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Shannon/Erne Waterway

NORTH

By David McEllin

by Northwest

Ireland in the 19th Century was well serviced by canals/inland waterways. Two artificial canals, the Grand (1756) and the Royal (1789), joined the Shannon from Dublin at Banagher, Co Offaly and Clondra, Co Longford, respectively. Many of the canals were almost lost to posterity with the advent of the railways but with the passage of time the canals are now being restored. The restoration of the Shannon/Erne system commenced in 1994 and took four years to complete at a cost of £30 million. The catalyst for this was the peace process in Northern Ireland and the commitment of the Irish and British to cross border projects. The development of the canals, linking both sides of the divided borderland, was seen as an ideal undertaking that would help bring tourism and prosperity to the region that was neglected during the troubled years

The waterway's potential was first envisaged in 1838 when a young engineer John McMahon was



Hire boats at Carrick on Shannon

commissioned to survey a route to connect the Shannon and Erne waterways. His plan was simple involving three phases; the Leitrim reach, the summit reach at Lough Scurl, and the Woodford River reach to the Erne. The plan went ahead in 1846 giving much needed relief work during the famine years when at one stage 7000 men were employed on the scheme. Gunpowder was used to blast rock and steam-powered dredgers to deepen channels across lakes. It was completed in 1860 and lauded as a great feat of engineering. It was a commercial failure however due to the advent of the railways. The original purpose of this 62.5 km section of canal/waterway was to complete the link of Ireland's inland waterways allowing connection from Limerick to Belfast via the Ulster Canal in the North, and Dublin and Wexford in the South via the Royal, Grand and Barrow

Navigations. By 1914 an average of 70,000 tons of commercial cargo was being carried between Dublin and Limerick city, much of it was Guinness stout. The river traffic went into decline as industries supporting the canals, such as coal from the Arigna mines, opted for rail transport.

In the 1990s with Ireland's improved economy the various bodies advocating the re-opening of the canals suddenly found their views listened to, with the Shannon/ Erne system taking centre stage. It became a 'flag ship' for negotiation of cross-border cooperation involving North-South Bodies. The lost and stagnating canals of the border counties were now identified as 'the missing link' that would forge a unity of purpose between divided communities and bring about an influx of tourism and cruiser traffic on the lakes and canals. Heretofore, it was known as the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell Canal, henceforth following restructuring, it would be called the Shannon/ Erne Waterway.

In Victorian times when legislation was enacted to regulate the development the objective was land drainage of the vast waterlogged countryside and to redress the constant flooding of farmland; provision of facilities for barge and boating traffic was of secondary importance. This area is a virtual jigsaw of lakes interspersed with rivers. By catering for two objectives a conflict was created in that lots of water was required for boating whereas the opposite criterion applied for land drainage. A topographical obstacle was that part of the navigation was 24metres over the Shannon water level, which resulted in the construction of eight locks to the summit level at Lough Scur and eight further locks in the fall-away towards Lough Erne. A concern was an adequate water supply from Lough Scur to operate the movement of boats through the locks. The Office of Public Works carried out surveys from 1974 to 1986 to assess the ability of the water supply to accommodate



Mooring at Leirim Village



Fishing on the Boyle Canal



Walkway adjacent to the Boyle Canal

the expected traffic of boats during those years; the system would have failed on four of those years coinciding with good summers. Two remedies were suggested, one to dam two nearby lakes hoarding water to be released into Lough Scur, the second to back-pump water from lower stretches

of the canal; the latter solution was adopted.

The re-construction was a major success and a jewel in the crown of Ireland's waterways; the longest in Europe. Many of the locks had to be rebuilt the old cut-stone saved and reattached to mass concrete, new bridges, moorings, mill races and weirs, banks and tow-paths mended. It takes 16 hours to navigate the waterway not counting the offshoots from the main artery to the Boyle Water and Lough Key (the most beautiful in the system) west of Leitrim Village, or another branch to the Lough Allen Canal with access to Acres Lake and Drumshanbo; the route to Arigna coal mines. There is a floating dock at Leitrim, a charming hamlet.

The canal locks are operated by the boat crews, by using a smart card costing approx €10, will take you through the most remote, stone-age country in Ireland adjacent to Lough Scurl and Keshkerrigan where in the recent past gold artefacts, flint arrow tips, shields and dug-out boats dating from 4,500 years ago were found and are now housed in the National Museum. The legendary Fionn MacCumhal is reputed to be buried on nearby Sheemore Mountain. On to Ballinamore where the names over shop fronts are in the Gaelic language written in Celtic designs. 'Boxty' a form of potato cake is a local speciality in restaurants and pubs and the locals talk about the long abandoned Cavan and Leitrim Railway which ran through here as if it were yesterday.

The canal goes north from here to Ballyconnell, a most attractive town and onwards along the Woodford River, which is actually the border between Cavan and Fermanagh, with some lovely mooring places in this locality like Haughton's Quay before continuing into Upper Lough Erne. There is a branch from here to the pretty market town of Belturbet where, as in Carrick-on-Shannon, there is a boat hire company. Near here



Barge & Cruisers at Ballinamore



Canal bridge near Ballinamore

is the bridge of Aghalane one of many blown up and needing repair in the aftermath of the recent Northern troubles. The final leg of this journey is through Northern Ireland and the two lakes Upper and Lower Lough Erne. These are formidable lakes with a long history of water sports and boating clubs.

There are many places of interest including castles and islands to visit in these lake-lands, such as Crom Castle and Castle Coole House both open to the public and Enniskillen Castle with its imposing Watergate, the town built on an island at a crossing on the Erne from early times; a must for friendly shopping and a visit to the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers Museum. Before heading downstream you may have to negotiate the lock at Portora with Portora Royal School on a hill where the famous Irish scholars Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett boarded. Islands on the lake to visit are Devenish Island which has the ancient monastic ruins and round tower of St Molaise; White island with 12th century



Canal lock No.7 Ballyduff

church ruins with six stone carvings and Boa Island at the north extremity of the lakes where strange Janus figures are found. A popular tourist centre Castle Archdale is worth visiting; it was from here that flying boats took off during the war in the defence of allied shipping from U-Boat attack in the North Atlantic. It now has marina facilities, walking and pony trails. This whole waterway is a haven for wildlife, flora and fauna which received special care throughout the period of the restoration work.



Lough Scur