Fishing Heritage
of Portavogie, Ardglass & Kilkeel
Fishing has been a major industry in County Down for many years. Three ports - Kilkeel, Portavogie and Ardglass - remain at the centre of the fishing industry today. Their communities revolve around the sea. Local people and their traditions have strong ties to the water.

While family bonds have endured across the generations, the fishing industry has changed with great purpose over time, working towards a sustainable future that respects the local marine environment.

In Northern Ireland, there are now over 350 licensed vessels fishing for seafood, and the industry employs over 1,000 full- and part-time fishermen. Around £20 million worth of fish and shellfish is landed annually into Northern Ireland. Some seafood caught by the local fleet is landed outside of Northern Ireland, into the UK, Republic of Ireland, and as far away as Norway and Denmark, bringing the total value of landings from Northern Irish fishing vessels to around £60 million.
The local catch

Prawns make up the largest proportion of the local catch and have done for some time. Specifically, local fishermen catch *Nephrops norvegicus*, also known as the Dublin Bay Prawn, langoustine, Norway lobster or scampi.
Strictly speaking it’s not a prawn at all, but a type of lobster. However, for the purposes of this booklet, langoustines are simply referred to as prawns.

Incredibly, many years ago, fishermen threw prawns back into the sea, viewing them as a useless by-product of the main fish catch.

Gourmets now consider local prawns an upmarket delicacy. As a result, County Down shellfish is in demand around the world. Consumers are also becoming increasingly aware of the health benefits of eating seafood. It might surprise natives that, in a French supermarket or Spanish restaurant, Northern Irish seafood takes pride of place on the counter or menu.

Large trawlers do still catch pelagic fish in these waters. Pelagic fish are free-swimming from the top to the bottom of the water column, but are mainly found mid-water. They include mackerel and herring.

Demersal fish are also still important species for local fisheries, although the prawn makes up the biggest share of the catch. Demersal fish are bottom-dwelling, like cod, haddock, monkfish, hake, plaice, brill and whiting.

Shellfish like scallops, mussels, crab and lobster also feature in the local list. Aquaculture is a growing industry in the area, both in the Irish Sea and Strangford Lough. The tradition of pot-fishing endures too. Fishermen use potting creels to catch crab, lobster and prawn. Winkle picking is common in Ardglass, Kilkeel and Tyrella, with workers harvesting shellfish by hand.

Some of the local catch is seasonal. The mackerel season is about three weeks long and the herring season is also relatively short.

Changes in market demands and available technology, such as the move from salting to freezing, also caused huge changes to the make-up of the local catch.

The main prawn season runs from the end of June to September, although the species is caught all year round. This is a busy time for prawn trawlers, involving weeks of intensive labour.

Dublin Bay Prawn is made up of two products - the whole fish and the tail. Local prawn tails are mainly sold to the UK scampi market, while whole prawns are exported to France, Italy, Spain and the Middle East.

Buyers work all three Northern Ireland ports, and both Kilkeel and Portavogie host regular auctions. However, fishermen sell many locally caught prawns under contract, rather than auctioning them.

Fishing also supports other industries, including processing. Pelagic fish go to the local factory to be frozen, then buyers export many of them to the Baltic States, China and the Far East.

The volume of the catch depends on vessel size as well as commercial quotas. Of course, like any other industry, fishing operates within the usual framework of demand and supply. The technological advances that created a greater supply of fish and prawns also meant that often prices dropped.

Changing diesel prices also have a huge effect on fishing costs. An average prawn trawler uses 2,000 litres of diesel in a typical week, so it’s easy to see how rising fuel prices affect the bottom line.

The ritual of the diesel lorries pulling into harbour once a week to refuel the boats signifies a major variable cost for the fishing industry.
Fishing gear improvements

Boats and nets are thought of as the hardware of the fishing industry. Both have changed considerably.

With the move away from sail, boats evolved into coal-powered steam drifters, and later to diesel-powered boats that were bigger again and could travel further. The old sailing boats were restricted to working in very calm weather. Today’s diesel boats can fish all year, and in most weathers.

Different species of fish require different nets to catch them. Local fishermen use demersal trawl nets for their main catch of prawns and bottom-dwelling fish. This is a long, low net that moves across the seabed.

Twin and quad rigs can tow two or four nets at one time. Boats may pair up when two or three vessels trawl together, towing one net between them.

Generally, net design has changed in an effort to be more selective about the type or size of fish to catch. Many dual purpose nets used locally can catch prawns and fish. They are towed along the seabed. As a conservation measure, these nets now have sections of square mesh in the top panel to let some fish escape. This helps fishermen become more selective about the species caught.

Seine nets were originally Scandinavian. They are ring nets that are shot around the fish, catching mainly whiting, cod and haddock.

The net’s rope that is laid on the seabed closes slowly, effectively herding the fish into the net.

A seine net is lighter than a trawl net, and the boats tow it for a shorter time. As a result, this type of fishing is more fuel efficient.

A bigger trawler can bring in 500 tonnes of fish on one trip. These are now vacuum pumped out of the boat in minutes.
Changing Fisheries

The original fishing boats heading to sea from County Down were herring drifters. Their nets drifted with the tide at night and were pulled in by hand.

These boats followed the shoals of fish. In fact, an entire fishing industry followed the herring shoals. Many nomadic boats travelled round the coastal ports as the fish themselves moved.

Early boats also set long lines. These were branches of fishing line with baited hooks for catching cod, ling, haddock, plaice and whiting.

This method was highly selective and sustainable, but was time-consuming and labour intensive for the crews.

Main Image: Hands of an expert – retired skipper Alastair McBride mending nets at Kilkeel harbour

Herrings
Navigating change

Years ago, skippers often navigated by lining up their boats with familiar landmarks.

The move to a hyperbolic navigation system, known as Decca, divided the local fishing waters into sectors, which are still familiar to fishermen today.

Although crews now make the most of up-to-date GPS technology to navigate, many still refer to the familiar Decca sectors.
Many fishermen claim that weather variations, even in the course of their own working lives, have changed the industry.

Anecdotally, fishermen often report that the incidence of extreme wind has risen over the years, making their working trips increasingly unpredictable, and often more treacherous.

Industry experts agree that fishing is the most dangerous peacetime occupation.

According to Seafish, the authority on seafood, 25% of UK fishermen claim they have had an incident at sea which put their lives at risk.

Extreme weather is a frequent worry, but occasionally boats face other unpredictable dangers. In spring 2015, while fishing close to the Isle of Man, around 18 miles from the port of Ardglass, a prawn trawler was dragged backwards by a submarine.

The Karen’s nets became entangled with the submerged hazard. The incident destroyed much of the fishing gear on the boat, as the crew decided to release the equipment to avoid being dragged under.

Fortunately no-one was injured, and the crew believe their speedy response saved them from potential disaster, as did a lucky break of an entangled steel cable on the boat.
Every industry is built on its workers, and the families that support them. In tightly-knit communities like Portavogie, Kilkeel and Ardglass, family ties are crucial.

The people’s stories

Seafish produced a series of short films that celebrate Northern Ireland’s seafood industry and communities. You can view them on Seafish’s YouTube channel.

Retired skippers Alastair McBride and Elwyn Teggarty enjoy each other’s company while mending nets at Kilkeel harbour.
County Down’s fishing industry has depended for years on the people that travel to the area to work. Currently, people from Eastern Europe, the Philippines and beyond make up a significant proportion of those helping fishing to flourish here. Migrants work in all aspects of the industry, as crew on the trawlers and in fish processing at the ports.

Many families’ involvement in the fishing industry goes back for generations. However, migrant workers have always been a feature of local fishing – from the gutter girls from the west of Ireland to Eastern European migrants.

After the Second World War, one Polish man migrated to Ardglass, leaving behind the post-War communist regime in his native land.

Frank Zych (pictured above), born in 1927, came to Ardglass via England. Legend persists that ‘Frank the Pole’, as he was nicknamed in Ardglass, arrived in England in a fishing boat! Frank lived for more than 50 years in Ardglass, at the heart of the fishing community, working with his sons Tony and David, and later with grandson Conrad.

Thanks to the Down Recorder which published Frank Zych’s obituary.

Herring lassies

Women played a huge part in the fishing industry, in particular working as “herring lassies” or “gutter girls”.

Female workers followed the shoals of herring, taking seasonal work in various fishing ports. Although some of the gutter girls were local, many came from the west of Ireland, in particular from Donegal. The men from this area were often already working in nomadic fishing boats that moved in fleets around the Irish coast, so it was a natural step for the women to work this way too.

The gutter girls worked in the harbours’ curing yards, gutting and packing the herring into barrels. It was hard work, done out of doors, with long hours when the catch was good.

Many of the herring lassies met their future husbands through this work. Plenty married into local families in County Down, and the fishing ports are still home to their direct descendants.
Fishing for generations

As well as more recent arrivals, a great tradition involving generations of fishing families exists in all of the County Down ports.

In Ardglass, at least five generations of the Smyth family have been involved in the fishing industry, including jobs such as auctioneers, buyers, fuel suppliers, fishermen and Harbour Master. Some of these jobs have been carried down from father to son.

The Mourne Maritime Visitor Centre, opposite Kilkeel harbour, has a permanent exhibition called ‘Families at Sea’, which has more information about local families like these. The exhibition inside shows what life was like for the fishermen at sea and the household at home. You can find out more about it online at mournemaritime.com/families-at-sea/families

One such family is the Cassidys of Kilkeel, whose involvement in the fishing industry stretches back for at least five generations.

In May 1918 during the First World War, a German u-boat torpedoed six boats from the Kilkeel fishing fleet. The submarine torpedoed the line of boats that had been tied together, mercifully having allowed the crews to escape to shore.

Charles Cassidy was skipper of the Cyprus, one of the six boats to be lost that day. Charles’ descendants went on to fish in Kilkeel. His great-great-grandson has continued the tradition, through his role in the Merchant Navy.

His granddaughter helped form a fish sales company, and her sons also became involved in fish sales and pelagic trawling.

Another Kilkeel family, the McBrides, worked once as farmers, but turned from the land to the sea in a downturn because of an early interest in skiff fishing.

William John McBride Senior was one of the ‘Half Eleven Men’, who wouldn’t fish on a Sunday, and instead made preparations for leaving the harbour just before midnight. Sons and grandsons have all followed into the fishing business, where they continue to work today.

Gilbert McBride, a retired fisherman now based in Ardglass, recalls each weekend’s hard work, as he and his crew followed the habit of making the boats ready for the week’s fishing ahead.

Fishing in harmony

Many unifying traditions have grown within the fishing communities. One of these is the Fishermen’s Choir from Portavogie. The choir was set up in the 1950s by Eileen Palmer, the wife of a local boat builder, who was also a church organist. Members of the Fishermen’s Choir, which is still going strong with around 25 singers, are drawn from the local fishing community and other men from the area. The choir performs regularly at churches, public events and fundraises for various charities.
From boat to market

Something Fishy is a family-run Portavogie business that brings fresh seafood to local consumers.

Trader Edward Murray buys his product mainly in County Down, and his market stall is packed with boxes of delicacies like prawns, crab and scallops sourced in Portavogie harbour, as well as Strangford Lough mussels.

Edward Murray’s family has long involvement in the local industry - his father owned a fishing boat - while father-in-law Alan Coffey is the fourth generation of his family to work in fishing.

Having traded at St George’s Market in Belfast for more than three decades, as well as at many other local markets, Alan has seen big changes in consumer demand over the years.

While white fish remains a popular choice, demand has grown for shellfish like lobster, prawns and oysters.

Both Portavogie men believe that the key to successful seafood retailing lies in product freshness. As Something Fishy sources seafood mainly from local suppliers, the journey from fishing boat to market is as brief as possible, so that high quality products reach consumers quickly.

Fishing moves forward

Like any industry, commercial fishing methods have evolved over time, making the most of the latest technology to streamline operations. Over the years, this has included advances in boats, nets, onboard machinery and navigation equipment.

Many other challenges drive change in the fishing industry, including conservation measures and quotas that regulate the catch volume. For many years the local fishing industry has been looking towards building a sustainable future that respects the marine environment.
As you tuck into local prawns, spare a thought for the crew out in all weathers, trawling the Irish Sea for this delicacy.

Fishermen on the prawn trawlers typically head to sea for a day or two at a time. Of course it all depends on the weather and tides, as well as the crew’s availability.

A day’s work on a prawn trawler bears little or no resemblance to the relaxation associated with hobby fishing!

The crew’s commute to work starts very early, as they set off from port about 3.30am to journey to the fishing grounds, a trip which can typically last between one and three hours. They call this “steaming off”.

Ideal conditions for a fishing trip? A calm day and a neap tide. Fishing is usually more productive on the neap, rather than spring tide.

Of course the crew can also face violent storms or mountainous waves, freezing weather and gales, and other extreme conditions.

The prawns they seek live in u-shaped burrows in areas of muddy seabed, a habitat common in the Irish Sea. The creatures themselves are quite unpredictable, so catch volume can vary hugely. Often the best catches come with the first dawn tow and the dusk tow.

Prawn trawlers tow their nets for three to four hours at a time.

The skipper often takes the first tow, which allows the crew to sleep. Then everyone gets up to have breakfast and lift the nets.

Ideally the crew is busy on deck all day, sorting the previous tow until half an hour before the next one is brought in. The crew makes the most of all their time at sea, trawling the nets all night. This means long shifts as the crew shares the watches. Those onboard need to be physically fit and capable of strenuous team work.

Conditions can be cramped, with the crew doing practical work in often challenging situations. The sea itself is unforgiving, and the crew is always at the mercy of the weather. Remaining calm under pressure is a skill that’s highly prized!
Skippers are in overall charge of the boat at sea, and will generally do the detailed planning and navigating, as well as managing the crew onboard. They move from bridge to deck, and tend to be experts on every area of their fishing grounds, with great knowledge of local weather patterns.

As the season for some seafood is short, it can be hard for skippers to get crew for brief periods. Many factories now fly in migrant workers for the herring and mackerel season, running from September to February. This is very different to years ago, when boats often had the same crew all year round. The volatile earnings in the industry mean that crew members may need second jobs, which also restricts their availability.

Mobile phones help skippers share useful information. Often they decide to change fishing ground if the catch isn’t good, or if a tip-off comes that there’s better fishing elsewhere. As a result, sometimes the prawn trawlers are concentrated into one area where the fishing is best that day.

Their trawlers take ice onboard to store the fish and prawns, as well as having modern refrigeration equipment for storage. The crew handles the fishing gear, keeps the decks clear and works together to bring in the catch. They sort the fish and often gut and store it.

They tail the smaller prawns and pack the larger ones whole, and help unload the catch back at the harbour.

Most crews are made up of “share fishermen”. Put simply, after boat expenses and the owner’s share is taken care of, the takings from each trip are divided between the crew.

The ratio is usually two shares for the skipper and one for each of the crew. Earnings can be unpredictable, and the business is cashflow intensive, in particular affected by changing diesel costs.

From labouring and butchering, to navigating and engineering - it’s not your typical day at the office!

Boat-spotting
If you’re interested in following the course of vessels in local fishing grounds, check out www.shipAIS.com. Powered by GPS, this website lets you spot boats fishing the local waters and follow their progress.

Sorting the produce
Returning to harbour
Unloading the catch
Prawns
Straight from the trawler

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Unloading the catch from a prawn trawler at Portavogie Fish Market
Day out at the harbour

For visitors who want to soak up the atmosphere of a busy, working fishing port - here are some tips to help you make the most of your trip.

Friday is a great day to experience the buzz of all three County Down ports. In summer, fishing boats generally return to harbour between 7-10pm, unloading their catch then.

If you’re looking to buy seafood locally you can buy it in the ports, from mobile fish vans, East Coast Seafood, Ballyhornan, renowned fishmongers, McKeowns of Bangor, and other outlets.

It’s also worth visiting St George’s Market in Belfast. Friday morning’s traditional variety markets is a fish lover’s paradise, with plenty of stalls selling seafood from the local ports.

Find up-to-date listings at: discovernorthernireland.com/Seafood-Splendour-A1935

Fresh fish from the boat at Ardglass harbour
Along the coastline and heading inland, you can pick up stunning driving routes, as well as walking and cycling trails.

A visit to County Down’s fishing ports fits perfectly with driving the Mourne Coastal Route. It runs from Belfast, through Bangor, via the Ards Peninsula to Newry, and takes in the Lecale coastline and scenic loops into the Mourne Mountains. Brown signs with white text mark the route which, along with nearby Strangford Lough, covers some of the best scenic driving in all of Ireland.

You could follow in the footsteps of Ireland’s patron saint on Saint Patrick’s Trail, in Downpatrick and around Lecale. This 92-mile driving route connects the key sites with strong links to Saint Patrick’s life, landscape and legacy. Saint Patrick arrived in Ireland by boat, crossing the Irish Sea, navigating the Narrows into Strangford Lough and landing just outside Downpatrick.

Many choose to walk in the famous Mourne Mountains, following the Mourne Wall or visiting the scenic Silent Valley, as well as hiking Northern Ireland’s highest peak, Slieve Donard.

Beautiful sections of coastal path include the walk from Saint John’s Point to Kilough, or south of Ballyhornan.

Ballyquintin Point, at the tip of the Ards peninsula, and Killard Point, just south of Strangford, are also particularly rewarding for walkers.

The tower houses, ancient monuments and natural beauty around Strangford Lough, Northern Ireland’s only Marine Nature Reserve, create a satisfying and varied brush with local nature.

Strangford is the UK’s largest sea lough, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and an Area of Special Scientific Interest.

Castle Ward and Mount Stewart, both National Trust houses and gardens, are worth a visit, as is Delamont Country Park, with glorious views over the lough.

Mountain biking, golfing, sea safari boating and canoeing is all within easy reach of County Down’s three fishing ports. Stunning local beaches suit sunny days as well as windswept walks - try Tyrella or Cloughey.

To find out more, see visitstrangfordlough.co.uk, visitmournemountains.co.uk and strangfordlough.org
Within the industry, commercial buyers talk about sustainability and tracing origins, much as they do in agriculture. What about consumers? There’s a wealth of information about buying fish and choosing sustainable species, buying in season and understanding industry labelling.

The Northern Ireland Pelagic Sustainability Group sea herring fishery recently became the first Irish Sea fleet to be awarded Marine Stewardship Council certification, which recognises a well-managed and sustainable fishery.

Seafish’s new online RASS tool (Risk assessment for sourcing seafood) provides lots of information to allow buyers and consumers to make sustainable choices when selecting seafood. Find out more at www.seafish.org/rass/

Seafish’s digital campaign, Fish is the Dish, found at www.fishisthedish.co.uk, provides lots of ideas for using seafood as a key part of a healthy family diet.
Spotting local wildlife

County Down’s harbours are teeming with wildlife. Look up for dark flocks of birds and look out to sea for marine wildlife.

You might spot the glossy head of a grey seal in the harbour water at all three ports. They are frequent visitors, being well-fed by fish from the boats. Often the seagulls and seals battle it out in the harbour for the best pickings. The gulls are frequently spotted landing on the seals’ heads, in hope of a snack!

Less frequently spotted, but equally at home, are the otters in Ardglass harbour. Count yourself lucky if you see them; they are worth watching out for all the same.

There are plenty of birds to spot at the harbours, where they find rich pickings. Expect to see many gulls - black-headed, herring and common gulls - plus cormorants and black guillemots.

Jellyfish are often visible in shallow waters, or washed up on the rocky shore. If you’re lucky, you could spot bottlenose dolphins, harbour porpoises, minke whales or even a basking shark. These great creatures are the second largest fish in the world, measuring up to 10 metres long. They feed on plankton, so don’t represent any threat to humans.

Many overwintering birds come to this area and to Strangford Lough, attracted by the rich pickings on the shorelines. You may spot turnstone, winged plover and brent geese in winter.

In summer, you can watch the gannets dive. The islands of nearby Strangford Lough also provide an important habitat for nesting terns. They arrive from the Antarctic and Africa to breed.
- Grey seal
- Black-headed gull
- Jellyfish
- Brent goose
Fishing fables

In any dangerous occupation, perhaps it’s inevitable that superstitions take hold. Fishing’s many occupational hazards mean that workers are often superstitious.

Local traditions endure, and the growing number of migrant maritime workers also bring their own customs to the area.

Some beliefs survive across the generations, although it’s fair to say that most fishermen are no longer as superstitious as their counterparts years ago. However, customs endure and a chat with a fisherman can reveal some surprising beliefs!

Many still consider it unlucky to rename boats. Others insist that it’s ill-fated to allow women onboard, particularly redheads!

Members of the clergy are traditionally discouraged onboard too, joining a list that also includes pigeons, and merely the mention of pigs or rats. Some fishermen insist that whistling onboard can summon up a storm.

Herrings were often called silver darlings, partly due to their colouring. Some believed they got the name because of the money they were worth to the fishermen, while others were convinced that mentioning their real name brought bad luck, and that the herring shoals would swim away.

The club that is used to cull landed fish at sea is traditionally called the priest, possibly drawn from the idea of administering the last rites!

In Ulster Scots, the word freety means superstitious. It’s an adjective that could apply to many fishermen and their families.

In fact, many Ulster Scots’ words relate to the twin local pursuits of fishing and farming. One example is the carpers, referring to the men, women and children that gathered in the herring escaping from the nets as they were brought ashore.

Less a superstition and more a religious conviction, many local fishermen would not go to sea on Sunday. In County Down they became known as the “Half Eleven Men”. Local Kilkeel tradition concerns a group of these men who got their boats ready from 11.30pm on Sundays, so they were ready to set out after midnight.

Other surprises lie in store for fishermen at sea, and local tales of items brought in with the nets reveal great variety. One Ardglass legend tells of an oven brought up in the net, with a still-warm chicken inside!
Of course many of the things caught in nets are more mundane, and County Down fishermen have seized the opportunity to help clean the sea through the Fishing for Litter project.

This encourages fishermen to dispose of their strange catches carefully, and to recycle marine litter where possible.

The aim is to help sea life thrive, make beaches cleaner, reduce damage to fishing nets and to lose less catch to contamination.

Northern Ireland’s first Fishing for Litter scheme was launched by the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority in Ardglass in 2014, to be extended to Kilkeel and Portavogie in the near future.
Emergency response and fishermen’s welfare

According to the Fishermen’s Mission, fishing remains the most dangerous peacetime occupation in the UK.

More than 13,000 people work in the UK fishing industry. On average, 15 are killed or seriously injured each year. Even fully-trained, safety-conscious and well-equipped crews face unpredictable dangers at sea.

This is why emergency back-up and welfare services are so crucial.

If you see someone in trouble at sea, Call 999 for assistance.

To donate to the RNLI, visit: rnli.org or telephone: UK: 0300 300 9990

If you’d like to donate to the Fishermen’s Mission, please call Freephone 0800 634 1020
The RNLI, HM Coastguard and The Fishermen’s Mission

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution has five lifeboat stations on the County Down coastline - Bangor, Donaghadee, Portaferry, Newcastle and Kilkeel.

Operating as a charity, and relying on public donations and legacies, the RNLI saves lives at sea. Volunteers provide 24-hour search and rescue services in the UK and Republic of Ireland, involving 4,600 lifeboat crew members and 3,000 shore crew.

In one year alone (2014), RNLI lifeboats launched 261 times in Northern Ireland, bringing 281 people to safety.

The RNLI works alongside government-controlled and funded coastguard services to prevent loss of life on the coast and at sea. HM Coastguard provides 24-hour maritime search and rescue response and co-ordination around the UK coast.

Northern Ireland’s maritime rescue co-ordination centre operates from Bangor harbour in County Down. This centre becomes part of a supporting national network in September 2015.

The coastguard is responsible for the entire Northern Irish coastline from Lough Foyle to Carlingford Lough, including the inland waters of Lough Neagh and Lough Erne, and they work with other emergency authorities and nations in the interest of maritime safety. The Maritime & Coastguard Agency produces legislation and guidance on maritime matters, and certification for seafarers.

The Fishermen’s Mission provides support to fishermen and their families across the UK.

This includes financial, pastoral and spiritual support, as well as emergency response. The Fishermen’s Mission responds to fishermen and their families’ needs following disasters at sea, and helps retired fishermen to cope with hardship or isolation.

Locally, Fishermen’s Mission centres, such as those in the County Down harbour towns, provide leisure space for local and migrant fishermen to relax, as well as practical facilities, such as laundry.

To find out more visit: rnli.org
fishermensmission.org.uk
gov.uk/mca
County Down's fishing ports

Portavogie is the second largest fishing port after Kilkeel. The harbour is an important commercial hub of Northern Ireland’s fishing industry, and the village’s name is justifiably well-known globally as the home of the Portavogie prawn!

Ardglass sits on the coast of an area called Lecale, which was an important Norman stronghold, and is made up of the eastern area of County Down. Ardglass is sited on a natural inlet, making it an ideal haven for boats, as it offers natural shelter and access at all stages of the tide.

The town was an important historical port for the Normans, as was Carrickfergus.

Kilkeel is now the biggest fishing port in Northern Ireland. The town has also earned a well-deserved reputation as the seafood capital of the Mournes, with its cookery school at the Mourne Maritime Visitor Centre by the harbour.

Fishing is just one of its main industries - Kilkeel is also famous for farming and Mourne granite. The harbour itself is relatively new, dating from the 1850s. It was expanded significantly in 1955, and improvements continue today.
In 2015 the Strangford Lough and Lecale Partnership (SLLP) led a collaborative Maritime Heritage Tourism initiative to benefit fishing communities in County Down, with funding from the European Union and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development through Axis 4 of the EU Fisheries Fund, administered by the South East Area European Fisheries Fund.

Ards and North Down Borough Council, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority and the SLLP worked together to:

- Produce this brochure on the area’s fishing heritage, with the support of fishermen, harbour masters and others who participated in the photography and provided information and stories.
- Work with local people on public realm improvements to reconnect Portavogie Harbour to the rest of the village.
- Provide on-site visitor information, an App and free WiFi for all three fishing ports.

Many thanks go to all the local people who contributed to this work.

The funds also helped the SLLP to develop and provide heritage guide training courses in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. Some of the trainees now provide guided tours of the area and related materials are available online.

As part of wider work on the area’s artisan food offering the SLLP commissioned a plan to develop local and visitor markets for locally landed fish.
Portavogie is Northern Ireland’s second largest fishing port after Kilkeel, which is further along the coast in County Down. The village grew to become an important maritime centre partly due to its location, and also because of the rich supply of superb seafood in local waters.

There has been a settlement at Portavogie since the 1600s. Surrounding rocks provided shelter and fishermen could beach their boats on the sandy shore. The area is still known as The Cove near Stablehole and Puddledyke.

It can be reached by walking along the promenade past the last remaining ‘oul’ pump in Portavogie.

Visitors to Portavogie are close to Ireland’s most easterly landmark, Burr Point, which lies north of Portavogie towards Ballyhalbert. The island offshore is known as Burial Isle and is home to nesting terns. Legend persists that it has a secret Danish burial chamber full of Viking treasure, if you could find it under the guano!

Portavogie has two fine beaches: the East Shore’s promenade has stunning views to the Isle of Man and Scotland, weather permitting! At low tide you can see McCammon Rocks where fishermen anchored their boats before the harbour was built. From the South Shore you can walk to two islands at low tide – the Green Isle and Bird Isle, which is now a tern colony. Check the tide tables before venturing out.

There are superb views to Isle of Man and further along the coast to Cloughey and Kearney.

The harbour, which has recently undergone a £2 million renovation, has transformed over the years, with major work resulting in the new harbour in the 1980s. Recently installed pontoons provide berths for smaller fishing boats and leisure craft. Before the modern harbour was built, fishermen used to land their catch at McCammon Rocks and Warnock’s Rocks, where they also beached their boats for repair.

Murals at the village school and on a wall opposite the harbour reveal more about the fishing history of the village, with panels showing local fishermen at work. A memorial statue in the harbour, by Colin Telfer, commemorates the lives of local fishermen who were lost or died at sea.
The South Rock lighthouse, on a reef south of Portavogie towards Kearney Point, was built with the support of Lord Kilwarlin, 2nd Marquis of Downshire. It was lit for the first time in 1797 and named the ‘Kilwarlin Light’ in honour of the Marquis. It was replaced by a manned light vessel in 1877, which was automated in 1982, and replaced by a navigation buoy in 2009, although the lighthouse on the South Rock still stands.

Scottish families settled in the Ards peninsula in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, including the influential Hamiltons and Montgomerys. This area still has strong links to the Ulster Scots language and customs. Portavogie was part of James Hamilton’s estate. A 1625 map in North Down Heritage Centre in Bangor shows an area that locals still know as the Warren, due to the number of rabbits there.

Various seating along the harbour and throughout the village allows locals and visitors to rest, relax and enjoy the views.
Portavogie

Landing the catch

Shellfish is the main catch of Portavogie boats, in particular prawns and scallops. The local fleet currently stands at around 50 boats.

Many of these local vessels are small, inshore potting boats, targeting crab and lobster around the coast. Other large trawlers, targeting white fish and prawns, provide work for up to five fishermen each.

Strong family connections in Portavogie mean that many crews have ties that go back for generations.

It’s not unusual to see groups of fishermen stretching out their nets along the quay and in the car park for a mending session.

Once the catch is landed at the harbour, it is either processed locally by one of several Portavogie businesses, or transported for processing further afield.

At one time there were two large processing factories at the quayside, but this industry has downscaled to several smaller local businesses today. Deals are done by agents representing several boats at one time.

Fishing supports many different onshore jobs, including boat repairs, painters, plant hire and chandlers, which in turn boosts retailing and business in the village. Boat building is a strong tradition, its strength drawn from decades of local expertise.

From port to plate...
Global fame

Northern Ireland has plenty of specialist seafood restaurants, in which Portavogie shellfish often gets star billing.

The celebrated Portavogie prawn features on many restaurant menus, not just in this area, but globally, where prawns are one of County Down’s most highly-prized exports.
Ardglass

Historic Ardglass

The Ulaid resisted Viking invasion for 200 years, and were involved in a famous sea battle off the Ardglass coast in 1022. After defeating the Vikings and capturing many of their ships, the Ulaid sailed to the Vikings’ Dublin base and devastated the city in 1026.

After the Norman invasion in the 1170s, Ardglass became one of two Norman ports in Ulster. The other was Carrickfergus.

Ardglass has more medieval tower houses than any other Irish town. They were built to protect it from the O’Neills and Ulaid clans.

Jordan’s (or Shane’s) Castle, overlooking the harbour, was the Norman citadel, supported by a defensive curtain of other buildings like Cowd Castle and Margaret’s Castle, both near Ardglass Golf Club. This type of defensive building is unique to Lecale, appearing from Strangford to Dundrum. Its strength made Lecale the last surviving Norman colony in Ulster in the 1400s.

Ardglass is also the site of the oldest trading complex in Ireland. The remains of the fortified Newerk (or New Works) are still visible at Ardglass Castle, which is now part of the town’s Golf Club.
Tudor armies arrived after the O’Neills seized Ardglass and ownership passed to the Fitzgerald Lords of Kildare. The FitzGeralds protected Ardglass and much of Lecale from plantation, but in 1637 they sold trading rights to the crown.

Ardglass went into decline until 1800, in favour of Belfast and Newry. William Ogilvie’s purchase of Ardglass manor in 1810 was the key to the town and harbour’s revival. As landlord, Ogilvie helped develop the harbour, pier, lighthouse and village streetscape, as well as the town’s reputation as a spa. The lighthouse at the North Dock is a replacement, as the original blew down in 1838. Thanks to Ogilvie, by the 1830s Ardglass was the main fishing port in the North of Ireland.

From the later 1800s, Ardglass enjoyed a thriving export market, processing herring and white fish and selling to local markets and Russia, Germany and the USA.

At one time, the Downpatrick, Killough and Ardglass railway ran directly into Ardglass harbour.
Ardglass

Built heritage

The curved crescent near the marina is part of the town's conservation area. The Victorian Bathing House is opposite the play park. It provided privacy to female bathers when Ardglass was a popular, sophisticated Victorian spa, with hot and cold vapour baths and an elegant hotel for those taking the waters.

Ardglass' highest landmark, Isabella’s Tower, is visible from the Downpatrick Road on the way into the port. It was once a coastguard’s watch tower, which local landowner Beauclerk built in 1851 for his daughter. Workers discovered funeral relics from a Bronze Age burial site during construction.

Historians believe the hill is a prehistoric carn – a man-made monument to an ancient warrior or chief.
The harbour today

Activity still centres on the harbour and marina.

Today, the local catch is mainly prawn, herring and mackerel. The tidal North Dock has the nickname ‘God’s pocket’, while the South Dock is called the ‘Sawpit’.

Ardglass harbour has berths for about 40 local fishing boats and the marina also welcomes yachts sailing the Irish Sea.

It’s a good location to wait for the best tide to navigate the Narrows - the entrance to nearby Strangford Lough.

Discover maritime Ardglass

The Ardglass Tourism and Marine Heritage Centre in Bath Street is open in summer, with more information inside about the town’s maritime history. There is a mobile app of Ardglass’ heritage trail at www.ardglass.eu, as well as hundreds of maritime photographs, with links to a Facebook site where visitors can identify people, places and boats.

You can download the Co Down Heritage Trails and Strangford Lough and Lecale apps on either apple or android, and find out more at visitstrangfordlough.co.uk or visitmournemountains.co.uk

From Ardglass, visitors can enjoy more of the beautiful Lecale coastline. Coney Island’s beach is just a short journey away, as is the town of Killough. St John’s Point lighthouse lies towards the Mourne Mountains from Killough. This route will also lead on to Rossglass, Minerstown and Tyrella beaches.
Kilkeel is the seafood capital of the Mournes, nestled alongside the Irish Sea and the famous mountains. In 1890, more than one-third of all the herring landed in Ireland came through Kilkeel. As well as fishing, the town was built on two other industries - farming and granite. Kilkeel’s strong maritime tradition endures today. Still a bustling port, the town supports many onshore industries centred on the harbour, including boat building and engineering. Fishing is a major part of the local economy. Commercial activity at the harbour also features marine engineers, an ice factory, a fish market and ship repair works.

Kilkeel’s fish processing factories produce scampi, kippers, oysters, mussels, scallops, crab and sustainable white fish, such as haddock, gurnard and pollack.

The majority of Northern Ireland’s prawn catch is also processed in Kilkeel.

Kilkeel is home to Northern Ireland’s largest fishing fleet, and all roads lead to the busy harbour. Today the main catch is prawn, with crab and lobster on the increase. Oyster and mussel farming is also a growing industry nearby.

Seascope, Kilkeel’s most recent visitor attraction, is a marine hatchery research centre where visitors can get as close as they dare to local lobster.
Visitors to the harbour can watch the fishermen land their catch and get a photo at the Big Fish sculpture. The Seafarers' Memorial at the harbour is a more serious artwork. It’s a reminder of the daily risks that seafaring workers face and commemorates those who lost their lives at sea.

The Mourne Maritime Visitor Centre, Nautilus Centre, has panoramic views of the harbour, as well as exhibitions that reveal more about life onboard a fishing boat. A permanent exhibition inside deals with ‘Tracing your Mourne roots’. The centre also houses the Mourne Seafood Cookery School, with opportunities to learn how to cook the local catch. Facilities for visitors also include Kilkeel Visitor Information Centre and the Families at Sea display.

Visitors can also buy fresh seafood right at Kilkeel harbour, at Heather’s Fresh Fish at The Harbour Store. The town’s Spar supermarket also stocks locally caught seafood, promoting products that are fished in County Down, rather than shipped to it.
Kilkeel

Seafarers’ Memorial

One of the last-quarried pieces of famous Mourne granite forms the Seafarers’ Memorial at Kilkeel harbour, a monument to fishermen lost at sea.

The same local company also made the Diana Memorial Fountain in London’s Hyde Park and the 9/11 Memorial Gardens in New York. Mourne granite is world-famous, and it was once exported widely.

Many of the streets in cities like Manchester and Liverpool are paved in Mourne granite setts.

The graveyard of the Old Church of St Colman’s in Kilkeel has a memorial to the 94 people who died in the maritime disaster involving the passenger steamer, the Connemara, and the cargo ship, the Retriever, on Carlingford Lough in 1916.

Seafarers are grateful that Kilkeel has its own RNLI lifeboat station at the mouth of the harbour. It is one of five stations in County Down.
Kilkeel has a self-guided circular walking trail, covering the main sites of interest in the port. The Lower Square in the centre features the sculpture Narrows Journey, depicting the heritage of the local fishing, farming and granite industries.

The town centre has many award-winning fish and chip shops, cafes and restaurants, all serving the local catch.

Percy French, who wrote the well-known song lyrics “Where the mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea”, frequently stayed in the old Temperance Hotel in Kilkeel. The former site of the hotel is beside Kilkeel Presbyterian Church on Newcastle Street.

Nearby attractions are surrounded by natural beauty. The Silent Valley reservoir is ringed by dramatic peaks. The 13th century Anglo-Norman stronghold of Greencastle is nearby, as is award-winning Cranfield beach at the mouth of Carlingford Lough. One of the last working watermills in Northern Ireland is beside Annalong harbour, known as the Cornmill.

Of course, visitors can also enjoy thrilling views of the stunning Mourne Mountains. Kilkeel is part of a driving trail called the Mourne Coastal Route. Brown signs with white text signpost the route from the port, guiding visitors through some of the most scenic driving in Ireland.

For more information, see www.visitkilkeel.com

A Percy French painting, Silent Valley and the Mournes
This Maritime Heritage Tourism Initiative was funded by the European Union and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development through Axis 4 of the European Fisheries Fund administered by the South East Area European Fisheries Fund.

Thanks to the following people and groups for making this booklet possible -