



Public Record Office
of Northern Ireland

INTRODUCTION

ANDREWS' MILL PAPERS

December 2007

Andrews Papers (D4189)

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Summary



Andrews' Mill, Comber, Co. Down, c.1905

The Andrews Mill papers comprise 544 volumes relating to the flax spinning mill in Comber, Co. Down, and 55 volumes pertaining to the various Andrews family farms and estates, Cos Down, Cavan and Kilkenny. Once the volumes had ceased to be of administrative use they had been placed in the attics above the mill offices for safekeeping and there they had remained relatively undisturbed. The archive was uplifted in its entirety from the attics during the

summer of 1997, and transported to PRONI in two van loads. This massive business archive, perhaps one of the biggest in PRONI, provides a unique insight into the life not only of a major manufacturing company but a whole community.

The archive has been divided into two principal sections comprising: records of Andrew flax spinning mill, Comber (D4189/A-D); and farm books (D4189/E). Before describing the archive and the wealth of information recorded within it, it may be helpful to give a brief introduction of the family which created it. The Andrews family loom large in the history of the mill and of the town of Comber, which to a large extent is a mill village, dominated by the spinning mill which was the major source of employment in the town.



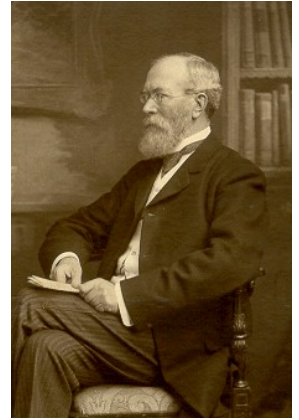
Andrews family background

The Andrews family rose to prominence in Comber during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Burke's Irish Family Records traces the family back to Thomas Andrews, who was a Churchwarden of Comber, 1733-35. However, a history of the town (D3743/6) takes the genealogy back further although it is to a large extent speculative. It cites that the family are first mentioned in the muster roll of 1630 of Viscount Clandeboye, which records a Thomas and Robert Andrew, who were of Scottish descent. During the 1641 rebellion, a Robert and James Andrew mustered at Comber. They were probably the sons of the aforementioned Thomas and Robert of 1630. The rent roll of the manor of Mount Alexander (Comber) for 1684 includes a Robert Andrew, who was probably the son of Robert Junior who mustered at Comber in 1641. He in turn had two sons, John and James, both of Comber.



Thomas Andrew/s

John had a son, Thomas, born in 1698 (mentioned above) who established the family interest in milling. Thomas Andrew was clearly a man of some significance in Comber, for although he was a Dissenter, he was elected Churchwarden. In 1735, Thomas Andrew changed the name to Andrews to distinguish it from Thomas Andrew, a distant cousin. He died in 1745 and it was his eldest son, John (1721-1808), who was the real founder of the family enterprises in the linen and milling businesses in Comber.



Rt Hon. Thomas Andrews

In 1783, as he pursued his various business interests he won £10,000 in the state lottery, part of which he used to buy the townland of Carnesure. John Andrews raised and commanded a Volunteer company from 1779 until 1788. His company was known as the Comber Rangers. His youngest son, James (1762-1841), who was a Lieutenant in his father's company was also his business partner. John Andrews died in 1808 and was succeeded by his youngest son, James, during whose lifetime the business continued to expand under the name of James Andrews & Sons. James Andrews was co-founder of the Unitarian/Non-Subscribing Presbyterian church in the town in 1838. His eldest son, John, born 15 November 1782, was taken into partnership with his father in 1812.



John Andrews

John Andrews is known in the family as 'John the Great'. He was at various times soap-boiler, chandler, miller, maltster, distiller, farmer, brickmaker, contractor, linen-draper and bleacher. In 1783, as he pursued his various business interests he won £10,000 in the state lottery, part of which he used to buy the townland of Carnesure. John Andrews raised and commanded a Volunteer company from 1779 until 1788. His company was known as the Comber Rangers. His youngest son, James (1762-1841), who was a Lieutenant in his father's company was also his business partner. John Andrews died in 1808 and was succeeded by his youngest son, James, during whose lifetime the business continued to expand under the name of James Andrews & Sons. James Andrews was co-founder of the Unitarian/Non-Subscribing Presbyterian church in the town in 1838. His eldest son, John, born 15 November 1782, was taken into partnership with his father in 1812.



John Andrews, and his sons, James, John and Thomas

In 1830, John Andrews became agent for the 3rd Marquess Londonderry. In 1863 he founded the new firm of John Andrews & Co., flaxspinners. Three of his four sons, James, John, and Thomas were partners in the company from its establishment. A new spinning mill was built in 1863-1864. The plans for the new mill were prepared by James Combe & Co., Falls Foundry, Belfast, who also supplied the machinery, but the engine and boiler were supplied by Victor Coates. In 1864 spinning commenced. John Andrews died on 13 May in the same year. His youngest son, Thomas, born in 1843, became chairman of the company. Under his direction the spinning mill continued to flourish and was enlarged in 1907.



Thomas Andrews

Thomas Andrews was a prominent public figure. He was chairman of the Belfast and Co. Down Railway Company, 1895-1916, President of the Ulster Liberal Unionist Association, 1892-1916, and one of the promoters of the Ulster Convention of 1892. He was sworn of the Privy Council of Ireland in 1903, and was High Sheriff of Co. Down in 1912 and a Deputy Lieutenant for the county. He died in 1916. His eldest son, John Miller Andrews, succeeded him as chairman of John Andrews & Co. Ltd, flaxspinners.



John Miller Andrews

John Miller Andrews rose to even greater public prominence than his father. He was MP for Co. Down, 1921-1929 and for Mid-Down from 1929. He was Minister of Labour in the Northern Ireland Cabinet, 1921-1937, Minister of Finance, 1937-1940 and ultimately served as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1940 until 1943. Andrews also served as patron of the Ulster Unionist Labour Association and the Ulster Unionist Council. He died in 1956. He had been succeeded by his only son, John Ormrod, in 1927 as managing director of John Andrews & Co. Ltd. John Ormrod Andrews sat as MP for Mid-Down, like his father, from 1953-1964 and also as minister in several Stormont departments. He later became Leader of the Northern Ireland Senate. His sons, John and Thomas, were directors of John Andrews & Co. Ltd, flaxspinners.



Closure of the mill and re-development

In 1997 the company ceased spinning flax but happily this will not be the end of the mill. Ambitious development plans have been proposed which should see the mill fulfilling a new role in the twenty-first century. Moreover, the permanent preservation of the records will ensure that its original function will never be forgotten.



Record of Andrews Flax Spinning Mill

The records of Andrews mill have been divided into three main section essentially according to function. The three principal sections comprise financial and administrative records, technical records and personnel records. There is also a miscellaneous section which provided a catch all for various volumes which did not obviously slot into the foregoing categories. The records of Andrews mill span virtually the complete working life of the mill and indeed its pre-history.



Mill beginnings

The earliest volume dates from May 1863 and records the initial construction of the mill (D4189/D/1). It gives details of every nut and bolt used in the building. Enclosed within the volume is a letter dated 28 May 1863 from James Combe & Co., Falls Foundry, Belfast to James Andrew, providing a quote for the estimated cost of building the mill:

'We have made enquiries and we learn that the cost of a mill in the Belfast district on suitable foundations say 18 to 22 Bays long, 4 stories and attic would be about £450 per bay, 20 bays along £9,000. This indicates foundations - Ash car plinth, the foundation not exceeding 3 feet for walls and four feet deep for pillars, walls, columns, beams, arches, filing (no cross gutters in spinning room) roof with skylights, for attic, building 51 feet wide overall, first floor 14 feet, second 13 feet, third 12 feet 6 inches, fourth 12 feet 6 inches, attic for reeling, 4 feet at eaves, windows, staircase'.

This early ledger also records the costs of material and labour throughout the construction of the spinning mill. Moreover, it gives details of the installation of the machinery into the building.



Letter books of Andrews flax mill, Comber

In the absence of the minute books, the letter books provide a detailed insight into the workings of the mill. Unfortunately, the run of volumes is incomplete, the range comprises: 1863-1866: 1869-1873: 1887-1888: 1910-1912: 1913-1916: 1918-1921: 1924-1955. Although the letter books are far from complete they are an invaluable source of information concerning the mill, and indeed the local community. The first damp-press letter book (D4189/A/2/1) dates from 25 November 1863 and complements the above mentioned ledger. It contains copies of the original outgoing letters to James Combe & Co., and Victor Coates concerning the building of the mill in Comber and the installation of machinery. The details include a letter to Victor Coates, dated 27 January 1864, '... We are now putting in the arched floors, and that work will be completed in about a fortnight. The boiler house is quite ready ... We have engaged a manager for the mill at a high salary ... We are most anxious to commence hackling in March...'. The correspondence continues for three years providing a record of flax buying, and the manufacturing and selling of yarn. The volume also contains accounts of the Mount Alexander estate and a letter from James Andrews concerning his desire to be discharged from the agency of the Londonderry estates to which he succeeded after the death of his father, John in 1864. The letter book also contains many details about the mill workers including correspondence about employees accidents and work outings, etc.

The letter books continue in much the same vein until the 1930s. The second volume, which covers the period, 1869-71 contains copy letters mainly from John and Thomas Andrews (D4189/A/2/2). The bulk of the correspondence obviously relates to the business in hand but once again there is much of local colour relating to employees and the surrounding area. This includes a letter dated 2 July 1869 from John Andrews to W.C. Watt accepting his letter of resignation from the mill evening school with regret: 'We understand the difficulty of instructing the children in the evening who have been working hard in the mill during the day...'. PRONI also holds the records of Comber Spinning Mill National School, reference SCH/746. These include a register for girls dated 1867 to 1877.



Construction of a house by Thomas Andrews

As already stated the correspondence not only concerns the workings of the mill, but also contains personal letters from the Andrews family. These letters mainly relate to the building of a new house under the supervision of Thomas Andrews beginning in 1870. There are also further letters about the preparation of fruit gardens for the house.



Letter books 1910-1930s

The letter books resume, after a considerable gap, in 1910. The correspondence reveals the changes within both the business and the flax industry at large. The letters depict the European dimension of the firm such as dealings with flax agents in Courtrai, appointment of representatives in France, Germany and Austria and shipments of yarn to Russia, etc. The outbreak and impact of World War One is clearly documented in the letter book for that period (D4189/A/2/6). The correspondence details their concerns about flax supplies, however, it would appear that they had large quantities in stock which saw them through the first months of the conflict.



Personal letter book of John Miller Andrews, 1914-1916

The personal letter book of J.M. Andrews (D4189/A/2/7) is the only volume of its kind in the run. He was in effect managing the business by this period and the correspondence is a mixture of work and pleasure. On a personal note it gives details of the motor launch 'Amethyst' which he and his brother, James, raced in local regattas around the Ards peninsula. The volume also contains a letter to Dawson Bates, Old Town Hall, Belfast, in which he refers to his connection with the Comber Ulster Volunteer Force. Many of the letters relate to the impact of the war on the mill workforce and efforts to discover information about conditions in Belgium with regard to flax. The mill production was mainly for government orders: '...We are largely engaged in spinning thread yarns and aeroplane cloth yarns...' (9 July 1915).



Post-war letter books

The letter books immediately after the war are revealing in their portrait of a company attempting to re-establish business with a war exhausted Europe and open up new markets. There are less local details, although a regular feature is the purchase of coal for the mill workers. The final letter books cover the period 1935-55. However, they are in effect yarn and flax order books.



Cash books, ledgers and trade ledgers

The cash books and ledgers chart virtually the entire working life of the mill from 1864 to 1980. The cash books record the daily total sales and expenses of the mill. There is duplication of the initial twenty years of the mill because once the original 'old' series were completed the details were copied into the new series which commenced in 1883. Interestingly, the 'new' series pre-dated the original series by eleven months beginning in January rather than December 1863. Thus it would appear that the original cash book is missing from the archive.

The trade ledgers begin in 1890 and give details of business accounts of companies with whom Andrews mill traded. The volumes also include accounts of various individual members of the Andrews family. The trade ledgers were also used for recording the accounts of other local institutions such as Comber Unitarian/Non-Subscribing Congregation, and Comber Coal fund, etc. These accounts are in the volume because various members of the Andrews family acted as trustees for a diverse range of local organisations.



Report books and flax invoice book

The report books of Andrews flax spinning mill begin in 1865 and continue until 1958. They provide details of the total amount of reels and yarn produced per spindle on a fortnightly basis. The flax invoice book of the mill covers the first five years of the mill. It contains the invoices sent for the different lots of flax purchased by the mill from various local dealers and suppliers. It reveals that large quantities of flax were bought up locally from Newtownards, Ballynahinch, Belfast, Comber, Armagh, Cookstown, Newry, Dungannon, Castleblayney and Ballymoney.



Yarn order books and stock books

The stock books of Andrews mill commenced in 1865 and continue until 1987. They record the amount of line in stock on a monthly basis. The yarn order books are less comprehensive in their coverage. They start in 1887 and finish in 1977. They detail the monthly orders for different quantities of line or tow and the various suppliers of the raw material. There are many other sections of records, too numerous to describe in detail, which relate to the manufacturing and production of yarn.



Employees records

There are a wide range of records relating specifically to the employees of Andrews mill. These comprise section C of the archive. However, they are not as detailed as some comparable sources as they do not give information on age or address. Although the letter book for 1925-1935 (D4189/A/2/12) contains statements certifying the dates of entrance and age of various employees such as 'Eliza Bishop (née Anderson) commenced work in the mill on 18 May 1871 aged 13 years old' dated 8 December 1926. The majority of these statements declare that boys were over twelve years of age and girls were over thirteen respectively.



Pay books

The pay books begin with the start of production at the mill in June 1864. The first volume (D4189/C/1/1) contains a 'list of wages in Comber Flax Spinning Mill' dated 14 June 1864. The wages list gives details of the wide range of workers employed including: machine boys, spreaders, front minders, spinning master, fireman, watchman, spinners, etc., etc. It gives rates of pay per day and rates of bonus pay for the different types of workers.

The pay books record the names of the workers and give details of deductions for fines, coal and rent from the gross pay. It also reveals the amount of hours worked in some cases or the quantity of work achieved. It is a fascinating record of the men and women who comprised the workforce of Andrews mill and reveals the gradations which existed within the mill. The pay books come to a conclusion in 1899. After this period instead of one combined pay book containing the wage details for all the many and varied workers for the different processes of the mill, separate wage books were opened. These wage books begin in 1899 and run until the 1950s and 1960s. The wage books break down according to the different departments which existed within the mill such as hackling, reeling, spinning and preparing. The complete run of pay and wage books should make it possible to trace the entire working life of an employee or indeed of a family, as it is quite likely that generations of one family were employed at the mill.



Cash memorandum books, rent ledgers and workmans' (sic) ledgers

The cash memorandum books contain a record of the amount deducted from employees wages for the rent of mill houses on a weekly basis. It is only a record of names and does not give information about residence. The cash memorandum books cover the period from 1865-70 and 1939-59. Rent ledgers complement the cash memorandum books although their time span is considerably more limited ranging from 1936 to 1976. The rent ledgers give details of properties leased in various streets in Comber and the tenants' employees' names. Finally, the workmans' (sic) ledgers are a record of the amount deducted from mill workers wages for their coal allowance. The mill supplied coal to employees' mill houses and the cost was deducted from their pay. However, the archive does not solely relate to the work of the mill. The miscellaneous section contains a billiards book (D4189/D/6) giving details of scores and team members. Presumably, the billiards teams were part of the mill's social club for the workers.



Farm books of the Andrews family

There are a large number of volumes within the archive relating to the various farms of the Andrews family mainly in and around Comber (D4189/E). However, there are also four volumes pertaining to property in Cos Cavan and Kilkenny. The records span the period 1882-1987. There are farm letter books, cash books, ledgers, journals, and dairy cash sales books. The farm books relate to three principal properties: Maxwell Court, Comber, Carnesure, Comber, and farms in Cos Cavan and Kilkenny. There are also later non-specific farm books for J[ohn] Andrews & Co., and general farm ledgers. The Maxwell Court cash books record details of weekly wages and house rents between 1883 and 1919. The Maxwell Court ledgers also give information on crop production of the farm from 1883 to 1922. The Maxwell Court journal details the weekly accounts for farm produce from 1884 to 1900. There is a similar run of volumes for the Carnesure farm.



Other Andrews family deposits

There are relatively few other deposits of papers pertaining to the Andrews family within PRONI. They are:

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| D3655 | c.300 documents mainly comprising correspondence and photographs, 1841-1956, relating to William Drennan Andrews, James Andrews, Thomas Andrews, Sir James Andrews (Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland), Thomas Andrews Junior, and John Miller Andrews. |
| D4209 | 14 documents mainly comprising testamentary papers relating to the Andrews family, Comber, Co. Down, 1872-c.1950. |
| T3124 | Twelve account books, day books, ledgers and letter books, 1756-1802, of Robert, James and Michael Andrews of Comber. |
| T3405 | 1878 election poem, 'Andrews for Down', relating to William Drennan Andrews, who was standing as the Liberal candidate against Lord Castlereagh later, 6th Marquess of Londonderry at the 1878 By-election on the death of James Sharman-Crawford. |

The papers of Andrews mill comprise a comprehensive business archive. However, they not only provide a unique insight into flax spinning but reveal much about the local community and the Andrews family itself.

