

# Strategic site led to many firsts at Foynes



## Then & Now

with Tom Aherne

THE PICTURESQUE village of Foynes in West Limerick was world famous during the flying boat era in Ireland from 1937 to 1945.

Foynes was the centre of the aviation world with the famous flying boats landing and taking off with a diverse range of passengers from celebrities to refugees.

On July 5, 1937 the inaugural flight which was operated by Pan American Airlines departed Newfoundland (Botwood) and landed in Foynes the following day.

This marked the beginning of transatlantic commercial flights. Faing is the Irish name for Foynes and translated it means raven. A bird in flight ties in nicely with the flying boat era.

It is built along the Shannon shore in a beautiful location between green wooded hills and the shining waters of the Shannon Estuary.

It has a rich historical and cultural background, a thriving port and a noble marine roadway that leads to all parts of the world.

Foynes has associations with the William Smith O'Brien family. William's daughter Charlotte was a tireless campaigner for improvements in the accommodation provided on the notorious emigrant ships in the post famine period.

A nephew of hers Conor O'Brien circumnavigated the globe in his yacht Saoirse, the first Irishman to perform this sailing feat between June 1923 and June 1925.

Foynes is the third largest deep water commercial port in Ireland and it was selected as a temporary site on the River Shannon which is the longest in the British Isles.

The site would be in use until an Airport at nearby Rineanna could be designed and built. Rineanna opened in 1945 and is now known as Shannon International Airport.

The flying boat was a type of propeller-driven seaplane that used its fuselage as a floating hull that was supported on the water by floats under its wings. The flying boats proved very useful during World War 2 as they did not need runways and the pilots could land and take off on the water.

The planes left Foynes late at night for security reasons and landed there early in the mornings.

A boat threw flares on to the water to create a flare path for the flying boats to take off and more flares were shot into the sky to create artificial daylight. Foynes welcomed many famous people during those years including John F

Kennedy, Humphrey Bogart, Douglas Fairbanks Jnr, Yahoed Menuhin, Charles Lindbergh, and Eamon De Valera.

The flying boats offered a lot of comfort during those 17 hour flights. In the Boeing B 314 there were seven separate passenger compartments, a galley and dining lounge as well as plenty accommodations for the crew.

Two stewards prepared the meals from a good choice menu waited on tables and catered for the passengers needs.

A round trip from New York to Foynes cost 675 dollars in 1939. Maureen O'Hara one of Ireland's best known actresses, is one of Foynes most devoted patrons and a regular visitor over the years.

She was married to Captain Charles Blair an award winning pilot who set many records, and piloted many flights in and out of Foynes.

He was tragically killed in a plane accident on September 2, 1978. He flew 1,500 Atlantic crossings and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery in America. A special display is dedicated to him at Foynes Flying Boat Museum.

Foynes led the way in those days with many notable firsts to its credit and it provided the country with an opportunity to compete internationally.

The first airmail letters were issued through Foynes, plus the first commercial aviation communications service.

The first Irish Commercial Metrological service was set up there also and Joe Sheridan introduced Irish coffee for the weary passengers on a dark and stormy night in 1942.

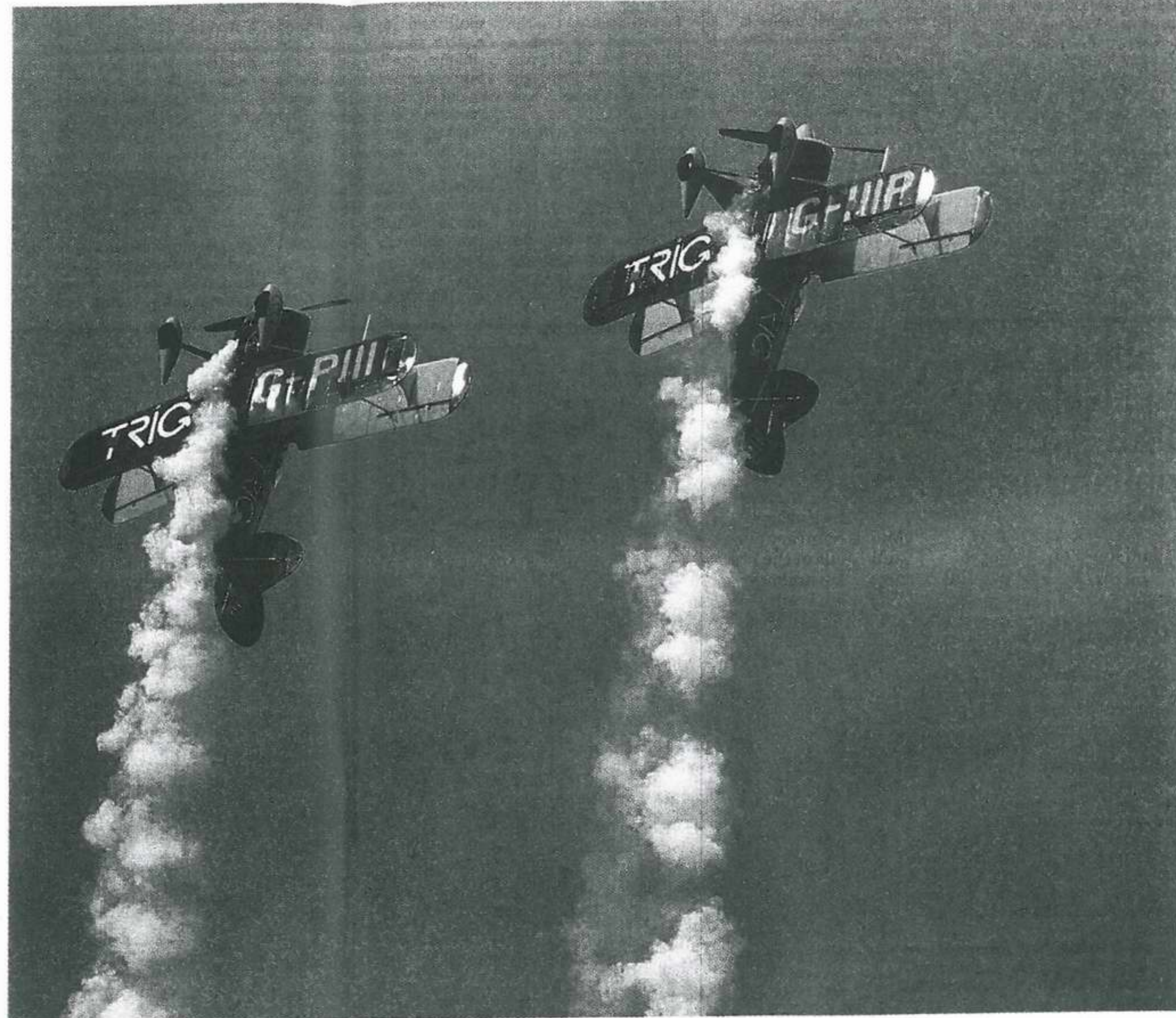
There are many dates of importance associated with Foynes including the first flying boat Imperial Airways Cambria which arrived at Foynes from Southampton under Captain Taffy Powell on February 25th 1937.

The first commercial scheduled passenger flight left for Foynes with 19 passengers on board on July 8 1939 and its arrival the following day was celebrated in Foynes last weekend with a spectacular air display to mark the 75th anniversary.

THE NINTH Know Your Neighbour weekend on this Saturday and Sunday is now a permanent date on the social calendar.

It is a Macra na Feirme initiative and it is supported by The Wheel, Irish Country Living and the Irish Farmers Journal.

The organisers are asking people



Foynes aeronautical heritage was celebrated last Sunday with a spectacular air show attended by the Taoiseach Enda Kenny, among others

Picture: Sean Curtin/Fusionshooters

around the country to get involved and to organise events which will bring people new to areas and their neighbours together.

The theme this year is "Neighbours-Near and Far" as Macra encourage people to include their neighbours who are living abroad.

All our communities have lost neighbours to emigration and their absence is felt most in their homes, communities, and the local sports and social clubs.

Macra are encouraging everyone to pick up the phone and say hello or to send them a post card to let them know that they are being thought about.

People can also organize a Skype call with friends to their absent neighbours over this weekend.

It is all so different now than in times past in my area when everybody was calling into each other's homes, without an invitation, and some children were even fed and looked after in their neighbour's homes.

The hands in the clock have gone full circle and you would need to book an appointment to call to many houses at present.

There are various reasons for the complete change including less movement from people then from their own areas due to no means of travel being available.

The arrival of the motor car changed all this and new horizons beckoned leaving people less time to visit their neighbours.

Television was another reason to

stay at home for entertainment rather than call to the neighbours for a chat a game of cards, rings or a house dance.

The increased risk of robberies from unwelcome callers has also led to many homes having to increase their security to protect their property and possessions.

I was always delighted to hear the latch on the gate being opened when I was young and neighbours calling were plentiful.

I welcome the Macra initiative and the Know Your Neighbour weekend and I think nowadays we need our neighbours more than ever to survive all the challenges we face.

A WEST LIMERICK Heritage Network Bus Tour of Newcastle West,

Abbeyfeale, and Dromcollogher will take place this coming Saturday July 12 from 11am to 4.30pm.

This is a great opportunity for people to explore the hidden heritage of the monastic settlement in Abbeyfeale, the Co-op movement in Dromcollogher and the Desmond family in Newcastle West.

The tour will be led by locals with an in-depth knowledge of the areas and the hidden stories.

This project is funded by Limerick City of Culture and supported by West Limerick Resources, and limited seats (cost € 5 per seat) are available and booking is essential.

Contact Suzannne at West Limerick Resources on 069-79114 or email westlimerickheritage@gmail.com

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PAGE 17