

# Trips on the river

## My Limerick

A weekly  
series by  
KEVIN  
HANNAN

I remember, as a very small boy, my trip down the river in the paddle steamer "Mermaid". I can recall nothing of the scenery along the route, of which I heard many favourable comments from those crowded along the rail, and, in afterlife I often pondered what I had missed, though admitting that fine scenery would have few charms for a small boy on a great big ship for the first time in his life.

I can best recall the lemonade, the dancing and the music of accordions and fiddles though the chugging of the mysterious engine below decks and the foaming water cascading from the revolving paddle wheels was a fascinating contrast to the music and, what I regarded, the strange behaviour of the passengers.

It was a memorable occasion for me, my first major escape from the couped up environment of the old city, with its smells from the fetid lanes and alleys, the blaring of factory hooters marking the passing days and the thunder of iron banded cart wheels on the block-paved city streets.

The vessel was owned by the late Matthew Russell, an enterprising and successful local merchant, who made a brave attempt to revive the river trips which were such a notable feature of Limerick life for almost sixty years.

The "Mermaid" was an old vessel with a long history of service in the estuary. In the 1870s it replaced the "Vandeleur" on the Foynes/Kilrush service. She was the last of the river cruisers. I remember her

moored in uncharacteristic idleness in the lie-by at Howley's Quay for a number of years before she disappeared for ever.

I often paused to survey her empty decks and bemoan the silence of her motionless paddle wheels. It was the end of the paddle steamers cruising down the estuary from Limerick and the end of a recreation that was never revived, even though a number of efforts were made with more modern, but less colourful craft.

From the 1870s there were fine vessels engaged in pleasure cruises from Limerick. In the summer of 1878 the Citizens' Tug Boat Company used their powerful new vessel, the "Commodore", under Captain Biggs, for pleasure cruises down the river from Limerick. During the weekdays, she was engaged in her main task, towing. At that time all sailing vessels, from medium size, had to be towed up the estuary; sailing a large vessel through the narrow confines of the river would have been next to impossible. She was capable of accommodating 500 passengers in "tolerable comfort". The cost of a Sunday outing on the river was one shilling!

Before the West Clare Railway, the journey from Dublin to Kilkee took 10 hours! Excursionists left Kingsbridge station at 9am and reached the "Empress of watering places" at 7pm after "a pleasant journey by rail, steamboat and car, the regulations of both the former being most perfect and free from any unnecessary delay". On arriving at Lim-

erick by train from Dublin, trippers walked to Russell's pier where the paddle steamer was waiting to take them to Cappagh pier, thence to Kilkee by a horse drawn long car. I wonder how many of to-day's pampered excursionists would endure the rigours of such a journey?

Another fine vessel built in the city was the yacht "Circe". This was built "on the North Strand (no doubt Russell's Yard), in 1871 by Mr P Gaynor", for Thomas Alexander, the well-known Ship's Chandler, whose premises were at the corner of William Street and George's Street (the Saxone corner). At the time of launching the following notice appeared in the Chronicle: "The lines of this fine vessel are the admiration of all nautical men who have inspected her and being constructed almost entirely of Irish timber, shows what might be done by encouraging native talent and industry. She is, indeed, no small credit to her builder and we trust she will not disappoint her enterprising owner, who is highly esteemed on the Shannon as second to none as a yachtsman. On leaving the quays, she was named the "Circe". She will be yawl rigged and is 24 tons, builder's measurement".

Another small vessel owned by a Limerick merchant was the paddle steamer "Fairy Queen". She was owned by Mr JW Shaw. There was a carnival atmosphere around the quays when she set out on her first trip in 1865: "she left for Grass Island at the rate of 8

to 10 miles per hour, to the admiration of hundreds of spectators. She is little more than the size of an eight oar barge".

Two of the more colourful vessels that engaged in pleasure cruises on Sundays in the early years of the present century were the "Shannon" and "Flying Huntsman". The latter had twin funnels abreast and did not look at all as well as the "Shannon", which cut quite a dash with its full complement of happy passengers leaving Russell's quay on Sunday mornings.

Of all the vessels that plied the estuary the "Shannon" must take the palm for excellence of performance and good looks. Up to the early years of the century, her Sunday trips were well patronised, but her life giving weekly commercial engagements were falling off to an extent that made her continued use uneconomic. The climax came when the vessel remained in the docks amid rumours that she was sold.

But, as time passed on and she remained at her moorings, hopes ran high that the rumours were unfounded and the citizens would, once more, enjoy the river excursions they thoroughly enjoyed for more than two generations. But all hopes vanished when one fine day she steamed out of the docks bound for Greece with a Greek captain and crew and with a new name "Kaliope" painted on her bows.

The port of Limerick - the quays - for so long characterised in the past by the teeming shipping, has given

way to great herds of mute swans and the quayside looks resplendent with long lines of ornamental trees; a picturesque promenade in a radically changed scene. There are no boats to be seen.

There are many who remember the large number of pleasure row-boats moored across the river above and below the Sarsfield Bridge. These were owned by the two rowing clubs, Shannon and Limerick, whose members were wont to row their wives and girl friends to Corbally and picnic on St Thomas' Island, long before Thomond Weir closed the river to all traffic.

Strollers along the quays often paused to watch the dockers unloading the ships resting on their keels on the riverbed at low tide. In the light of modern methods of discharging cargo, it seems

incredible that up to a few years ago, a full cargo of coal was taken from a ship in sacks.

Another feature of dockland, which is drawing to a close is the trout fishing, up to the end of the nineteen fifties, the river from the Island Point to the Pool, teemed with trout and anglers lined the quays and the bridges during the evenings of the fishing season.

The discharge of vast quantities of chemicals through the sewers is regarded to be the true source of the mischief; these are mainly household toilet cleaners and disinfectants, which are guaranteed to kill all germs but it is felt they must kill all kinds of aquatic life as well. It is a sad situation for which there seems to be no remedy.

## For Aidan Hurley

I met with a flautist in the Gate Bar,  
And we talked about music while having a jar;  
We talked about Limerick and times long ago,  
And of the people who lived in Punch's Row.

The time it soon passed while having our chat,  
Telling old tales about this and that;  
Of people we knew, some dead and long gone,  
While in the background the singer, the song.

As we sat in the bar, having our sup,  
The barman called out 'gents, it's time to drink up'.  
— S. Collins.

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