



Timeline of the 1798 Rebellion in North Down and the Ards

Follow the Ghosts of 1798

1792:

- Reverend John Cleland, Church of Ireland minister of Newtownards and agent for Lord Londonderry of Mount Stewart began to insist on the payment of tithes which infuriated the overwhelmingly Presbyterian population of the area and may have led many to commit themselves to the United Irish cause.
- Throughout the 1790s Londonderry and his son Viscount Castlereagh were active in opposing the United Irish movement for reform and in attempting to suppress their activities in the Ards area. They also, with limited success, attempted to raise a force of yeomanry to provide military support for the loyalist cause. The Stewart family had originally been Presbyterian but had changed to Anglicanism. In the years prior to the Rebellion the Reverend James Porter, Presbyterian minister at Greyabbey satirised Lord Londonderry's actions and personality in the columns of the Northern Star.

1797:

- April: During a raid on a public house in Belfast a copy of the 'Donaghadee Resolutions' was discovered. These had been passed by members of United Irish societies in the Donaghadee area and in no uncertain terms asserted the people's right to oppose 'tyrants' and 'oppressors'. They also outlined plans for the abolition of tithes, the confiscation of the property of opponents of 'liberty' and the establishment of a Revolutionary Committee to be elected every year by popular vote in the event of a successful revolution.¹
- April: A French frigate carrying guns for the Co Down United Irishmen was wrecked off Ardglass.
- Throughout the year arrests of suspected United Irish leaders were carried out.

1798:

Spring:

- Rev. William Steel Dickson of Portaferry allegedly became Adjutant General of the Co. Down United Irishmen.
- Dickson's visits to Scotland had already made the authorities suspicious that he was in contact with radical societies there.

28 May – 4 June:

- Dickson visited a fair at Killinchy, and afterwards Saintfield, Belfast, Downpatrick and Ballynahinch. On the journey he made contact with various individuals. He is likely to have been communicating to them details of the preparations for battle. One of those he spoke to was Nicholas Mageen, later exposed as an informer.



4-6 June:

- Dickson was arrested at Ballynahinch and sent to Belfast for questioning. He remained in prison during the Rebellion and was eventually confined at Fort George, Scotland with other United Irish leaders.

5 June:

- David Baillie Warden, a young Presbyterian who had recently qualified for the ministry, saw and spoke to Dickson at Ballynahinch. Later he learned from the informer Mageen that Co. Down was expected to rise in arms on 7 June, in time with McCracken's rising in Co. Antrim.

Dawn – 7 June:

- This was the time set for the Newtownards men to assemble on Scrabo Hill to prepare for an attack on Newtownards. Warden attended but no others appeared.

7 June:

- Officers and men of the York Fencibles and 22nd Light Dragoons were forced by United Irish insurgents to leave Donaghadee by boat for Belfast
- Loyalists evacuated Donaghadee, going to Portpatrick and Stranraer.
- Donaghadee United Irish leaders met with leaders in Greyabbey.

8 June:

- Most of the United Irish senior commanders in North Down were under arrest. Warden and other young, newly appointed leaders met to determine a course of action. They decided to attack Newtownards.

9 June:

- Murder of the McKee family at Carricknacesna near Saintfield. This family of loyalists were trapped in their house which was set on fire, killing all within. Many of the men who carried out the attack came from the Killinchy, Balloo and Comber areas.
- The Battle of Saintfield - Colonel Stapylton and a party of York Fencibles left Newtownards. They marched through Comber to Saintfield where they were intercepted by a United Irish contingent and suffered several casualties before having to retreat to Belfast.
- About 300 United Irishmen from North Down raised by David Bailie Warden assembled in the graveyard at Movilla Abbey, Newtownards.

10 June:

- The Market House in the centre of Newtownards was attacked by the men who had assembled at Movilla. Warden had also mobilised parties from Greyabbey, Ballywalter and Kircubbin. Members of the Yorkshire Fencibles regiment (who had been left behind by Stapylton when he went to Saintfield) made up the garrison and they managed to drive the rebels back.



- At Bangor, insurgents deprived a boat in the harbour of its heavy guns and marched to Conlig.
- The Newtownards insurgents also headed for Conlig and waited for reinforcements from North Down, including Bangor and Donaghadee. At this point either Warden or another young Presbyterian licentiate, James Townsend was appointed chief of the combined Ards Brigade. The garrison at Newtownards retreated to Belfast rather than await a second attack, so the rebels were able to walk in and take over the town where they commandeered abandoned military supplies and ammunition.
- The insurgents camped on Scrabo, where they were joined by further supporters before marching on to Saintfield and the final battle at Ballynahinch. Many contemporary reports indicate that the bulk of Munro's force came from North Down, Ards and the Peninsula.
- Insurgents, including the Presbyterian probationer Archibald Warwick of Kircubbin, attacked the garrison in the Market House in Portaferry but were beaten back by musket fire from the soldiers and canon fire from a revenue cutter anchored in the narrow water of Strangford Lough. They retreated to their camp at Inishargie. However, the Portaferry garrison also evacuated across the Lough to Strangford and then to Downpatrick.
- The whole of North Down and the Ards was now in insurgent hands with some towns, including Donaghadee and Newtownards, run by a French revolution style committee of public safety. The situation in the area was to change abruptly after the defeat of Henry Munro's force in Ballynahinch on June 13, leading some to call it the shortest-lived republic in history, since it lasted only 3 days. After this, the Crown forces quickly re-established their authority and began rounding up leading insurgents for court martial.

13 June:

- Defeat of the Co. Down United Irishmen at Ballynahinch. After this, the Crown forces quickly reestablished their authority and began rounding up leading insurgents for court martial. One who had a narrow escape was Rev John Hutton, Presbyterian minister of Millisle. He was a Scot, born in Dunblane, and had been in Ballynahinch on the day of the battle.

Suspected of involvement in the battle, troops surrounded his house at Ballycopeland. However he was not at home, and when it later became clear he had no part in the Rebellion, he was not arrested.

14 June:

- The remaining insurgents still encamped on Scrabo Hill, Newtownards were attacked by the military and arrested if they did not manage to melt away.

2 July

- Execution of Rev. James Porter at Greyabbey.

15 October

- Execution of Archibald Warwick at Kircubbin. He was a licentiate of the Kircubbin congregation – their minister was Rev George Brydon from Lauder in Scotland.



Late Autumn

- David Bailie Warden permitted to emigrate to America.

Sources for North Down and Ards Timeline

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