that binds it all together. Us.

We are part of this heritage, and it is part of us. We all have ancestry; whether we know the details or not, and for many of us these forebears were part of a largely rural scene of farmers, fishermen (sometimes both), local traders, clergy and administrators. Many people have deep familial connections with the landscape. So it really is in our blood.

This is not to say that it’s been one long stream of unremitting calm and procreation. All our genes contain clusters of Celtic, Viking, continental, Irish and British characteristics, sometimes provided in violent circumstances, but giving us resilience and strength and shaping our character and outlook on life. And today’s world sees new peoples arriving bringing with them further new ideas and qualities that will also filter into future generations, enriching the stream even further. We are genuinely a product of the history of our landscape and we’ll continue to be shaped by events outside and within Strangford and Lecale.

That’s the background of our lives today, and whilst many of us will increasingly travel to Belfast and further afield for work, relationships and future, we’ll still have strong links to the Lough and the coasts and hills of Lecale. Our heritage also belongs to a much wider community than just those who actually live here. This makes it all the more important that we retain and enjoy the identity of this distinctive landscape, its features and its culture.

There is much to enjoy. Festivals celebrate some of the features of our heritage from St Patrick’s ministry to sea faring Vikings and Sir Hans Sloane’s milk chocolate to the autumn arrival of Brent geese who’s first landing is usually in the northern mudflats each autumn. There are other events that celebrate aspects of the lough, like the Bar Buoy yacht race, a scene of vigorous rivalry to get past that all important mark before the tide turns – and the subsequent barbeque is no less important. The Narrows regularly challenges hardy souls who brave its waters in sporting triathlons and charity events.

The passing of the millennium saw 1,000 local people help erect a massive stone pillar over 10m high on a promontory at Delamont, that now dominates the approaches to the Quoile.

There are also a host of minor events that don’t always grab the headlines, like the music that streams out of various pubs at various times around the Lough. Many
of the tunes have local origins reflecting nearby people or places. There are school events which reflect aspects of Strangford and Lecale and its history, and this is extremely important since it is our children who will carry the stories and sense of identity into the next generation. There are a wide range of local artists and crafts folk whose distinctive work is often inspired by the local landscape and scenes, but none of these creative souls could operate without a mass of listeners and spectators – in other words, us.

Finally, perhaps the most important aspect of our heritage is simply never written. It’s our walk along the shore, our appreciation of a multicoloured sunset over a fine view, tickles of intrigue learning about scandalous activities centuries ago, the scatter of seabirds in a grey wind, enjoying fine local produce from land and sea, and the efforts of a small child as it tries to control an angry crab. These things are almost taken for granted, but they are probably the most important, and we’ve been doing them for thousands of years.
Our countryside and coastal towns are not best appreciated from an armchair! We need to get out and enjoy them, whether it’s through some sort of physical activity or the more leisurely pursuits of restaurant and pub. And whilst most places usually come up with the clichés that there is ‘something for everyone’, in the case of Strangford and Lecale this opportunity is here in abundance, for all ages and inclinations.

Fine pathways that take you across tracts of forgotten countryside, offering views that the road-based driver can’t imagine. St Patrick’s Way cuts across Lecale between farms and rocky hills, the stone saint himself overlooking your endeavours, and the chances are your footsteps will cross his at some point. A walk up to the top of Scrabo Hill gives panoramic views of the whole of Strangford Lough and far beyond to the Lecale, Mournes, Isle of Man and Scotland – it must have been a key outlook post in ancient times. There are a number of coastal paths, for example around Ballyquintin Point, Killard Point, and all along the Sheeplands coast to Ardglass, Coney Island and beyond to St John’s Point. Delamont’s paths offer outstanding views of the south of Strangford Lough and Lecale.

For those who want more managed landscapes there are many opportunities. The fine National Trust estates at Castleward and Mount Stewart, in addition to their architectural heritage, have a matrix of paths and gardens, many accessible to the disabled. There are also many attractive smaller walks, for example Nugent’s wood at Portaferry, good at any time of year but spectacular during May’s bluebell season. The gardens are of international standard – with flourishes of different colours through the seasons.

Our opportunities for traditional beach pursuits are less extensive than other areas, especially given our long and winding coast. However, there are a number of places to take the kids, like Island Hill near Newtownards, the wide sweep of the beach at Ballyhornan, and Tyrella beach backed by rolling dunes and the views of the distant Mountains of Mourne.

There is both variety and abundance of wildlife. Both the Lecale coast and Strangford Lough offer exciting and important diving locations within fairly easy access of boat launching facilities, and it’s also relatively easy to find good diving spots that can be reached from the shore. Visibility in these waters is not the best, but that’s what you get when the waters are fertile with microscopic life. If you are not into diving, the aquarium at Exploris in Portaferry gives an excellent idea of what lies below our waves.

Opportunities to see bird life and seals (and sometimes porpoise) are outstanding. There are bird watching hides dotted around the Lough, and also loughside car parks and lay-bys which offer equally excellent views, particularly of overwintering birds between September.
and April, and in the south of the Lough, views of seals. At Castle Espie near Comber the recently re-landscaped lakes, the result of an innovative attempt to work with coastal processes rather than against them, offers views of both native and exotic wildfowl as well as its industrial heritage. During the summer boat trips offer the chance to see both seals and seabirds amongst the islands, often with commentaries by local experts, and even a ferry crossing will bring sightings of creatures of the sea.

All this wealth of wildlife comes to us with some responsibilities. We need to ensure that our enjoyment of this resource doesn’t damage the very thing we’ve come to see. Most of this is common sense, and it is usually easy to see when birds or seals are ignoring or unaware of you, and then you’ll have a better experience of their natural behaviour. Try and avoid wandering over the habitats where numbers of birds are feeding or roosting – they are mostly wet and slippery in any case. When watching seals at their haul-outs, keep yourself or your boat well away and move slowly – do not make them take to the water.

There are a range of other opportunities to enjoy the heritage of Strangford Lough and Lecale. Most of Northern Ireland’s sailing clubs operate around Strangford Lough and there are important marinas or pontoons in Ardglass, Portaferry and Strangford. There’s a recently established set of canoe trails that weave in amongst the islands of Strangford Lough. Cycling has received a boost with the opening of a complex of tracks in Castleward, but there are also innumerable good routes in the open country. For those with a head for heights the airfield at Newtownards is a good base for pilots with a variety of aircraft to explore the area and it offers short flights for the public. Country lanes and trails are ideal for horse riding.

After all this appetite-generating activity, the range of local restaurants and bars become an enticing option. Many places offer local seafood or other foods from the locality. For those cooking at home, there are many outlets selling local meats, seafoods, vegetables, eggs and honey.

An important feature of our heritage is also the intangible aspect: music, verse, stories and the work of many artists and crafts folk. Music can often be heard wafting out of local pubs and in many cases this is scheduled so you don’t have to turn up on chance. The range of literature relating to Strangford Lough and Lecale is extensive, coming as poetry, sometimes recited, and stories. Ards Borough Council and Down District Council both have vibrant arts programmes that bring in a wide variety of themes both from within the district and further afield.

The question for us all is – does this amount to a vibrant package that sets us apart, distinct, and characterful, from any number of other landscapes? Can we identify with it? We have everything going for us, and more. The question is how we can shape it into a meaningful treasure trove that speaks out for Strangford and Lecale.
Distinctive landscapes often give rise to distinctive characters playing roles for good or ill, in history. Many of them weren’t born here, but perhaps inspired by the opportunities of our region, they stayed and made a name for themselves. The recorded history of Strangford and Lecale goes back some 2000 years during which time there must have been many colourful and energetic folk. Most have now faded from records and memories, but even so the history of our landscape, natural history and society have seen some notable people. Here are just a few:

**Magnus ‘Barelegs’,** or Magnus III Olafsson, King of Norway, established control over the western isles and Isle of Man in 1098, and later attempted to extend this to Ireland. He was partly successful, through an alliance with Muirchertach O’Brien, King of Ireland. Unfortunately for Magnus, his association with us comes from the fact, as legend has it, in 1103 somewhere near the River Quoile, he was ambushed by warriors of the Ulaid kingdom and killed by a blow to the neck. The legend maintains he was buried near Downpatrick and a site is marked as such. Today he is more conspicuously remembered by the Viking festival which re-creates a supposed invasion by Norse-style boats with suitably costumed ‘invaders’.

There is very little information about **Cathal** of Lecale as an individual, but he deserves a mention as his name is embedded in that of Lecale, which originated from ‘Leth Cathail’ or ‘Cathal’s portion’. It seems to have been the result of a compromise between the two main branches of the Dal Fiatach royal line, giving him the status of a leth-rí or joint king. So he was probably fairly big in these parts. Lecale itself would have been quite a self sufficient territory in his day, isolated from other parts of Ulster by marshland and river, and so they would have developed a considerable prowess in shipping. It is likely that they took on the Vikings on several occasions, and acquired some prominence politically.

**John de Courcy**, an Anglo-Norman from Somerset, invaded Ulster in 1177, set up castles in Carrickfergus and Dundrum. He established his base in Downpatrick and around Lecale, and distributed lands to many of his soldiers and supporters whose names can still be traced to some of today’s families. He can be regarded as the founder of Downpatrick as a truly significant town despite his rather chequered career in and out of power and his numerous rows with the England’s King John. However, he and his wife Affreca who is buried in Greyabbey (which she founded) have left us with a legacy of important monastic sites and a clear sense of identity in this part of County Down.
St Patrick is arguably our most famous resident, and the patron saint of Ireland. Although he is celebrated as an Irishman throughout the world, he wasn’t Irish, but came as a slave, probably from Cumbria. He eventually escaped but after a vision he returned to spread the word of Christianity in the north of Ireland. He is know to have arrived in Strangford Lough and probably made his way up the little Slaney River to Saul near Downpatrick, and there converted the local leader Dichu of Saul to Christianity. He travelled widely converting powerful leaders and peasants alike, although there are many conflicting legends about his work. Patrick finally died in 493 on (of course) March 17. It is said he was carried to Saul as part of his funeral procession, and then buried beside what is now Downpatrick Cathedral, allegedly alongside St Brigid and St Columba. His story doesn’t end there – shortly after his death there was a battle between rival groups who wished to keep his remains in their own areas – but he stayed in Downpatrick.

St Mochaoi who lived about the same time as Patrick, has given his name to Mahee Island and he is accredited with the founding of Nendrum monastery. Today we can explore the ruined embankments with the stump of a round tower, and take in the view over Ardmillan Bay, its channel to Strangford Lough, and look across to Greyabbey and Chapel Island. In his day it seems to have been a much busier place – some 450 monks maintained a centre of religion and learning, and required cultivation and livestock to feed the monastery and its attendees. They constructed and operated a sophisticated tidal mill for flour production, and a generous fish diet to judge by the fish traps in the bay. Mochaoi died in about 477 but the Monastery continued for some 500 hundred years after this. There is speculation that it was eventually destroyed in a Viking raid but there is no firm evidence for this. J S Andrews’ delightfully fictional book ‘The Bell of Nendrum’ gives a good impression of the lives of the monks in those ancient days.

Sir Hans Sloane was born in Killyleagh in 1660, and until the 1960s/70s his parents’ house could be seen until sadly it was demolished to make way for a housing estate. However, he is commemorated by a fine statue not far from Killyleagh’s harbour. There is little record of his activities here. But we can take pride in the formative years for one of the founding fathers of natural history, and it is reasonable to assume that our hills and coasts must have awakened his interest in nature. He is best remembered for his book on the natural history of Jamaica, and after he settled in London, his medical career caring for the great and good, the adaptation of milk chocolate to British tastes, and finally the founding of the Natural History Museum, based on his extensive collection of specimens. Many streets, squares and other places in London are named after him, and there’s also a monument to him in the Chelsea Physick Garden.

Daft Eddie - an unlikely hero! Eddie was a lad, according to old and inappropriate parlance, ‘had a slate loose’, and was used by smugglers in the Killinchy area as a sort of dogbody. According to local legend, he overheard these villains discussing a raid on a local magistrate living on the Ards Peninsula. Unnoticed, he slipped out, and on the dark winter’s night, seized a boat and rowed single handed through the reefs and currents of Strangford Lough, then running several miles to alert the magistrate. When the armed smugglers arrived they met a ‘welcome’ party of the local militia and were arrested. So it seems Eddie may not have been so daft after all. He now lies buried in Killinskin churchyard, though tragically someone has stolen the gravestone.

Four authors, more than any others perhaps, although that’s a matter for debate, capture the lives of recent generations living in and around Strangford Lough and Lecale.

Michael McIver was born in Newry, but grew up on the Ards peninsula, entering St Columb’s College, Derry. His background is as a local journalist, but he is best known for his short stories, regarded by many as his best work, are lyrical evocations of human emotions and moral choices and their attention to detail of place and mood paint a vivid portrait of the lives and ethical dilemmas of ordinary people”. The most famous of today’s Irish poets, Seamus Heaney, said he had “a comprehension of the central place of suffering and sacrifice in the life of the spirit”.

Sam Hanna Bell, novelist, short story writer and playwright, perhaps more than anyone captured the life of folk living around the shores of Strangford Lough. He was born in Scotland in 1909 but raised in Raffrey, County Down. From 1941 to 1949, he was a features producer for BBC Radio Ulster. He produced a variety of works: for example his short stories, Summer Loanen, was published in 1943. His novels include The Hollow Ball (1961), A Man Flourishing (1973) and Across the Narrow Sea (1987). His most famous work is December Bride (1955) which describes a claustrophobic and disturbing set of relationships in an isolated farm. This was made into a memorable 1990 film, much of it based on Taggart Island near Killyleagh, but also at Salt Water Bridge. With sad irony, Sam died in the same month that the film was released.

Dr Maurice Hayes, former county hurler, Down GAA mastermind, Downpatrick town clerk, local politician and Ombudsman, is highly regarded for his even-handed journalism. He offers a charming picture of 1930s village life in his book Sweet Killough: Let Go Your Anchor (1994). His later childhood in Denivar’s Hotel, Downpatrick, is described in Black Puddings with Slim: A Downpatrick Boyhood (1996) and seems a world away from the 21st century.

The Tomelty dynasty hailed from Portaferry. Joseph Tomelty, playwright and actor, was born there in 1941. He left school aged 12 to become a housepainter, but attended classes at Belfast Tech. His acting career began in 1937 and by 1938 he was writing plays for radio. He managed Belfast’s Group Theatre from 1942-51 and wrote the script for the weekly radio
comedy The McCooeys for seven years. His plays include Idolatry at Innishargie (1942) and All Souls’ Night (1945). Red is the Port Light is very evocative of this area.

**Affreca.** Whilst John de Courcy dealt with the political and military issues of Strangford and Lecale, his wife Affreca built up a strong relationship with the church, though it isn’t really clear whether that was for strategic or religious purposes – maybe both, since they were very much intertwined at that time. Affreca was the daughter of Godfred, King of the Isle of Man, so the marriage was a fairly smart move for John. Legend has it that, after a perilous sea crossing, overwhelmed with relief at surviving the storms, she founded the Cistercian abbey at what we now call Greyabbey in 1193, helped by monks from Holm Cultram on the Solway Firth. Affreca is buried in the abbey. Although the abbey was closed by Henry VIII, and was almost destroyed in subsequent upheavals, the structure and fine architecture can still be seen and visited.

**Mary Ward**
Born Mary King in 1827, Mary’s links to Strangford Lough come from her marriage to Henry Ward of Castleward, by whom she had three sons and no less than five daughters. However, her main claim to fame is surprising, given that raising such a large family is a pretty full time occupation. Despite having no formal education or qualifications (such details weren’t considered to be necessary for a lady in those days) she became an accomplished artist, naturalist, astronomer and microscopist. It would have been an uphill struggle – women were not permitted to be members of erudite societies, and still less expected to publish books or articles. Yet Mary did indeed publish books on microscopy, natural history, many of which she illustrated herself. In many ways she was what we today might consider to be a very modern woman. Given all this talent and her ability as a mother, her life was tragically short – in 1809, travelling on a small train in Parsonstown near Birr (Co Offaly), the open carriage lurched and she fell off, under the wheels, dying almost instantly. After her death the family moved back into Castleward, bringing her scientific possessions and paintings – these can still be seen in the old house.

**James Hamilton**
Born James of Ayrshire was a scholar at Universities in both Glasgow and Dublin before being sucked into diplomatic activity for both Elizabeth I of England and James VI of Scotland, helping to secure the succession of the latter as James I of England, for which he was granted lands in Ulster and became a major player in the Plantation of County Down, where long wars had left the land underpopulated and uncultivated. He lived first in Bangor, then in Killyleagh. The Rowan-Hamiltons of Killyleagh Castle are descendants. His countryman and rival was Hugh Montgomery. He was a hot-tempered soldier-adventurer who had done a deal with Con O’Neill of Castle Reagh, Lord of much of East Down but imprisoned in Carrickfergus Castle. In exchange for securing Con’s release, Montgomery was to receive half his lands, but James Hamilton persuaded King James to split the lands three ways. Clandeboy went to Hamilton, the Ardes to Montgomery and Castle Reagh to Con O’Neill. Montgomery never forgave Hamilton. He also brought over many Scots settlers and established his base in Newtownards, later moving to Comber then Greyabbey where his heirs still live at Rosemount House. Montgomery gave each of his six churches gifts of a bell, a 1603 Geneva Bible and a 1603 Common Prayer book. One of the bells in Greyabbey Parish Church to this day is nicknamed “Old Gomery”.

JUST about every bit of our fertile soil owes its origins to the ice age, and the retreat of the glaciers. These left a complex mix of boulder clays and other sediments, soon to be overlaid by humus-rich soils created by a succession of different habitats, many of them forested, but with complex glades and clearings. The rich soils gave a robust start to the pioneering efforts of Neolithic farmers 6500 years ago, and they are just as fundamental to our farmlands today.

We have, by global standards, a lush fertile farming environment, and it’s endowed with a benign climate (even if we grumble from day to day). The wide open slopes of the fields round Scrabo in the north of Strangford Lough gradually merge with the rolling drumlin landscapes further south, and this in turn gives way to shallower glacial deposits so that amidst the drumlins of the southern Ards and especially amongst the open lands of Lecale, we find outcrops of rockier terrain as the bedrocks poke through.

These subtle variations in our farmed landscape generate strong echoes in the variety of farms and their produce. The northern farms with their large fields, some on the Scrabo slopes, others on polder lands claimed from Strangford’s mudflats, have probably the finest market gardening conditions in Northern Ireland, supplying cabbage, Brussels sprouts, carrots, potatoes, as well as cereal crops, to the Belfast market and further afield. These are some of the most valuable farmlands we have, which in the case of the shoreline farms poses a real dilemma as rising sea levels challenge both the costs and the technology of the protecting tidal bank.

The horticultural scene also penetrates down the western shores of the lough to some extent, probably encouraged by an intermix of sea and land offering fairly frost free conditions. The neatly farmed slopes of purple brassicas reaching down to a curving shore have inspired artists as well as food retailers! However, as we progress further south on both sides of the lough, the most dominant occupation offers scenes of well fed livestock feeding on lush pastures. These give us some of our finest meats, and increasingly local butchers and restaurants are highlighting the local provenance of the foods they are selling.

Perhaps more than anything else it is livestock farming, suckler herds and beef and dairy production that defines the quality of much our landscape. The intricate patterns of field boundaries, hedges of hawthorn and sloe in the north, accompanied by dry stone and whin in the south form a framework for these settled little farms, and the sight of a farming family moving cattle or sheep from field to field down a narrow lane is a common one.

The Ards Peninsula and all of Lecale are some of the driest parts of Northern Ireland, relatively speaking. Although there is some arable farming throughout our whole region, it is the southern and eastern areas that have the most consistent history of this, and in the 19th and early 20th centuries production of wheat and barley was far more widespread than...
today. About a third of Ireland’s windmills were clustered in our area, and there are a large number of ruined windmills in our landscape today. Until recent times a major factory, ‘The Maltings’ near Newtownards, processed barley for the brewing industry. Now changes in the global markets for grain have meant that arable farming in our landscape is a relatively small component of the economy.

Farming is the lifeblood of many of our communities and families around the coast and inland. But it is under pressure. Changing markets, variations in subsidies, complex regulations, and heavy competition from producers in Britain and the continent are eroding the viability of our farms, and in some cases forcing farmers to go part time and undertake supplementary jobs. Equally, our farms are putting pressure on our landscape. The drive towards intensification to counter the shortages of the Second World War have continued, and until recently subsidies were focused solely on increased production at the cost of all else. Now there is increased recognition that quality of produce is as important as quantity, and that part of the quality is the environment in which the food was produced.

Agricultural supports now increasingly require environmental good practice. But we are not there yet – decades of hedgerow removal has damaged many areas, natural hay meadows have been lost, and constant fertilisation has saturated soils with excess nutrients which find their way via streams and rivers onto our shores, changing the ecology in some areas.

Farming has changed the built landscape – we have lost most of the traditional gates and gateposts as entrances are widened to accommodate large farm vehicles.

So we have a balance to achieve. We need a thriving rural economy, and to lose our links with the farmed landscape would be to destroy a major part of our heritage as well as to lose the delights of locally sourced top quality produce. At the same time, if we believe that the quality of our environment and our countryside are also part of that inheritance, we have to continue our efforts to harmonise the two.
This booklet has been produced in association with the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership (SLLP) and its Turn O’The Tide programme, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

It is part of work to help connect people with their heritage and to develop a management strategy for the Strangford and Lecale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The SLLP facilitates stakeholders and statutory authorities to work together for the area’s heritage. Funded by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Ards Borough Council and Down District Council, it also involves the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Crown Estate Commissioners, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and others.

Thankfully, much of our heritage is very well looked after, but what if we lost our wildlife, beautiful old buildings fell into ruin, hedges were bulldozed and water polluted? Equally, there are many opportunities to encourage businesses, create jobs and let people enjoy and use our heritage through recreation, fishing, food production, housing and other activities.

Much of this area is protected by European Union and national legislation and the relevant authorities are obliged to look after the conservation features so that we hand on the area’s diverse wildlife and landscape in a good condition for coming generations.

Thanks go to the many people from the Partnership who helped to put this booklet together, especially Philip MacDonald from Queen’s University Belfast (and the Historic Monuments Council), Bob Bleakley and Sandi Howie from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency; and Isabel Hood, Northern Ireland Environment Link and Chair of the SLLP Advisory Committee.

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S LLP Advisory Committee Members 2011-2014

To take on board the views of local people and those with interests in the area the Partnership has a stakeholder Advisory Committee. Member organisations nominate representatives who are appointed by the Minister of the Environment.

Ards Borough Council; Association of Strangford Lough Yacht Clubs; Centre for Maritime Archaeology; Down District Council; East Down Rural Community Network; Historic Monuments Council; Joint Council of Wildfowlers; Marine Task Force; National Trust; NI Fed of Sub-Aqua Clubs; Northern Ireland Environment Link; Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation; Queen’s University, Portaferry; Royal Yachting Association; Sports Council for Northern Ireland; Strangford Lough Fishermen’s Association; Strangford Lough Tourism Destination Management Forum; Ulster Farmers’ Union; Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

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Wild and open coast Irish Sea
swells crash on the rocks and life
clings to survive Powerful tidal
surges and currents, whirlpools and
shipwrecks abound. Scattered
rocks and islands, reefs and shoals
sheltered creeks and bays and vast
flats of mud and sand – lake-like