

# Down Recorder

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**(Great information on Hurst's Linen Mill)**

## **Sprightly Jim celebrates one hundred years with with family and friends**

**19 April 2017**

THE 100TH birthday of the founder member of Ballynahinch Men's Probus Club was celebrated at a special event held recently at the Millbrook Lodge Hotel in the town.

Jim Harte — who was born on April 17, 1917 — was joined by Evelyn, his wife of 70 years, son Wilson, daughter Hazel and son-in-law John.

The Probus Club, which is now in its 25th year, was formed by Jim along with Billy Douglas and Eric Ivemy, who presented Jim with a Probus medal to mark the occasion.

Jim began his career at Hurst's Linen Mill in Drumaness in 1932 aged just 15. After their marriage in 1947, he and Evelyn lived first in the Lodge beside the mill dam and later on the first floor of Drumaness House at the other end of the mill complex.

The wet-spinning process at Drumaness was water-hungry. It was fed by a large tank on the roof, supplied by the mill dam, which in turn sourced water from McCaulay's Lough at Spa.

Raw flax was knocked into shape in a smaller three-storey building and then went through a series of refinements, ascending through the five floors of the mill proper.

The final product of fine linen thread was then sold on to weaving companies with the mill machinery powered by a coal-fired engine room, with its associated tall chimney, visible from miles around.

Most of the workforce consisted of women and girls drawn from the neighbouring country townlands of Drumaness, Loughinisland and Drumsnade, who walked to work for an 8am start. The male foremen on each floor wore short white coats.

The Hurst owners accommodated some of their workers in 70 company-owned houses in the village. They also ran a dining room where employees ate their own packed lunches and a reading room supplied daily with newspapers brought from nearby Ballynahinch.

The village also had its own post office and school, with the workforce cross-denominational and Jim is proud to say that political tensions were unknown within the mill.

It was within this village community that he met his wife Evelyn. Her parents were Eddie and Rachel Bain, staunch Methodists, who ran a general store beside the river bridge on nearby Newcastle Road.

Drumaness Mill was an important part of the war effort in World War Two. At one stage, Hurricane fighters had a skin of doped Irish linen; the RAF's Wellington bombers were entirely linen-skinned. As well as running a vital war industry, Jim found time to be second-in-command of the local Home Guard platoons in Dunmore, Listooder, Derryboye, and Ballynahinch.

After the war, with the Home Guard disbanded, Jim was instrumental in forming both the Army Cadet Force and the Ulster Savings movement. He proved the maxim "if you want something done, ask a busy man." In 1952, at the relatively young age of 35, he was awarded the BEM for services to Ulster Savings.

In 1969 Jim and Evelyn left Drumaness for a spell in Scotland where Jim worked for a while in Kirkcaldy with Wm Williamson & Sons.

In their absence, their son, Wilson, became a cub reporter with the Down Recorder, later graduating to the Belfast Newsletter and then to the BBC NI.

For many years, Wilson was producer for Wendy Austin's Good Morning Ulster programme.

In 1979, at the invitation of Peter Larmour, Jim returned to the Ulster linen scene, this time as director of the Killyleagh Flax Spinning Company, but because of stiff competition from low labour costs in India and elsewhere, the local linen industry is now a shadow of its former self.

In 1985 Drumaness Mill chimney was demolished and the rest of the building soon suffered the same fate, with Jim continuing in a consulting role until 1994. In retirement, Jim and Evelyn were active gardeners, featuring prominently in a Saintfield competition in 1990.

Jim wears his 100 years lightly and admits he does know what all the fuss is about, pointing out "there are plenty of centenarians about."

Last Wednesday morning, during the special event at the Millbrook to mark his centenary, Jim made a circuit of the entire room, shaking hands with well-wishers and showing he is as sprightly as ever.

Ballynahinch Probus Club would like to thank the Millbrook Lodge Hotel for all its help in making Jim's recent presentation such a success.