In the 17th century, with the help of Sir James Montgomery, the Savage family began developing the business life of Portaferry. It became a thriving coastal town with shipyards and quays.

A stone quay appears on George Johnston’s chart of the Narrows published in 1755. The depth of the water at the quay was about 4.6m high tide which allowed relatively large vessels to enter the port. This was vital in days when sailing ships carried all passengers and cargo in and out of Portaferry.

A second quay at the Saltpans appears in the Ordinance Survey map of 1834 and it was further developed by 1858.

The ‘big’ quay and slipway were extended in 1835 to accommodate a new steam ferry. John Lynn of Downpatrick submitted estimates of £90 and £30 respectively for work on the quay using Isle of Man stone ‘with prime timbre fenders at the corners of the quay.’ It was repaired and extended again in 1897. A third ‘wee’ quay was built before 1920.

A ferry between Strangford and Portaferry is known to have operated since the 12th century.

Q. How long does it take to cross to Strangford by ferry?
This neoclassical building was built in 1810 when Portaferry was a busy thriving coastal port. For over a hundred years the town was full of shipbuilders, master mariners, shipowners, rope-makers and ships’ chandlers. Dozens of ships were built here. In 1802, one of the largest vessels ever built in Ireland, the 500 ton Bess, was launched from the dockyard of Captain Edward Conway of Portaferry.

Local products such as potatoes, wheat and barley were exported to major industrial cities such as Belfast, Dublin, Glasgow and Liverpool. Sailing ships, many built in Portaferry, sailed from the quay to take passengers on a six week journey to North America.

Grand houses lined the shore where the majority of trade was conducted. It was therefore practical for the Belfast Bank to open a branch in these premises in 1865. It remained a bank until 1936.

In 1972 Queen’s University, Belfast bought the building and established a marine research laboratory here. Facilities in Portaferry are used by resident staff and students as well as associated researchers from Queen’s University and international visitors.

Q. Where on this building can you see a second radial fanlight?
This dramatic new building was finished in 2009 to house the new “Blue Peter V” lifeboat. The stone clad structure has been designed to blend with the surrounding buildings and the copper roof has been modelled in the shape of an upturned boat. It was designed by the Hutchinson Irvine Architectural Partnership. The land this building is on is one of the sites where shipbuilding took place in 18th and 19th centuries.

In the 19th century, as a result of the large number of shipwrecks in this area, it was decided to establish a lifeboat station at Cloughey, a small coastal village five miles from here. From 1884 Cloughey lifeboat was called out on 152 rescue missions and saved 311 lives. After relocation to Portavogie in 1965 a lifeboat was in service there until 1978.

Representations were made to the RNLI to maintain a lifeboat service here and in 1979 it was decided to place a single-engined ‘C’ class lifeboat in Portaferry on a trial basis. It was so successful that it became a twenty four hour a day, all year station in 1982.

In 1985 twelve persons were rescued from the converted fishing vessel Tornamona which struck rocks on her way from Portaferry to the Isle of Man. Two of those on board were the world famous motor cycling champion Joey Dunlop and his brother Robert. Also on board was a cargo of eight racing motorbikes for use during the Isle of Man TT races. Tornamona later sank.

Q. Which BBC children’s programme is Portaferry’s lifeboat named after?
In 1799 all the land on which this building, and the buildings behind stand was leased for business purposes to Read and Allen. In 1838 the premises were described as a house, office and yard with the highest valuation in the town. Twenty years later Edward Bryce bought the lease from Andrew Nugent but the terms show that it was specifically forbidden for the premises to be a tavern or public house for the sale of spirituous liquors.’

By the 1860s prosperity in Portaferry had reached an all time high and the port was handling more shipping than any other on Strangford Lough. It was about this time that Edward Bryce obtained his landlords permission to open a spirit-grocers in the corner premises. In 1880 he sold his lease to Henry and Hannah McGrath and for the next fifty years it was known as “McGraths of the Quay”.

In 1936 a local leading businessman, William McMullan, bought the property and leased it to a Miss Eileen Thompson and her mother. Miss Thompson applied for a hotel licence and employed James Beck to convert the building into a proper hotel.

Subsequent owners, the Wilsons and then the Herlihys, continued to improve the hotel which now incorporates the entire original house, the adjoining parlour houses and the old hotel.

**Q.** How many stars has the Portaferry Hotel been awarded?
Portaferry Castle, once known as ‘Savage’s Castle’, is a fine example of a tower house and was placed to have a great view overlooking Strangford Lough.

It was built in the 16th century by William Le Savage but later fell into disrepair. Sir James Montgomery, of Greyabbey, renovated the building when his sister, Jane, married Patrick Savage of Portaferry in 1623. At that time the only buildings recorded were the castle and a few fishermen’s cottages. Sir James enlarged the windows and roofed and floored the fortified house ‘so that his sister could live in greater comfort there.’

It is a square, three-storey building with one projecting tower to the south. There is an attic but no vault. Floors were wooden and the only stone floors were in the turret. There was only one substantial fireplace. Most of the eastern corner is in ruins. The entrance at the base of the tower is protected by a small machicolation and the entrance to the ground floor chamber is protected by a murder-hole. A curved stairway within the tower rises to the first floor and a spiral stairway in the west corner continues to roof level. The building continued to be inhabited until 1765 when the Savage family moved.

Q. Can you see the pistol loops in the battlemented parapet?
Exploris is Northern Ireland’s only aquarium and seal sanctuary. It was opened by Ards Borough Council in 1987 to enable the public to view the amazingly diverse marine life that exists around these islands. Strangford Lough contains nearly three quarters of all the marine species to be found in Northern Irish waters.

As a result of the enormous popularity the aquarium was extended and re-opened as Exploris by Prince Charles in 1994. The increased number of tanks enabled the aquarium to re-create a wide diversity of underwater communities which exist locally. Discovery pool demonstrations, run by experienced guides, give you the opportunity to interact with living creatures.

While the aquarium has been involved in the rehabilitation of seals since 1989, the new purpose built Seal Sanctuary only opened in 2000. This provided state of the art facilities to look after sick or abandoned seals from rescue to release. A new Education Suite and Exhibition Hall were built at the same time.

Q. Can you go into the park and find the strangely shaped garden wall? This was built in such a shape to allow maximum heat for wall fruit.

The walled garden in which Exploris is built, adjacent to the 16th century tower house Portaferry Castle, was once part of the Savage/Nugent estate. The Nugent were descendents of the Savages. In 1812 Andrew Savage, son of Patrick Savage, changed his name to Andrew Nugent. He called his son Patrick John Nugent.
In the second half of the 18th century many industries existed in Portaferry and it became the leading port of the Lough. By 1754 a bleachworks with a green was in operation and a linen market was established soon after. Linen was regularly transported to markets in England. This area would have been bustling with commercial activity. Until 1875 a ropewalk extended north from this point alongside the castle garden and ropes were made there by John Drennan of Mill Street. Close by the ropewalk was a tan yard, a tobacco factory, a distillery and a drying kiln. Shipbuilding was carried on and vessels up to 400 tons burthen were constructed. After 1877 there was a sawmill started by Hugh Beck. The large stone building opposite was once a water mill, complete with a water wheel on the gable wall. It ground wheat and corn (oats) into meal. The building in front was owned by a local merchant, James Elliott, and in 1850 he had stables in the Rope Walk for keeping his dray and carts in. The Nugent estate stored their sand lime and building material for repairing their town houses. Castle Street, locally known as The Shambles, was described historically as ‘an excellent street, constructed on a dog-leg!’

Q. Can you find the old weighbridge on the ground?
In the 1800s this was the site of the Portaferry’s fish market. In 1870 the Orange Lodge in Portaferry, founded in 1798, decided to build a hall and purchased the land from the Nugent Estate. On this outcrop of rock they built what has been described as a charming red brick building, with gothic windows, nice roofline and a pretty little pinnacle spire. The design has been attributed to the architect William Batt and it was constructed by local builder, Hugh Beck. The original date slab said ‘Portaferry Orange Protestant Hall 1870.’

A ball to celebrate Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee was held here in 1897.

The building was purchased and sympathetically restored by Portaferry Credit Union which moved into the new premises in 2008.

Q. In which year was a Credit Union opened in Portaferry?
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Portaferry Market House

The Market House is the earliest surviving public building in the town. Work began in 1749 and was completed by 1752. Its construction was commissioned and paid for by Andrew Savage, a member of the ancient family of Savages. During the Norman invasion, when John de Courcy and his knights passed through the area, one of them, le Savage by name, settled in this southern part of the Ards Peninsula.

Originally the Market House had a market every Thursday. Upstairs, meetings of the Portaferry Literary Society and the Portaferry Mechanics’ Institute took place. The building was also used as a Manor Court and later, a Petty Sessions Court. Tea dances and concerts were popular in this very central location. In the mid 19th century a daily reading room was opened as was Portaferry’s first bank, the Penny Bank.

The building was partially rebuilt following its defence against the United Irishmen on 11th June 1798. The Yeomanry of the town, under the command of Captain George Mathews, had taken the Market House as a garrison. At each end of the building they placed guns which had been sent ashore from the HMS Buckingham, anchored off Portaferry Quay. The United Irishmen, led by James McMullan and armed with pitchforks and pikes, marched on the Square and were met with a volley of fire. Some reports say ten, others say forty men died. Others escaped to the Isle of Man. Twenty seven refugees were captured there – fifteen Presbyterians, eleven Catholics and one Protestant.

Q. Can you walk right round the building to find the sun dial?
St Cooey’s Oratory

Mass used to be celebrated in a small oratory in St. Patrick’s Hall along the shore in Portaferry. Then, in the mid 1960s, the Parish Priest, Father Patrick McAlea, organised the purchase of two shops and a house to enable the building of a church in the town’s square. To make the site large enough, Jeannie Convey, Gerard Baird and Alec and Jean McCartney donated their back gardens.

McLean and Forte of Belfast were appointed as architects and their design resembled the shape of a boat, with a courtyard in front. This is dominated by a porch-like structure known as a port cochere. Granite from Wicklow was chiselled to provide the ambo, tabernacle, credence table and altar which itself weighs one ton.

The exterior of the church is concealed behind a free-standing belfry which contains a bell, once been used in St. Patrick’s, built in 1762.

Fr Morgan chose St Cooey as the patron saint of the new Oratory and foundation stones were brought from nearby Temple Cooey. Building work began in Christmas week 1966 and was carried out by Joseph Dynes of Ardkeen,

St Cooey’s Oratory was opened on 29th June 1968 and blessed by Bishop William Philbin. Two ancient stones from the ruined 7th century Temple Cooey church stand outside.

Q. How many fireplaces would this building have had?
This small circular graveyard, one of the most ancient sites in Portaferry, contains graves dating from the 17th century and the remains of an old church which has been described as a tall and romantic ruin. A medieval church is also thought to have stood on this site. For most of the 17th century this was the local place of worship for Presbyterians and many memorials from that date, including those of Ulster-Scots ancestry, can be found here.

In 1662 the church was given over to the Church of Ireland and was dismantled in 1787 when the modern parish church was built across the road.

This church of St. James, better known as Ballyphilip Parish Church, can be accessed through the gates directly opposite. It was erected in 1787 at a cost of less than £900. When completed St James’ had a lofty spire but this was removed as dangerous in 1810, the same year the churchyard walls were put up. The church was repaired in 1836 with the aid of a grant of £343 from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners.

Inside there is a stone of c.1730, carved in curly lettering, in memory of Patrick Savage and his family.

James Maxwell, who is buried in Templecraney, died fighting for the United Irishmen during the 1798 Rebellion. He died on June 10th at the height of the rebels’ success, when they held all of North Down and Ards.

Q. How much was the reward for reporting anyone causing damage to this property?
Portaferry Presbyterian Church

Portaferry is one of the oldest Presbyterian congregations in Ireland. It was founded in 1642 and moved to this site around 1662 when the original church at Templecraney was returned to the Church of Ireland. A meeting house, one of the first seven in County Down, was erected here in 1694. It was rebuilt in 1751 and again in 1839 after it was rendered unsafe in the “Night of the Big Wind” on 7th January.

Rev. John Orr, minister from 1822 – 1875, engaged the eminent architect John Miller who designed a classical building on Greek Doric lines with an Ionic interior. The building took a year to complete and cost £1999.12s.6d. A history of the church* states that the cost was met by members of the congregation and neighbours of all denominations who contributed generously. Rev. John Orr led by example and donated half his year’s stipend. It was said that the church combined simplicity, solidarity, symmetry and elegance.

Portaferry Presbyterian Church was opened by the noted Evangelical Presbyterian minister Dr Henry Cooke (1788-1868) on 2nd September 1841.

The church is situated on the corner of Steel Dickson Avenue – formerly known as The Back Lane. The avenue is named after the Reverend William Steel Dickson, minister of this church and founder of a classical school in Portaferry. He joined the Society of United Irishmen when it was formed in 1791. Steel Dickson was a consistent advocate of immediate Catholic emancipation and, as Adjutant General of the United Irish Forces, was arrested two days before the Rebellion of 1798. He was imprisoned in Fort George, Inverness until 1802.

*The Building of Portaferry Presbyterian Church – Hugh Anderson

Q. In what year was Reverend Steel Dickson born?
This National School building in Portaferry is now owned by the Presbyterian Church. It stands here in Meeting House Lane which is known locally as Purgatory.

The Irish National School system, established in 1831, provided education for all children between the ages of 6 and 12. Many stayed on longer. From 1900 there was a revised curriculum and all pupils studied reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, manual instruction, drawing, singing, object lessons, elementary science and physical education. This system provided a good basic education and its greatest achievement was a significant increase in literacy during the 19th century. Pupils brought in a penny a week to pay for the coal which heated the schoolroom. Some even brought in a bucket of coal.

The method of education was to go through grades or standards – junior infants, senior infants, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th. From 1st standard the passing was based on readers. If you mastered the reader for that year you passed into the next standard. If you didn’t master the reader you stayed in the same class until you did!

In the 19th century James Shanks, who became a leading light in the local Tenant Right Association, attended Portaferry National School. He studied there until he was 18 and apparently received an education up to the level given in any secondary school.

Q. What number is this National School?
This windmill was built by the Savage family in 1771. In 1836 records show that it was owned by William McCleery, a local merchant, shipowner and shipbuilder. At that time Portaferry was a place of prosperity and between 1812 and 1822 over thirty vessels were built in this little port. The main builders were the McCleerys and Thomas Gelston.

The windmill had two sets of millstones but was completely destroyed by fire on Christmas Day, 1878. There is little trace of the kiln house or grain store. Only the mill stump remains and it is an important navigational aid to shipping coming up the Lough.

A trial excavation in 1993 by the Historic Monuments and Buildings’ service concluded that the platform is original and was created in the 18th century by terracing the hilltop specifically for the windmill.

At one time there were over fifty windmills on the Ards Peninsula and most, like this, were built by local landowners. They would then allow their tenants to scutch flax or grind grain for a percentage of the crop.

Q. What number is this National School?
St Patricks R.C. Chapel

The building of St Patrick’s, on the site of an earlier Mass House, was begun by Rev James McTeggart in 1762, making it one of the oldest churches in the Diocese of Down and Connor. The date stone, which is built into the west wall of the church, has the following inscription: “All you good Christians pray for ye benefactors of this Chapel which was built by the Masons Doriens & Mr Henery Murland, carpender AD 1762.”

In 1831, Rev James McAleenan re-roofed and carried out extensive repairs to the church. His successor, Rev James Killen enlarged the church in 1845 by building the western wing (now the central portion of St Patrick’s). He also erected new galleries and removed the High Altar from the northern gable to the eastern wall. This altar was later replaced by Rev James Kennedy in 1923 when he erected the present marble High Altar.

During his three years as Parish Priest of Portaferry, from 1912 -1915, the Rev G Crolly added a new bell tower and sacristy. The existing bell, weighing 16½ cwts, was installed by Rev Patrick McKillop in 1939.

Extensive work was carried out by Rev George Watson between 1947 and 1949, due to the unsafe condition of the roof. This included new steel girders, re-roofing the church, plastering of the ceilings and interior walls, new heating and electric light systems and painting.

A Lourdes grotto was erected in 1954 to commemorate the Marian year, and was solemnly blessed by Bishop Mageean on 31st May 1955.

Who was responsible for the rebuilding in 1831?

St Patrick’s was rededicated in 1990, following renovations carried out by Rev Gerard Laverty.
A strong coastguard presence was necessary in Portaferry and Strangford in the 1800s because various Acts restricting exports from Irish ports had been imposed by the English government. This led to a great deal of smuggling which flourished in Strangford Lough where there was a considerable volume of trade. Imports of sugar, rum, whiskey, cloths and coal were arriving from Dublin, Whitehaven, Liverpool and America and exports of corn, herrings, cattle, potatoes and kelp were leaving.

These former coastguard cottages were built around 1850 to the excellent design of the Board of Works for Ireland. The architect was most likely Jacob Owen of Dublin and the cottages had a low look-out tower at one end. At the time this road was called New Row.

NEW ROW residents here in 1901:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<td>Fleming, John</td>
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<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Co Dublin</td>
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<td>Broom, Alfred</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Church of Ireland</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>Head of Family</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Co Cork</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘The Bay of Strangford is well adapted to smuggling, and the excellence of the situation is not lost on the smuggler.’
Duke of Rutland, 1787

Q. How many fireplaces would this building have had?
Like most coastal towns in Ireland, Portaferry had its own salt works at the turn of the 18th century. On 11th July 1783 Patrick Savage of Portaferry granted a lease of all this land to William Galway, John Reed, James McCleary and William Brown for ‘the free and unmolested use of the sea water for salt works.’

Salt was an essential commodity in a community dependant on agriculture and fishing. It was used for the preservation of fish, meat, butter and hides for domestic use and trade.

In 1853 the Portaferry Gas Light Co. was formed and it took over the premises to manufacture and sell gas for the production of light. A schooner brought the coal to the gas works every two months. The company continued in business for almost 50 years.

A second quay was built in the Salt Pans’ area in the early part of the 19th century. In 1900 the land was leased to James McCausland, a local shipowner, for the business of salvaging shipwrecks. He made further additions to the quay by reclaiming the land and re-filling it in with ash, stone and other gravel.

Q. Why do you think the place on which you are standing was called the Ship Builder’s Bank in 1799?
In 1899 the Very Reverend Hugh Magorrian, Parish Priest of Ballyphilip, acquired this site from Colonel Nugent of Portaferry. In the next two years a church-like building with a tall castellated tower was built to serve as a parochial hall. Money for building works was raised from local households and fundraising events. Although it was officially opened in 1903, it was in use from 1901.

Arising from the Gaelic Revival of the late 19th century, parochial halls were increasingly used as venues for the local feis - competitions in traditional music and dancing and recitations in Irish. Dances were frequently held too and it was not unusual to have 350 attend. St. Patrick’s Hall was also the venue for Irish dancing classes, plays and travelling shows. The local drama group, in the hometown of the writer and actor, Joseph Tomelty, was extremely active here. Billiards became very popular when a full size billiard table was donated to the hall by McCauslands who ran a ship salvage business nearby.

A Penny Bank flourished here from 1910 – 1928 and from 1929 the downstairs was used as a girls’ school. For half a century this hall was the heart of the parish.

Local people were involved in the building of St. Patrick's Hall. The stonemason was John Dorrian and the carpenter was Tommy Gilmore. A replica of this hall can be seen at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Cultra.

Q. In which year does the inscription tell you that this hall was built?
In 1799 a map by Patrick O’Hare shows a single building on this site but an 1859 survey clearly shows two buildings with a flight of steps up to rear walled gardens. The building is thought to date from circa 1840, but may be a remodelling of the building indicated on the 1799 map.

The Census of 1901, when the address was 7 New Row, describes it as a first class private dwelling with fourteen rooms and eleven windows to the front. It was occupied by an estate agent, Thomas Warnock, who lived here with his wife, Mary, his brother Hamilton, an architect, and three servants.

An observation tower on the roof suggests that the property may once have been the business premises of a sea merchant. It is now Portaferry Sailing Club which has been responsible over the years for running national and international sailing events. The Club started as Cooke Street Sailing Club in 1968, named after a previous sailing club in the town which ceased operating in 1956.

**Q.** Does this building still have eleven windows to the front?
John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, first came to the Ards Peninsula in 1778 and visited Portaferry and Strangford. He returned in 1789 and preached to packed congregations in ‘a large meeting house’ in Portaferry.

Permission to build this modest stucco meeting house was given at the 1786 Methodist Conference and, with subscriptions from members and other subscribers, was built in 1788. In 1836, there were 6 seats and a few forms and the church could hold 200 people.

From 1830-1870 a school was held here and pupils of all denominations attended. In 1904 the church interior was completely renewed in its present form. Twenty-two new pews were designed and six leaded light windows were installed. All work was carried out by the Beck family of Portaferry for the sum of £299. 5shs. The church was reroofed in 1910, at which time Rev. George Robinson was the Minister.

You are standing on Ferry Street, a street of great interest and character, where some of the oldest houses in Portaferry are to be found. Across the road from the church you can see a building that was the R.I.C. barracks in the 19th century. For most of the 20th century it operated as the post office. Portaferry had been a Post Town from 1767 and from 1810 the postmark was Portaferry 101 – that being the number of miles from Dublin.

The Church building was listed by the NIEA in 1976.

Q. What date on the gable wall proves that Methodism had been in this area before the building of this church?