

The Old Harbour Canal

Part One:

Commercial Activity

Introduction

The Canal Harbour was once central to Limerick's economic history and retains considerable tourist potential today. The article below and its sequel bring together the known history of the canal and also include photographic images previously unpublished.

These rare photographs come from the collection of my late father, Jack Rainsford, who died in Milford Hospice in 1997. They depict workers' lives on Limerick's Canal Harbour shortly before it closed in 1960.

Jack was a fine photographer who has managed to capture the working life of the Limerick Canal in a fashion not dissimilar to Fr. Browne's Titanic images. His priceless photos have immortalised work long past as a form of social history.

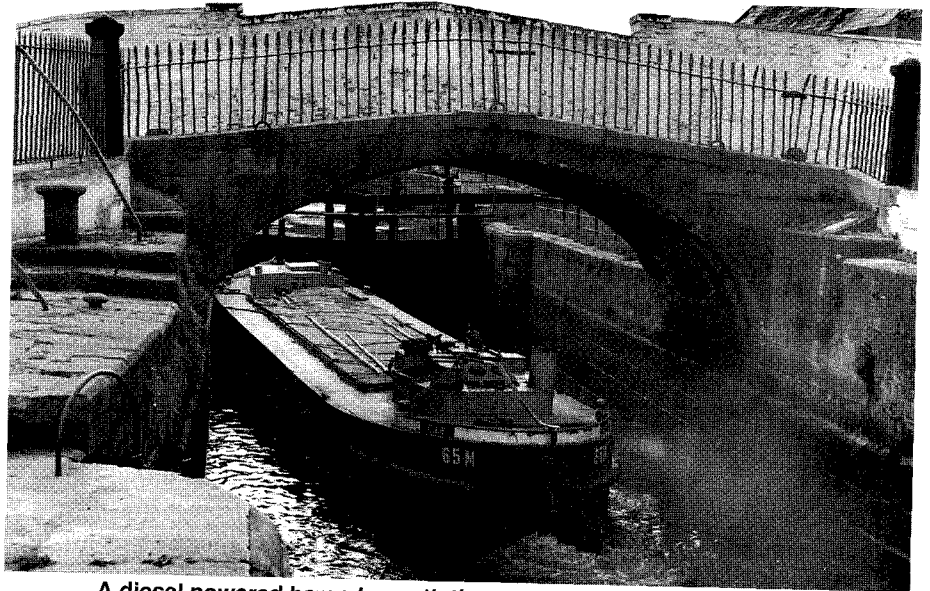
As each day passes more of that history is being uncovered thanks to the work of agencies like Limerick Civic Trust.

It is fitting therefore that these articles follow celebrations in 2008 marking 25 years of that illustrious body's existence.

The Historical Background to the Old Canal

The idea of a canal for Limerick was first floated in 1697 as part of a plan to link Irish rivers put forward by the then Lord Deputy of Ireland. In 1715, an Act was passed by the Irish Parliament to drain certain bogs and carry out works to encourage transport by canal. The canal age had begun in earnest in Ireland helped by the absence of a rail system before the 1820s.

In 1757, William Ockenden began work on a canal system on the southern flank of the River Shannon. Thomas Omer had done preliminary work (1755-1768) on the Shannon above Castleconnell. A 'cut' was planned at Annaghbeg to bypass the



A diesel powered barge beneath the stone bridge at the Lock Quay

by John Rainsford

treacherous Falls of Doonass and to link Limerick to the Grand Canal via Killaloe, only 1.5 kms away. Both men were pioneers in the use of so called 'Flash Locks' and it took 8 in all to tame the waters of Doonass. The Shannon falls 30m in just 19 kms between these points.

Given the difficulties involved it was not until 1799 that boats finally travelled from Killaloe to Limerick via Annaghbeg. The voyage itself was made more difficult by perennial summer droughts and winter floods. There were no towpaths as yet for the horses along the main banks. Indeed, flooding presented problems right throughout the history of the canal. The hump-back bridge over the Groody was shaped thus to accommodate it.

The Park Canal was a natural boundary between Garryowen, Rhebogues and Park itself linking the Shannon Estuary and river. However, canal building here was extremely difficult in an age of primitive tools and limited engineering techniques. The first phase involved building the First Lock at the Old Canal Harbour, off Clare Street, in June 1757. The construction took the canal through a quagmire called 'Bartlett's Bog' below Mike Maddens (Troy's Lock). For a few pence a day, workmen (supplemented by the Pery Charitable Loan Fund, established 1771)

used buckets and spades to shift tonnes of water-sodden earth under conditions that can only be imagined. As one spade dug into the muck, water quickly filled the hole and long days were matched by equally early mornings. The canal itself, as recent dredging proved, was sealed with a waterproof form of Adobe Mud. This was a yellow clay and was indigenous to the area. The total cost of the dig was put at £401 in all.

The next phase was even more taxing and involved shifting a seam of solid rock (50 feet deep) between the second lock at Troy's and Tom Bulls. The head of the canal was reached in 1758 and the waterway between Limerick and Dublin was formally opened in 1761. However, further progress was slow and the economy was in recession. Brownrigg, an engineer and later the Director General of Inland Navigation, recruited workers in 1807, but tillage at the time provided more profitable work. The recruits now increasingly organised into combinations, the illegal early trade unions.

Entrepreneurial Spirit

Charlotte Murphy has stated previously that the Limerick Canal was far from being an adjunct of the Grand Canal and was in fact a mini-project on its own. Men like Edmond Sexton Pery (1719-1806) M.P. for Limerick (1761-1785), Sir Henry Hartstonge of Sir Harry's Mall fame and the



The crew of the St. Brigid c.1950

Maunsell family saw in it a chance to kick-start commerce in Limerick and to provide the legions of poor with some income to live on. Private investment was insufficient, however, and in 1767 an Act of Parliament established the Limerick Navigation Company with the sum of £6000 granted to Limerick Corporation for the purpose.

In 1780, the Inland Navigation Commissioners completed the cut at Annaghbeg in Plassey and the first boats began the voyage to Killaloe in 1799. In 1813, the British government bought out the Limerick Navigation Company and vested powers in the Directors-General of Inland Navigation. The low level of industrial activity and its concentration in coastal areas meant, however, that traffic remained low. Canals did spur inland trade by reducing transport costs. In 1790, the average cost for transporting goods by road was 1 Shilling. The early canal company charters were highly competitive at 3d per ton per mile and 2d per ton per lock. In 1830, the Grand Canal Company engineer, John Stokes, designed the stretch from Parteen to O'Brien's Bridge, which he hoped would assist the local poor. It carried 14,600 passengers in 1836.

The economic boom of the Napoleonic Wars collapsed into depression after 1815. The Navigation Board failed in its charge of the waterways and the Commissioners of Public Works took over in the early 1830's. Railways were now also on the ascendant. Limerick and Athlone waterways were linked and Lough Allen opened in December 1820. All parts of the Shannon were now open but economic depression, unemployment and social unrest held the country in sway.

In 1826, John Grantham, a civil engineer of the Dragoons, successfully brought the steamer, the *Marquis Wellesley*, down the Grand Canal to the Shannon. The paddle-driven steamer crossed Lough Derg (a trip of some 20

miles) in 6 hours. However, passengers had to dismount at Killaloe, such was the ferocity of the river thereafter, and take the horse drawn barge to Limerick. Grantham himself died in the city in 1830. Steamers like the *Lady Lansdowne* and *Lady Burgoyne* continued to ply the route he opened well into the 19th century.

Toll revenue for the Grand Canal Company rose in 1831 to over £5,000. This revenue was raised via taxes on goods traded, which varied by distance travelled. Between Limerick and O'Brien's Bridge the charge levied was 15 pence per ton and 2 pence per passenger. From O'Brien's Bridge to Killaloe, 2s and 6d per cargo ton and 4d per passenger. This reflected that more difficult route. In the early 19th century, 100,000 people per year used the service at a cost of 8s per passenger per day. The figure represented both the high level of emigration and the presence of a *nouveau riche*, who preferred the relative comfort of the 4-day trip over the canal to the jolting roads to Dublin.

The prestigious passenger list included the father of Robert Emmet, colourful Republican, Napper Tandy, and the Liberator himself, Daniel O'Connell. The 'flyboats', as the passenger barges were now called, had only the finest cutlery, cuisine and mini-bars, with first and second-class passage. Hotels, such as that run by the Richard Harrold of Pennywell, once located in the 'Nun's field' (c. 1840), served breakfast, dinner and tea at exorbitant prices even for the day. It later became known in local folklore as the 'haunted house'.

Commercial Building on the Canal Harbour

The canal was divided by commercial activity, with millers taking the west bank and the east bank being reserved for turf sellers. In 1765, the Lock Mills, built by Andrew Walsh, contained some of the

most advanced equipment then existing anywhere in the British Isles. The mill wheels were powered by water from the canal itself for which the mill owners, principally John Norris Russell, paid the Shannon Navigation Company £40 per year. The foundation stone for the red brick bridge at Lock Quay was laid in 1761 and built by the Dutch engineer, Uzuld, who also helped design the mills in 1762. There was also a paper mill located nearby.

The Bard of Thomond (Michael Hogan) famously served his time in Russell's Mills. However, it was Guinness' who were the main player on the canal system and from the early 1800s, that company undercut every local brewery, driving all competition out of the city. The list of fatalities included the Canal Brewery, owned by Walkers of Cork, Steins of Pennywell and Ms. Tuckers of John's Square.

The first lock house was the headquarters of the Canal Management Committee, whose job it was to run the canal system. This body met every Friday to arrange the payment of workers and discuss the general management of the canal. The area was also the site of the old 'independent clubs' founded by Tom Steele, friend to O'Connell, in opposition to the Brunswick clubs of landlords (est. 1828). Plassey Bridge was built in 1840, marking the end of the ferry system and milestones showing the distance to Killaloe, erected in 1814. They still stand as they were then.

In the 18th century, the barges were flat-bottomed and 6-8 tonnes each. Some had retractable masts and square sails. By 1913, however, barges like the *Athy* and *St. Patrick* could carry 40-45 tonnes each. Guinness and coal were traded into the city and sand and marble from Ballysimon and Garryowen were traded out. In 1860, the bell for St. John's Cathedral was brought on a barge from Dublin, as were parts of the Telford organ for the choir of



Gussy McGrath (foreground) and fellow store men at the Guinness Warehouse

St. Mary's Cathedral in 1834. By 1950, however, road transport was in the ascendancy and raw materials could be transported in faster times and at cheaper rates.

Casualties And Fatalities

The Old Canal had a chequered history when it came to lives lost, as befits any maritime story. The years 1767-1823 were times of agrarian unrest and the countryside was populated by such diverse revolutionaries as Whiteboys, Terry Alts and Ribbonmen. Secret combinations began to have meetings opposite Paddy's Hedge between Troy's Lock and Lawlor's field, where a spring was conveniently located and lookouts easily deployed. In the late 1700s and 1800s, the British Government legislated against such organisations and one unfortunate Cooper was flogged through the streets of the city for his role in them. After 1807, however, Friendly Societies began to take on their more legitimate roles.

The poor, however, could still be driven to violence to feed their families and in 1772 the Mayor, Christopher Carr, ordered a detachment troops to be stationed at the Lock Mills. The soldiers opened fire on a crowd protesting for bread on the far side of the canal. Six people died over 2 days of conflict. A similar incident, which thankfully involved no fatalities, occurred in 1824 at Rhebogue. The flyboats themselves needed military protection in 1817 and barge masters armed themselves with blunderbusses to protect life and property from would be 'pirates'.

Nature also took a heavy toll on life. Thomas Sheehy drowned after his barge carrying stone from Gully's Quarry (Gilloogue) capsized around 1900. The other three crewmen escaped from the icy water. The often dangerous condition of

barges was exposed by the ease with which the limestone cargo had shifted in the hold. The remains of the barge is still visible today near Groody.

Superstitions and supernatural events also played their part. On Good Friday night, 1904, a young woman named Wallace accidentally slipped and fell into the dark water of the canal near Guinness' warehouse. A subsequent inquest was told that no one would save her given the night that was in it. Her terrible fate was regarded as being preordained by a higher power. The story has some parallels with Cornish folk beliefs represented by the rhyme; "Save a stranger from the sea and he will be your enemy". The story was all the more remarkable given that the age of manned flight was about to begin.

At least one tragedy was prophesied. On 2 February, 1930, three anglers were drowned after their boat was smashed against a pier of the Black Bridge. They were Thomas Madden (aged 42) from the Canal Bank, a decorated Carnegie Life-saving hero, Thomas Anslow (aged 35) and John O'Connell (aged 40), both from Pennywell. Another man, John Joe Airey, was rescued by Jim and Paddy McMahon downstream and taken to Barrington's Hospital, where he subsequently recovered. The fishermen, who wore heavy coats and boots, crammed into a small boat already overloaded with fishing equipment.

Gouldie Madden, whose family lived near the bridge at the time, recently recalled that the calls of the dying were heard, but misinterpreted as late revellers from Shanny's Pub. Her mother, Chris, her father, John, and friend, Jim Ryan, heard the voices, but Jim remarked unknowingly; "I wish to God that I was as happy as them".

Some days before the tragedy, a travelling fortune teller foretold of an impending tragedy. She told Chris Madden; "gentry and simple will stand on your floor and

you will lay the first flowers of spring on a freshly covered grave". The visitors to Chris Madden included William Wellington Bailey, who resided in the White House in Plassey, and Sir Vincent and Lady Nash from Castletroy, who donated a burial plot. The Mayor of Limerick, Alderman Michael J. Keyes, organised a city-wide collection for the families of the victims.

Two Franciscan friars located the bodies of Tom Anslow and Tom Madden by allowing straw from the Christmas crib of 1929 to float to the scene of the drowning. The bodies were locked in a deathly embrace.

Not surprisingly, the Madden family left the bridge to move to Troy's Lock soon after this terrible event. This period also marked the end of salmon fishing by rod from boats. The practice was formally banned in 1931 after 'The Guild of Abbey Fishermen', a financially bonded group, bought out the rights to fish for salmon from the 'Arthur Fishery'.

Around this time also, the Hewitts, a family who lived at the head of the canal, abandoned their 'lighthouse', which diverted barges down the canal coming from Annaghbeg. The light, which was powered by battery, spun around the central tower located directly in their backyard. The concept of a lighthouse on the canal heightens the very real sense of maritime tragedy that still exists to this day.

Glory Bears: The Harbour Canal in the 1950s

By the 1950s, the mile long stretch of inner city waterway had become a central part of Limerick people's recreation. At Troy's (Maddens) Lock there was swimming, fishing, walking and boating. Tom McNamara gave his name to Tom Bulls, not far from the Limerick-Clare railway bridge. Mick Moore, who swam 'naked'

winter and summer, on Christmas day and New Years day in the Groody River and was then seen running up and down the bank to warm himself, went down in legend as the 'Ghost of Groody'.

The building of a dam near O'Brien's Bridge and the ESB station at Ardnacrusha in 1929 closed the passage from Dublin via Killaloe, O'Brien's Bridge, Clonlara, Newtown Lock, Gully's Lock and Annaghbeg Lock to Plassey. However, an alternate route from O'Brien's Bridge via Ardnacrusha and down the Abbey river to the Harbour continued to thrive until 1960 in what amounted to an Indian Summer for commercial activity.

The diesel-powered barges now utilising this route were mostly Guinness barges, with a few privateers thrown in. One of these was the *The Sandlark*, which ran aground below the ESB tailrace at Corbally in 1941. Some 40 barges per week used the Annaghbeg route up to the 1929 closure. The *St. Brigid*, the *St. James* and the *St. Patrick* were the largest barges using the route. The *Fox* was the Board of Works maintenance barge. The other three towed the smaller barges across the treacherous waters of Lough Derg. Private barges lacked the registration letter 'M', which was mandatory on all Grand Canal Company barges.

The barrels of porter carried were made in St. James Brewery in Dublin and were piled in tiers in the storehouses. Empty barrels were deposited at Troy's Lock, where one enterprising family, used the stale porter as a feed additive for their pigs. The creatures slept very well and put on increased weight as a result. CIE continued to use the Guinness building on the harbour side for storage well into the 1970s. The area is still known as the 'Cooperage'. Ordinance Survey Maps (OS) from 1870 record this building and as early as 1840, an OS map records the lock manager's house as being in existence.

Hundreds of families in Limerick made a living from a variety of commercial activities on the canal. There were 'Sandcot Men', like the Frawleys, the Shanahans and the Crowes, who hauled huge loads of sand and gravel from the Shannon just above the head of the canal. Indeed, the danger from sand banks is still visible today in the form of posts, which protrude from the river bed near the new University jetty below the Black Bridge.

The horses used to transport the wooden casks were supplied by families of hauliers nearby. These were famous Limerick names like Mickey and Tommy Crosse and Don McGrath. Rope marks still survive on the walls of the bridge near Mike Maddens. These were caused by horses straining to prevent the barges crashing into the bridge and themselves from being dragged into the water. Barges were typically drawn 20-30 yards behind the horse.

The lock keepers were well known families. The Troys, Maddens and Ryans are names that have gone down in folklore. Mike Madden, brother of John Madden, whose grandson was Paddy

Madden, a former Mayor of Limerick, gave his name to the area around Troy's Lock. His niece, Gouldie Madden, still lives nearby. Jimmy Madden, father of Paddy Madden, took a boat ride to St. Patrick's school each day from his home at the Black Bridge.

Jenny Ryan still lives in the home of the lock keeper at Annaghbeg. Her father was the lock keeper, Jim Ryan. Dan Troy and his brother, Jack, were from Newport and worked the far side of the canal at Mike Maddens, also called Troy's Lock.

A ferry house was located near the Black Bridge where 4-man winches were operated to bring the craft across the river and horses changed for the gruelling journey that lay ahead. The ferryman's house was destroyed by fire in the early 1980s. Fisherman's huts have been in use on the bank for generations, including plots acquired specifically for the purposes of fishing seasonally for salmon. Peg O'Brien had a shebeen or illicit pub at a spot called 'Peg's Height' near the bridge in the 1830s, which was frequented and enjoyed by one and all. Families with long associations with the canal still maintain huts here to this day. Indeed, Pa Healy, a great sportsman of the day, had a new road named after him in the area in recent years.

Ned Pender skippered a smaller barge on the route with the *Fox*, detailed for repairs to winches, boats and bridges along the route. Gussy McGrath loaded and unloaded the Guinness barrels from these vessels. The barge workers slept in the bowels of the craft and could go on journeys that lasted months up the navigation route to Edenderry or Portumna.

The Canal Harbour itself was home to the Sand Office for weighing the 'Mulcair Sands' and the canal manager's office, located at the original site near the first lock, where only three red brick walls now survive. This was later the home of the Johnsons, of whom Brother Dominic Johnson of Glenstal is a surviving relative. John J. Johnson was the last manager for the harbour and Thomas Crosse his foreman. The canal manager's office was originally constructed in 1761.

Marble was quarried at Ballysimon and exported on the barges with Guinness and coal imported to the city. The Markets Field in Garryowen and Gully's Quarry near the Black Bridge were well known sources of stone until road transport came into its own in the 1950s. Petroleum products, breadstuffs, oats, packaged milk and whiskey were other traded commodities. Turf was also vital during the war years and lime, brick, timber and dung at other times.

The Beginning of the End and New Beginnings

In 1929, the German firm, Siemens, built a dam above O'Brien's Bridge and a hydro-electric power station at Ardnacrusha, which ended the Limerick-Killaloe navigation. Barges still operated from the harbour canal until 1960, using the route up the Abbey River, but the canal leading

to Annaghbeg fell into disuse. Flooding below Killaloe made the locks redundant. As Doonass was tamed, boats now passed through the double locks at Ardnacrusha leading down to the Abbey River. Jim Gully was the last lock keeper on the old canal system.

In 1960, the Limerick Canal was finally closed as a commercial waterway and the transport of stout by canal ended. From then onwards, the 200 licensed vintners in Limerick got their supplies by rail from Dublin. Guinness sold its 56 working barges at public auction soon after.

In 1984, concerned citizens launched a clean-up of the area and in 1993 Limerick Corporation identified the canal for restoration as part of the King's Island Development Plan. In 1994, Limerick Civic Trust commenced work at Lock Quay. The trust donated £86,860 from a total bill for the project of £824,122.

Subsequently, Shannon Development and Limerick City Council successfully obtained €1 million in funding under the EU "Water in Historic Cities" initiative, which ran from 2004 to 2007. This was a period which saw major dredging and re-development work achieved on the canal.

The new lock gates alone cost €100,000. It is hoped to make the canal navigable as far as the University, where small craft could one day transport students, staff and tourists. In doing so they will partake in a history that is rich in maritime lore.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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