

GEORGE H. WHITE

STATIONMASTER AND MUSICIAN

‘From Inisheer to Poyntzpass’

BY MICHAEL ANDERSON



Poyntzpass Station around 1938

When George Harrison White was appointed Stationmaster, Poyntzpass would probably have seemed an ordinary, quiet station. It turned out to be anything but quiet.

On a bright, moonlit Saturday night in November 1908, not long after George White's appointment, Patrick McAtamney was killed on the railway line at Poyntzpass. Aged thirty seven, Patrick had finished his day working with a gang of men maintaining the line near Portadown. At 5.30 pm he caught the train to Poyntzpass where he stopped off for a drink before walking home to his wife and child. He did not reach home.

The following Monday an inquest was held in the ladies' waiting room at the station. Witnesses stated that McAtamney had *“drink taken but was not drunk”* and that he had chosen to walk home along the line rather than by the canal bank. Dr.

W.R. MacDermott, J.P. said the body *“was mangled and torn....and parts of it had been carried along the line for a considerable distance”*. The verdict recorded was that Patrick McAtamney had been accidentally killed by the Greenore Express.

Over the years there were many other accidents. In August 1915 Alex Minnis, a ganger employed by the Great Northern Railway Company, was tightening bolts on the line between Poyntzpass and Scarva. Like all the railway employees, Minnis would have been very aware of the times of the scheduled trains but he failed to notice an oncoming 'special' train going to Belfast. The engine struck him and he was killed instantly. Dr. MacDermott examined the body and the jury returned a verdict of accidental death.

Robert Moody was a boy porter at Poyntzpass station when he met his tragic end, run down by



Map of the Great Northern Railway lines and stations - A very busy network

another 'special goods train'. Moody was crossing the line to the storage shed to collect the lamps for the signals, the scheduled train having just passed through. The noise of that train may have prevented him from hearing the approach of the second train which killed him. It was 1927, he was nineteen years

old. The following year at Ballybot quarter sessions, Robert's father Thomas Moody was awarded £100 in compensation for the loss of his son.

In 1908 motor car technology was in its infancy. For most people at this time, transport options were 'Shanks's Pony', horse, pony and trap, bicycle or train.

Poyntzpass was a busy station and a hub of the wider community with around thirty local, mainline and special trains arriving, departing or passing through daily, including goods trains through the night. Herrings from Dublin and tomatoes from Cork for the Belfast markets were among the many goods transported; milk was brought to the station from local farms to supply Belfast trade; bread from Inglis's Bakery came daily from Belfast; Guinness had their own wagons for regular transport. On Fair Days, hundreds of cattle were herded onto wagons for onward transport north and south for live shipment to England, Scotland and Wales. Of the June Fair in 1916, the 'Newry Reporter' stated "*The monthly fair was held on Saturday.Sixty four wagons were dispatched by rail.*" A wagon held around fourteen cattle. Many of the cattle dealers arrived by train the evening before the fair.

The stationmaster was responsible for the trains, the railway employees, the passengers and the goods, including receipt and dispatch of parcels and freight. Accidents both major and minor were common and in addition to preparing incident

reports and attending inquests, the stationmaster would doubtless have visited the families of those deceased or injured.

Punctuality of trains was seen, in part, as a mark of the efficiency of the station management. When Ivor Long from Lisnabrague was summoned in March 1936 for not having a light on his bicycle, having arrived in Poyntzpass from Dundalk on the train, his defence was that *“the train was late.”* He was fined one shilling and costs.

‘Special’ trains were needed for a wide variety of goods but also for annual church excursions, mostly to Warrenpoint, and more rarely for the transport of coffins. In 1912, following the death of Lieutenant Colonel W.J. Alexander of Acton House, the *‘Belfast Newsletter’* of November 16th reported that *“following an impressive service in the parish church, the remains, which were encased in a beautiful casket, were conveyed to Poyntzpass Station whence they were entrained for Dublin”* for burial.

Again, the Stationmaster would have been responsible for the railway company’s part in those proceedings.

Other incidents kept life busy at the station. Occasionally the gates were not opened and the train drove straight through them. The signal cabin was manned day and night and was renowned for all-night poker sessions which had the advantage of ensuring that the signal man stayed awake. During the 1920s there was a spate of arson attacks on signal cabins, including at Adavoyle. In 1921 the signal cabin in Poyntzpass was burned and apparatus destroyed. In July of that year, the Great Northern Railway Company lodged a claim of £2,300 for the damage.

In January 1935, a Great Northern Railway company’s rail-bus travelling from Banbridge to Goraghwood left the rails at a crossover at Poyntzpass station blocking both the up and down lines until a breakdown gang from Newry cleared the track.

The frequency of trains and consequent closure of the road to those walking or riding was a source of inconvenience to locals, not least to the traders.

When a train was due, the stationmaster was alerted from Goraghwood or Scarva that it had left there, and the porter closed the gates but the timing was imprecise and the gates might have been closed for a good deal of time before the train’s arrival. The porter may also have been responsible for the goods and passengers deposited and the gates may not have been re-opened until those were dealt with. Mr. James Alexander Gilleland, Master of Poyntzpass Boys’ and Girls’ National School between 1889 and 1905 complained to the railway company that pupils were frequently late for school because they were detained on the wrong side of the line during these delays. His complaint went all the way to the House of Commons in March 1901 and

The image shows two pages of a railway timetable. The left page is titled 'NEWRY TIME TABLE' and 'Poyntzpass.' It lists fares and train times between Newry and Poyntzpass. The right page is also titled 'NEWRY TIME TABLE' and 'Warrenpoint (Dublin Bridge)—Pop., 1,970.' It lists fares and train times between Newry and Warrenpoint. Both pages include a section for 'Sundays' and a notice for 'Ranges, Grates, and Mantels, Coal Savers. You should see our stock. ROSS & ROSS The Stores, Newry.'

Fares—1/8, 1/3, 0/8. Return—2/9, 2/1, 1/4			
Newry leave.	Poyntzpass arrive.	Poyntzpass leave.	Newry arrive.
8 0	8 21	9 20	9 39
9 3	9 31	12 35	12 53
10 33	11 13	3 26	4 3
1 55	2 19	6 43	7 7
4 47	5 10	9 9	9 32
Sundays.			
7 37	8 23		

Fares—1/-, 0/9, 0/6. Return—1/6, 1/2, 1/-			
Newry D. Bridge leave.	Warrenpoint arrive.	Warrenpoint leave.	Newry D. Bridge arrive.
7 0	7 10	7 45	7 56
8 24	8 35	8 45	8 57
9 5	9 15	10 15	10 27
9 47	10 0	1 25	1 37
11 35	11 45	3 15	3 26
2 24	2 35	4 30	4 41
4 11	4 23	6 20	6 32
5 19	5 30	7 30	7 42
7 14	7 25	8 45	8 55
8 22	8 32		
Sundays.			
Newry (D.B.) leave.	W. point arrive.	W. point leave.	Newry (D.B.) arrive.
2 5	2 15	4 40	4 52
5 28	5 40	7 25	7 37
8 22	8 32	8 40	8 50

Part of the Newry Train Timetable of 1917

as a result, the signal cabin was manned twenty four hours a day. In the meantime, and subsequently, the stationmaster would have had to deal with the complaints.

For thirty years from 1908 until 1938, the year of his death, the man orchestrating trains, goods, passengers and railway employees in Poyntzpass was George Harrison White. George’s predecessor as Stationmaster was John Stevenson and his successor in 1938 was George Porterfield.

Happily for the whole district, George Harrison White was not only an efficient stationmaster but also an outstanding musician; a choirmaster with an exceptional tenor voice and an excellent teacher who contributed greatly to the social and cultural life of the area.

During his thirty years in Poyntzpass, George White was conductor of Poyntzpass Choral Society and Poyntzpass Musical Society. At various times he also conducted Tandragee Choral Society, Newry Musical Society, Armagh Carol Society, Armagh Operatic Society, Newry Philharmonic Society, Newry Orchestral Society, and he was Choirmaster of Downshire Road Presbyterian Church. In addition, he was continually in demand to sing the tenor roles in productions such as *Messiah*.

In 1916 a Tennis Club was formed in Poyntzpass with George White as Secretary.

Poyntzpass in these early years of the twentieth century was fortunate in being home to other exceptionally talented men. **William Robert MacDermott** was dispensary doctor for more than fifty years until his death in 1918. A graduate of Trinity College, W.R. MacDermott served as a Confederate Army Surgeon during the American Civil War and later contributed to learned periodicals and wrote two books, one of which, *The Green Republic* was re-issued on 2002 as part of a series entitled *Classics of Irish History*.

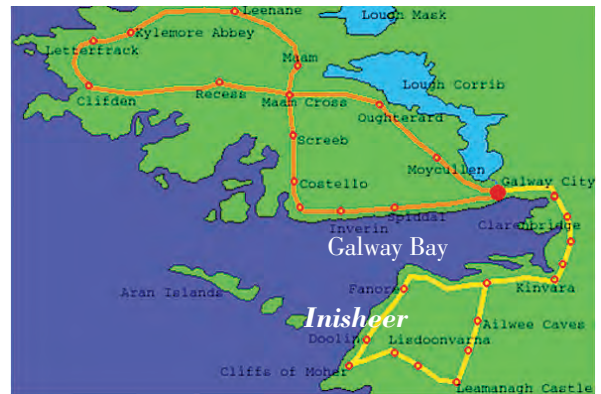
The Reverend William Frederick Johnston, Rector of the Church of Ireland between 1895 and 1921, was a renowned entomologist and joint author of *A List of the Beetles of Ireland*. He also contributed articles to many important publications.

Mr. Robert Judge, Principal of Poyntzpass No.2 National School from 1905 to 1932 was an outstanding pioneer in the field of teacher unions being for some time President of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, a body which at that time represented virtually every teacher in Ireland. In the later years of Dr. MacDermott's tenure, Mr. Judge assisted him as temporary registrar.

William Thomas Griffith with his wife Annabel ran Drumbanagher School. An intelligent and talented couple who had two sons - William John, known as Jack, became a mechanic with Felix Daly in Poyntzpass; Edward, known as Ted, had an extraordinary war career and became a professor of Geology.

George White was born on Inisheer Island off the coast of County Galway; his wife Kathleen was born in Drogheda; William Robert MacDermott was born in County Meath; William Johnston was born in

Cochin, Kerala, South India; Robert Judge was born in Glasgow and his wife Kezia Sarah Corr came from Co. Limerick; William Griffith and Annabel came from Counties Waterford and Monaghan respectively. Their paths converged in Poyntzpass and it is possible that their influence lingers still in the warp and weft of today's community.



Inisheer Island

So involved was George White in musical circles that one could only wonder how he had time to be stationmaster. On at least one occasion, he turned down a promotion in order to stay with all his musical associations.

He was later described as *“a man of likeable disposition; a warm favourite with all who knew him. Of a charitable nature, no appeal for monetary assistance or his vocal talents was ever refused”*.

The first indication we find of George White's outstanding musical ability is in 1913 when he won the Tenor Gold Medal at Dublin Feis Ceoil in a class of 24 which included four prominent Dublin tenors who were highly commended. He was aged 35. The Feis Ceoil is the equivalent of the Cardiff Singer of the Year competition or the BBC's Young Musician of the Year. A previous winner of the same prize in 1903 was the world famous Irish Tenor John McCormack and in 1904, the bronze medal in the same class was won by James Joyce.

We don't know where George's outstanding musicality began but it would be reasonable to assume that his second wife, Kathleen, an accomplished pianist, organist and teacher, was a strong influence prior to and after their marriage in 1906. Kathleen taught piano to many people locally, notably Sara Savage. In December 1913 Kathleen held a Pianoforte Recital for her junior pupils among whom were six children

of the Schoolmaster Mr. Judge; also two Griffith children and two from the Wright family. Kathleen was also in great demand as an accompanist, and travelled to Drogheda by train on Sunday mornings to play the organ.



George Harrison White

George taught singing to Terry Murray and Cora Hall, but also to many others who went on to sing professionally, not least among these, Eileen Ledlie from Loughbrickland. Under George White's tutelage and encouragement, Eileen entered the Belfast Music Feis, accompanied by Kathleen, and was awarded the Gold Medal in the Contralto class.

She went on to graduate from the London Royal Academy of Music having been awarded a scholarship and then to sing in concerts in London, Dublin, Belfast and locally. It is unlikely, I think, that Eileen Ledlie would have reached those heights had George and Kathleen White not been living in Poyntzpass at just the right time for her.

A sample of the many newspaper reports of the time:-

Newry Reporter March 9th 1912

CONCERT AT POYNTZPASS

The Poyntzpass Choral Society, under the conductorship of Mr. Geo. White, gave their first concert on Thursday night in the Courthouse, Poyntzpass, and the event proved to be a great success.....

Mr George White sang exquisitely "The Snowy Breasted Pearl", and his efforts brought a signal outburst of applause, to which he responded with, "I'll Sing Three Songs of Araby"....in which he excels....

Part 2 was opened by Mrs. George White with a pianoforte solo "Grillen," which was given as one would expect from a pianist of such repute in a finished manner, and the same remarks apply with equal appropriateness to the way in which she played the accompaniments to the different items during the evening.....

Newry Reporter January 14th 1913

POYNTZPASS MUSICAL SOCIETY "AT HOME."

The members of the Poyntzpass Musical Society were "at home" to their friends on Friday evening last in the Schools, Poyntzpass, kindly placed at their disposal by the Rev.W.F. Johnson, M.A....

A musical programme was opened with a pianoforte solo by Mrs. George White who also acted throughout the evening as accompanist...

It speaks volumes for their conductor, Mr. George White, that in a village of only 200 inhabitants, such a fine band of singers could be produced...

Mr. and Mrs. Geo. White contributed that ever-popular duet "Flow Gently Deva".....

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, George White's name also appears in the Armagh papers, singing at services in St.Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral and in St. Mark's Church; also conducting *H.M.S. Pinafore* for The Armagh Operatic Dramatic Society; singing the tenor part in Newry Philharmonic Society's performance of *Messiah*.

On at least one occasion, George White's good nature was abused. He had been asked by Mrs. Jane Smith, then president of the Armagh Operatic Society, to conduct them in '*The Gondoliers*'. This he did, making fifty one trips from Poyntzpass to Armagh in the process. After the production he wrote to Mrs. Smith to ask for his fee. In reply, Mrs. Smith asked him to "*wait a while longer and he would be paid.*" Payment not being forthcoming, George White eventually sued Mrs. Smith who in court stated that "*she had never offered to pay him a penny at any time.*" His claim was dismissed.



Kathleen White

George Harrison White was born in 1878, the seventh of ten children of Henry and Ann White. Henry White was a Coast Guard Serviceman and both he and Ann were born in England.

Coastguards at this time began as Customs Officers whose job was to apprehend smugglers trying to import goods without paying duty, as well as watching out for ships in distress. It didn't do for them to become too well acquainted with the local people, and as a consequence they were transferred regularly. This frequent disruption of the family, at a time when one couldn't just order a removal lorry, must have been hard, and the journeys long.

The first of Henry and Ann's ten children was born in Portsea, Hampshire in 1865; the next child, a year or so later, was born in Cork. They then stayed in Cahirciveen, Co. Kerry long enough to have four children between 1868 and 1875. George was born at Firmana, Inisheer Island, Co. Galway in 1878; and the last three children were born in Dublin.

In the census of 1911 Henry White states that three of his children had died. Among those who survived, John was a goldsmith, Ambrose a Clockmaker, Florence was a typist. Another of George's siblings who survived was Mary Ellen who features later in this history.

We don't know when George left the family home in Dublin, or what his early occupation was. The first record is that of his marriage in February 1898 to Mary Elizabeth Adelaide Mercer in St. Anne's Church of Ireland in Belfast. George was 22, a Clerk, living in Dunmurry, close to the railway station. Mary from Bangor, was aged 26, a widow, the daughter of a rate collector. Mary's first husband, Samuel Mercer, was a yarn buyer who died at the age of 32 leaving an estate valued at £1075.

Nine months after their marriage, George's wife gave birth to a baby daughter. Rejoicing at the birth of their first child quickly turned to grief when Mary died following a haemorrhage, just one and a half hours after the birth of her child. It was obvious that George would have been unable to look after a newborn baby so he turned to his parents in Dublin to care for his daughter, Mary (Minnie) Elizabeth Adelaide White. Census and will records indicate that Minnie lived with George's parents, her grandparents, until the death of her grandfather in 1917. After that she lived with her father's sister Mary and Mary's husband Howard Dulkan until her own marriage in 1929.

We pick up George's story again six years after his wife's death. In January 1906 he married Kathleen Blanche Coade, in St. Mary's Church in Drogheda. Kathleen's father Charles was a draper in Drogheda and Kathleen was a teacher. (Incidentally, Blanche Kellett, nee Whiteside, was called after Kathleen Blanche Coade.) Kathleen's Father later came to live with Kathleen and George in Poyntzpass and died here.

At the time of his marriage in 1898, as we have seen, George was referred to as a clerk and he was living beside the railway station in Dunmurry. When his daughter was born in 1899, he was listed as a clerk, living at Groomsport which also had a railway station. At the time of the 1901 census he was again listed as a clerk, living in lodgings on the Springfield Road in Belfast. By the time of his second marriage, to Kathleen Coade in 1906, he is referred to as a Railway Official at Culloville Railway Station, Co. Monaghan. A best guess would be that he was a railway clerk at Dunmurry and progressed to Railway Official at Culloville and finally Stationmaster when

he was transferred to Poyntzpass.

As you can see, George had lived in many different places, through his own career and because of his father having been a Customs Official, so it is perhaps not surprising that he chose to stay in one place when he got to Poyntzpass.

Some speculation is needed about how George and Kathleen met. It is possible that George worked for a time at Drogheda station, but it is also possible that while George was working at Culloville he attended concerts in Drogheda in which Kathleen was involved. They may have met through their joint interest in church music, and they both belonged to the Church of Ireland. However it happened, they met and married in 1906 to the great benefit of Poyntzpass, Newry and Armagh. A choral society is not formed without an enthusiastic and able choir master; likewise musical societies, orchestral societies and so on. The team of George and Kathleen White contributed enormously to the culture of music in the whole area during their thirty years here.

Having reached the age of sixty in April 1938, George was planning to retire as Stationmaster at the end of May that year. Ahead of retirement he and Kathleen had been building a house at Cathedral Road in Armagh, a matter of yards from the Church of Ireland Cathedral where George was lead tenor in the choir. However, early in March he became ill and was taken to Armagh Infirmary where he died on 6th June. At the time of his death, Kathleen was preparing their newly completed house for his homecoming.

George's funeral was held in Armagh Cathedral and he was buried there, members of the Newry Philharmonic Society bearing his coffin.

Tributes were paid in all the local newspapers. The Newry Reporter "*Newry people have been acquainted for a long time with George White's ability as a singer, a conductor and a teacher. His musical talent was remarkable, and he put it to good use. As a singer he was redoubtable and his fine true tenor voice has been heard with appreciation in many parts of the country.*"

The Ulster Gazette and Armagh Standard stated "*Mr. White was for over fifteen years tenor soloist of the Cathedral Choir, but his exceptional musical talents were not confined to Armagh, and it may be truly stated that he was known throughout Ireland as an outstanding musician. He had trained many singers who have become famous as broadcast and stage artistes all over the world. His untiring energy on behalf of musical culture rendered him a source of wonderment to many who knew him.*"

The Armagh Guardian "*He was indeed extremely popular and will be greatly missed, particularly in Newry and district where he had many pupils. About sixteen months ago, when the Philharmonic society presented Handel's 'Messiah,' Mr. White took the tenor part and thrilled the audience with his verve and interpretation.*"

After George's death, his wife Kathleen sold her new house in Armagh and went to live with George's daughter by his first wife. Margaret White, known as Minnie, had married Henry Willis at St Paul's Church, Glenageary, 18 Sept.1929. Henry was a graduate of Trinity College and at his death in 1953 was director of a textile company. Henry's sister Hilda also shared the house in Drumcondra.

George's wife Kathleen lived with Minnie until Kathleen's death aged 83, in 1962, and in her will left all her personal effects and £1000 to Minnie. Minnie continued to live with her sister-in-law, Hilda, in the same house and when Hilda died, lived alone for another twenty years until her own death in 1989, aged 90.

At the last..... George was buried in the churchyard of Armagh Cathedral; his parents are buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin; his first wife Mary Elizabeth in Bangor Cemetery; his second wife Kathleen at St. Mary's Church in Drogheda. His only child Minnie is buried in Dean's Grange Cemetery in Dublin.

George White's predecessor as Stationmaster in Poyntzpass was John Stevenson; John Stevenson's predecessor was John Stevens. George White was succeeded by William Porterfield.