

The Hastings Years: 1946 - Present

Perhaps a good starting point would be when today's Chairman, Dr William Hastings, joined his family firm at the age of eighteen years, having completed his education at Royal Belfast Academical Institution - more familiarly known as Inst - at sixteen and a half years, and enjoyed and benefited from two years in the timber business in Belfast.

William had one brother, Roy and three sisters, Maureen, Jessie and Olive. Their mother was widowed when William was only twelve years old, he being the youngest member of the family. So when their father died in 1940, Roy, then only 17 years old, managed the business and throughout the war years he expanded the inherited four working class public houses, plus three outlets managed on behalf of Mr Wilson Boyd, who at that time owned Old Bushmills Distillery.

Working in partnership for seven years, Roy and William developed the business to nine owned bars. However, at the early age of thirty, Roy died of a kidney disease, which probably could have been cured today, and young William, then twenty five years old, was left to continue to trade in what was a troublesome and difficult business.

However, simple disciplines in business ethics had been ingrained in the young men by their late father, so William continued with some good employees and enthusiastically sought to improve and enhance the image of working class bars with the development of lounge bars. These were usually on the first floor and previously used by men's clubs, such as dart clubs, drumming clubs and social evenings. This new concept of lounge bars heralded a new era when ladies would accompany their husbands on Saturday nights and the new luxurious surroundings were well patronised. Thus, a new type of business was created, the forerunner of today's social gatherings. Within two years of his brother's death, William had acquired another bar, The First and Last on the Newtownards Road, which he managed for Senator Wilson Boyd, and a few years later (1958) he bought all four bars from Senator Boyd for £100,000, a vast sum of money at that time, giving the firm a total of thirteen bars, mostly in working class areas of Belfast.

The deal included Dundela Football Ground, two houses next to the Stormont Inn and a considerable amount of Whiskey under bond. He immediately sold the Football Ground to the Club (of which he was President) for £2,000, the whiskey for £9,000 and converted the two houses into shops.

Licensed Premises Portfolio - 1951-1960

Stormont Inn plus Toby Jug off Sales - 167-169 Holywood Road, Belfast

Albert Bar and Wine Lodge - 1-5 Albertbridge Road, Belfast

Bloomfield Bar, 420 Newtownards Road, Belfast

First & Last, 246 Newtownards Road, Belfast

(The above were all purchased from Wilson Boyd (Old Bushmills Distillery) 1957

Royal Arch Bar, 175 Newtownards Road, Belfast (used as Head Office)

Scotch Row Bar, 146-148 Newtownards Road, Belfast

Great Eastern Bar, Newtownards Road, Belfast

Primrose Bar, 43 Albertbridge Road, Belfast

Deramore Arms, 361 Ormeau Road, Belfast

The Clock Bar, Connswater, Belfast

Boyne Tavern, 181 Sandy Row, Belfast

Moyola Arms, 174-176 Sandy Row, Belfast

Councillor Bar, Everton Street, Crumlin Road, Belfast

Rex Bar, 215 Shankill Road, Belfast

Salisbury Arms, 207 Shankill Road, Belfast

Four Step Inn, Shankill Road, Belfast

Mountainview Tavern, 1-3 Cambrai Street, Belfast.

All of this made William Hastings and Messrs Braithwaite and McCann the two largest licence holders in Northern Ireland. Messrs Lyle & Kinahan and Morton & Company were the largest wholesalers and bottlers.

The business was by now quite sizeable and modern bottling techniques were replacing the old style of each outlet doing its own bottling. So a central store was purchased in Lord Street in East Belfast for £5,000 and named the Sandown Bottling Company, and although intended to supply only the Group bars, it was inevitable that a larger wholesale business would emerge in the not too distant future, and indeed this was the case.

At this time William was thirty years old, living at Upper Malone Road and taking care of his ageing mother. In 1960 he married a secondary school teacher, Joy Hamilton, a graduate from Queen's University who taught French and English and who was the daughter of the owner of one of Belfast's largest market gardens. They set up home in Harberton Park, at Upper Malone, and within six years there were four children, three daughters and one son, whose early school days were spent in the leafy suburbs of Malone.

The sixties saw a steady business growth in a number of unplanned ways, with no real strategy, but only the instinct to make a profit and change direction from the pub trade and to improve and increase the business at every opportunity.

The Wholesale Business

The small business had outgrown the premises in Lord Street and it had reached the limits of its resources. A similar, but larger operation, owned by the Irish Whiskey Company and called the Bridge End Bottling Company, found itself in a similar situation. Through the necessity to expand, with new buildings and expensive bottling lines, the two companies amalgamated. Owning fifty per cent each, William Hastings and Bill O'Hara (who was the Managing Director of the Irish Whiskey Company - a public house group which owned the Bridge End Bottling Company the Royal Hotel in Bangor and the Brown Trout Inn) became joint managing directors of the new company, which was called The Ravenhill Bottling Company because of its purchase of fine new property on the Ravenhill Road.

This was a real act of faith by both parties and they did agree to all the major adjustments that were necessary to complete and to successfully operate as one.

A second hand bottling line was bought from an expanding brewery in England and second hand glass lined cooling tanks were obtained locally from William Younger's wholesale bottlers in Belfast. Import of bottled lager become economically impossible because of the enormous amount of theft at the docks, so incredibly and to the delight of the company, Carlsberg Breweries appointed Ravenhill Bottlers as Northern Ireland agents, and it became the first ever bottler of Carlsberg outside of Copenhagen. This was the key point of development and led to other agencies, including Teachers Scotch Whiskey, Gold Label Barley Wine, Sherries and ports and other own brand items. Success over a ten year period created problems when the company outgrew its limited financial resources, as the competition was the huge Guinness organisation and Bass Ireland. Wisely the company realised it could not compete with the finances required and the risks of further expansion too great and it sold out to Bass, (whose Chairman at that time was the late Sir Robin Kinahan), for £220,000 in 1970, giving the Hastings company £110,000 - a great bonus with which at that time already needed cash to fulfil the expansion plans for those hotels already owned.

Hamilton and Hastings

About 1965, by way of diversion, William Hastings was introduced to Mr William Hamilton (incidentally, no relation to Joy), and together they had the opportunity of taking over the staff catering at Nutt's Corner Airport, the precursor of Aldergrove/Belfast International Airport today. Canteen club members had been having difficulty in managing the small business (as committees are not good business gurus), so a new company, Hamilton and Hastings, was formed and it applied for, and received, the first licence at the airport where it traded quite profitably for about five years and established a solid cash base.

Subsequently, Nutts Corner was closed and the concession for the catering at the new Aldergrove airport was granted to this new company, which had little catering experience, so Mr Ben Kirk, who at that time was the Assistant Manager of the Grand Central Hotel in Belfast, was appointed as manager, and business consolidated and developed at the growing new airport for the next ten years.

The company, Hamilton and Hastings, diversified and invested in the Isle of Man. It owned the Peveril Hotel in Douglas, leased the Grand Island Hotel in Ramsey, and gained the concession for catering at the Sea Terminal in Douglas and the Wildlife Park at the Curraghs. It was also awarded the concession for bars and food at the new airport in Middleton St George in Teeside in the North of England, and at the airport's St George Hotel, which was a sixty bedroom Grade A hotel, converted from a World War II Officer's Mess.

All of this was exciting and interesting and although profitable year on year, was very far from being a gold mine, but it did assist enormously in a learning curve at a time of great changes in the tourist industry.

During the 1950's the hotel industry was beginning to blossom and it was evident that Northern Ireland had not enough bedrooms for the growing tourist business. Hamilton and Hastings purchased a large house, the former home of a leading builder, Mr McMaster, and converted it into the Stormont Hotel, a ten bedroom unit, which was mandatory to secure a liquor licence. This venture proved to be highly successful. Another sideline of the company was the concession for catering at all of Northern Ireland Railways outlets and on the trains. However, at this time William Hastings decided to withdraw his interests in Hamilton and Hastings and purchased from the Hamilton Hastings Company the remaining 50% of the Stormont Hotel. All other interests were sold to Mr Billy Hamilton and Mr Ben Kirk. Hamilton and Kirk continued trading very successfully, the company going to Mr Kirk on the death of Mr Hamilton. It continues to flourish today with its base at the King's Hall in Belfast.

Hotels

1964 saw the purchase of the Adair Arms Hotel in Ballymena for £30,000. This was seen as a good licensed trading business in a thriving town and a vehicle for perhaps gaining some experience in the field of catering and hotel keeping. An excellent Manageress, Miss Marian Muir, was 'head-hunted' from the Fort Royal Hotel in County Donegal. The learning curve had started and the thrill of being an "hotelier" rather than a "publican" was a real motivating force, as in middle class Belfast the

licensed trade was not seen as highly desirable for a respectable Protestant family. Now, today attitudes have changed. Needless to say, the Adair Arms Hotel was completely renovated, modernised and brought up to a very high standard with 36 bedrooms, function suite, and a very popular grill bar restaurant, which attracted much passing trade, in the days before Ballymena had a by pass road. It was at that time Ballymena's foremost and best hotel.

The Stormont Hotel - purchased from the Hamilton Hastings Company started life as a private house and developed into a ten bedroomed hotel. Today it is a four star hotel, with 110 bedrooms and large conference facilities.

Culloden Hotel

1969 saw the purchase of the then 13 bedroom Culloden Hotel for £100,000 and the appointment of Mr Hugh Margey as manager. He was a graduate of University College Dublin and the son of a hotel consultant who was assisting in the development of the Adair Arms Hotel. Culloden Hotel was formerly a Bishop's Palace, built in the Scottish baronial style and set in twelve acres of gardens overlooking Belfast Lough, in a magnificent situation, now maximised into a five star hotel, with all rooms having a wonderful outlook.

The grand house was first auctioned in 1964 and purchased and developed to a very high standard by the late Mr Rutledge White, a businessman and high class baker of renown in Northern Ireland. He and his wife Madge devoted five years of tender loving care but could not make it into a profitable outlet. The purchase was finalised by phone call to William Hastings' accountant, Mr Rollo McClure, who contacted him to say that the Fixtures and Fittings were included and a 25,000 tax loss available. William, who was in bed at that time with mumps, said yes, and went back to sleep. He would worry about that tomorrow!

Its sale in 1964 stimulated much interest and was auctioned by Mr Jim Morgan of Ross's Auction fame. A large crowd of interested prospective purchasers had estimated a value at around £13,000. The people present were intrigued when the auctioneer took an enormous bid from a telephone bidder and everyone was, of course, curious to unmask the mystery purchase whose final bid was £18,000 - well above the expected value.

This finally turned out to be a Mr Rutledge White, a well known business personality, who had a superior bakery on the Lisburn Road and whose fashionable wife Madge ran one of the first and easily the best Milk Bar in Rosemary Street, Belfast. Their desire was to establish a boutique hotel of style and elegance with the Culloden.

This they did indeed accomplish, with wonderful French furnishings and beautiful paintings and with an excellent chef, Alistair, who produced food and service far beyond anything available in Northern Ireland at that time. The great talking point was the small Chapel area in the original house, which was changed to be the bar area and gave rise to great cause for hypocritical and humorous comments and it was rumoured that the Whites had to have the area deconsecrated. However, having traded for five years and discovered that hotel keeping was really hard work,

they put the hotel on the market. Their son in law, Alex Roberts, finally agreed with William Hastings the broad issues of the deal but the final price and agreement was transacted by his accountant when he was still ill.

The purchase price of £100,000 was agreed with the knowledge that the Culloden Hotel Company had sustained losses of £25,000, which could be claimed by the Hastings Group. William Hastings said yes, and promptly went back to sleep in the knowledge that he had a good quality manager for the hotel and to take this unique opportunity, which needed further investment and expansion, into a future important hotel situation.

The Ballygally Castle Hotel on the famous Antrim Coast Road was purchased for £40,000 in 1968. The owner was the very well known carpet manufacturer Mr Cyril Lord, who was retiring to Barbados. This quality old 20 bedroom hotel has been restored, extended and developed over the years and is now the jewel hotel on that famous route to the Giants Causeway, now extended to offer 44 large en suite bedrooms and full conferencing facilities.

William Hastings felt that at last he was an hotelier, making money in the bars, spending money on hotel development and trading in the wholesale business. In 1970 the business had an annual turnover of £1,600,000, generating £100,000 cash per annum. At this point 65% of the turnover was beverage and only 35% food and accommodation.

A few years later the sale of bottling plants and wholesale interests created much needed cash and when the Ulster Transport Authority offered a group of six major hotels for sale in May 1971 for £440,000, William Hastings was the only buyer with the nerve and the ability to raise the cash. Again Mr Rollo McClure was the accountant who packaged the details of final price and Sir Charles Brett of L'Estrange & Brett completed the very complicated legal details.

The "Troubles" had escalated, but no one could have foreseen the holocaust in store. Internment in September of that year finished any tourist trade, upon which the six new hotels totally depended. Visitor numbers to Northern Ireland fell from over one million to below 400,000 in the space of two years. 1970-75 were good years for profits in the pubs, but it was clear that working class clubs would siphon off the cream of the pub trade when they fully developed and took advantage of the new licensing laws in their favour. As a consequence of this, when opportunities arose during 1975-1980, William Hastings either sold the bars or leased them as property developments. Similarly, when the chance came, the Northern Counties Hotel in Portrush and the Laharna Hotel in Larne were sold and the Midland Hotel in Belfast was converted and let out as offices. The top floor became Group Headquarters, (previously located above the Avenue One on the Newtownards Road) which it is still is today. At this time the company became known as the Hastings Hotels Group. The newly established Head Office staff, with its accountant/financial director, Edward Carson, having been appointed only one year earlier, grappled with the much larger staff and operation. The City Hotel in Derry was bombed and vested and the Great Northern Rostrevor was also burnt out in "the Troubles". There remained six hotels in the group and only the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle was

left trading from the original Ulster Transport Authority purchase. There followed massive reinvestment in every hotel which consolidated the group as the leading hotel operation in the North of Ireland.

1990 saw the sale of the Adair Arms Hotel, as it was not envisaged that it could reach the required "four star" status physically, now planned for the group as a premier brand.

The Fir Trees Hotel in Strabane, which was purchased in 1984, and which gave Hastings Hotels a presence West of the Bann since the demise of the City Hotel in Derry in 1973, was sold for similar reasons as it could never have qualified structurally for a four star hotel and by this time the group had purchased the Everglades Hotel in Derry.

1994 saw the signs of better times politically for Northern Ireland. Simultaneously the famous Europa Hotel, (famous for being the most bombed hotel in the world), went into Receivership and was offered for sale. Once again, William Hastings was the only purchaser with the courage and the cash resources to undertake a bombed out shell, despite efforts by tourism board chiefs and government ministers and agencies to encourage large "brand" companies to take an interest. It was seen as a great opportunity for the future, a large downtown Belfast hotel, and it was bought after some months of serious consideration, during which time William had a quadruple heart bypass and recuperation. There was, however, the support and approval of the Financial Director, Edward Carson, now also Vice Chairman of the company, and son Howard who was establishing himself as Managing Director, with his confidence and ability by now well proven. As stated, the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle, the only remaining "railway hotel", survived four major bombs. It was nicknamed by the financial director "The Titanic", as it was in peril of sinking, and taking the company with it. However, all survived and company resources invested in the grand old building and it is now currently on a level far beyond any time in its 100 year history.

As the strongest hotel group in Northern Ireland, an opportunity to invest in Dublin in the Merrion Hotel venture in 1997 arose. The 50% interest held by the Hastings Hotels Group in that fine Georgian property is one of the greatest delights for the Directors. With two of Ireland's wealthiest and most prestigious businessmen, Lochlann Quinn, Chairman of Allied Irish Bank and Dr Martin Naughton, Chairman of the North South business co-operation body (who together jointly own the massive company Glen Dimplex, with its worldwide brand strengths) - these partners hold the other 50% of the shares in the Merrion Hotel. Together there is a very strong liaison with Hastings Hotels, who became the first All Ireland hotel company and a very bright future of growth and development is envisaged, at the very top end of the Irish hotel market, in an indigenously held company.

From the mid 1980's the family of Dr Hastings, all well educated and starting their various career paths and family responsibilities through marriage, as the occasion arose each one was invited to participate in the business, if he or she so desired.

The eldest daughter, Julie, has three young children, of whom the eldest is following his grandfather to RBAI for his education. Julie spent her school days at Victoria College in Belfast, and as well as being successful in her academic studies, she participated in school sports, excelling at tennis, later playing for Ulster and Ireland. She is still as enthusiastic about tennis as in her youth. She obtained a BA degree at Queen's and then went to the United States where she gained her Masters Degree in Atlanta, Georgia.

Subsequently she gained a Post Graduate diploma in Marketing from the University of Ulster. (She was referred to en famille as the Three Degrees - a popular singing group of the time). A career in tourism and marketing was the route she had chosen and when invited to take the position of Director of Marketing and PR in Hastings Hotels, she immediately responded positively. Julie now is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing.

Howard, the only son and second in the family, first attended Inchmarlo, the prep school of Inst. (Royal Belfast Academical Institution). He then transferred to Brackenber House Preparatory School, (no longer in existence), as he had to prepare for the Common Entrance Examination prior to entering Harrow School in England. He enjoyed his years there, made many firm friends and fully participated in every facet of school life. From Harrow, he went to Nottingham University where he obtained his II(i) in law, then moved to London where he qualified as a Chartered Accountant with Peat Marwick (now KPMG). At a later stage he did a MSc degree at the University of Ulster. Howard married an English girl, Philippa Jackson, and they lived in London for several years, Howard working as an accountant in a large vehicle importing plc. In 1989 he was offered the position of Operations Director in Hastings Hotels Group, later progressing to Managing Director in succession to his father, the current Chairman. He immediately saw the opportunities on offer, sold his home in London, and purchased a house in Comber, Co Down. He now lives at Craigavad, which makes Rockport School within easy access for his three children.

Daughter Allyson was educated at Victoria College in Belfast and spent her last two years as a boarder at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen. From there she went to Buckingham College in High Wycombe, where she gained an HND and later she graduated from the University of Ulster with a degree in Tourism and Leisure, which equipped her for her career. After ten years as Events Director at the Culloden Hotel, Allyson has now moved to join the family at Head Office as Group Events Director. Allyson married Conor McKimm in 2005.

Aileen was the youngest daughter - all four children were close in age, the four being born within six years - and she too went to Victoria College, spending her last two years of schooling at Sevenoaks in Kent, as a boarder. From there she went to Stirling University where she graduated in modern languages. She remained in Scotland to work in Edinburgh in the field of sales, met and married a young Scotsman, an accountant with Touche Ross at that time. They were seconded to Milan for two years, added Italian to their vocabulary and then returned to Northern Ireland where Aileen's husband is now working with PricewaterhouseCoopers and

they have three children. Aileen was well qualified to accept the position of Sales Director with the hotel group.

This new team of management merged into their new roles over a period of years and brought with them the talents and expertise of today's generation of business executives.

The anchor man within the firm, Edward Carson, a chartered accountant, educated at Campbell College and Queen's University, who had joined the company in 1972 as Financial Director, was appointed as Vice Chairman, and the new General Manager of the Europa Hotel, Mr John Toner, a professional hotelier, was invited to take a seat on the Board. This established a strong executive board of Directors, all well motivated and all with excellent qualifications. The transfer of management to the third generation is unique and rare in a business of this size, now employing 1,000 full time staff, with a value of up to one hundred million pounds and a sizeable property portfolio in Ireland, north and south.