Abbey unlocks its Hell’s Gate secrets

By DENIS O’SHAUGHNESSY

THE outline of what appears to be an attempt to build locks at what is known as Hell’s Gates below Mathew Bridge has been uncovered during work on the main drainage project. Hell’s Gates gets its name from the huge water turbulence at the point where the Abbey River meets the Shannon.

What appeared to be a stone-cast wall caused much curiosity and it has now been discovered that the structure was the foundation of lock gates which were originally to be part of an ambitious scheme to create a floating dock, over and lock system designed to free boats in Limerick from dependence on the tides. This would enable access along the Abbey River and so on to Kilcoltra and the upper reaches of the Shannon.

This 1922 project was to be part of the grand Wellowsley (new Sarsfield) Bridge plan and was drawn up by the bridge’s constructor, civil engineer Alexander Nimmro.

The first stage of the project had commenced with the building of the lock wall along the river bed, but because of cost overruns on the bridge construction, the weir and dock never materialised.

The Wellowsley Bridge and lock project was approved by the House of Commons Select Committee with civil engineer, Thomas Shaw, in 1902. The plan had also to be altered, this time because of unfavourable soil conditions on the river bed.

Twelve years later, an even more ambitious plan to plan the river at a point where the present Shannon Bridge is was approved by a House of Commons Select Committee with civil engineer, Thomas Shaw, in 1902. The plan had also to be altered, this time because of unfavourable soil conditions on the river bed.

A century later, in 1922, plans were again drawn up in connection with the building of the Shannon Scheme to build a weir at the point where the Abbey River meets the Shannon. These plans were also altered, this time because of unfavourable soil conditions on the river bed.

A view of construction work on the new navigation weir at the point where the Abbey River meets the Shannon. In contrast, the lock wall of the aborted 1822 weir project was never built.