

MEMORIES OF THE OLD CANAL

by Kevin Hannan

How many of us, from time to time, like to recall the golden days we enjoyed "up the Canal" whether bird-nesting in the adjacent hedges, or fishing for perch off the "jetty", or in the quiet waters near Madden's Lock, or during the warm summer days, swimming at "Tom Bulls"? Whatever the recreation, the Canal was the magnet. For the very young it was the avenue to the great new world beyond the city. How many thousands of anglers served their apprenticeship by its peaceful waters? How many more who sailed the Seven Seas enjoyed their first trip in a brecaun? How we gazed in wonder at the laden sand cot, showing only an inch or two of its gun'le over the water, being towed by a barefoot man, bent forward with the great strain of his task. In those far off days the Canal harbour was full of animation and colour: barges being loaded and unloaded, wet sand being shovelled from the cots on to the sand quay, the banter of workmen and the general activity that seemed to illustrate the justification for so great a venture as the cutting of the canal.

The great task began on the 13th June, 1757, when workmen began the cut at Bartlett's Bog, a swampy area that stretched between Lock Quay and Pennywell Lane. Even to-day a casual look at the fields on both sides of the Canal, at this point, will give some idea of the prodigious work that lay ahead of the army of labourers, equipped only with barrows, buckets, ropes, hand pumps and the main implements, picks and shovels.

After they had slushed their way through the watery peat of the bog, the most difficult part of their task began. This was the cutting through the end of Park Hill, between Madden's Lock and "Tom Bulls." Here they had to delve more than fifty feet, where some rock was encountered. This had to be pulverised with sledges, or, in some cases, split with wedges and lifted out in convenient pieces. The Shannon was reached at Rhebog and the main cut completed in the following year; surely a wonderful feat by men whose wages were, according to tradition, only a penny a day. This I do not altogether accept. The famous Pery Charitable Loan Fund was established in 1771, only fourteen years afterwards, for the relief of poor tradesmen, by granting them loans of three guineas, to be paid back in instalments of 1/4 a week. Despite the social cleavage that existed between tradesmen and labourers in those days, it is hard to believe that workers could labour through a gruelling 60 to 80

hours for six pence.

The cutting between Annabeg (Plassey) and the Shannon above Castleconnell, which was undertaken two years earlier, proved to be an almost insurmountable task for the labourers and the engineers. At Newtown Bog, between Gillogue and Clonlara, those hardy workers encountered an enemy that thwarted their efforts all the time-water. As they shovelled out the peat and clay, water took its place before the shovels were brought to earth again. Here, in the quite bog they laboured in mud and water, without the relative comfort of water-proof boots or clothing. Many had to walk long distances to their homes, and rise again in the small hours to face the long journey for another day's toil. Ironically, the ultimate purpose of their efforts was to contain the element which hampered their endeavours so completely by its insistence on being contained all the time.

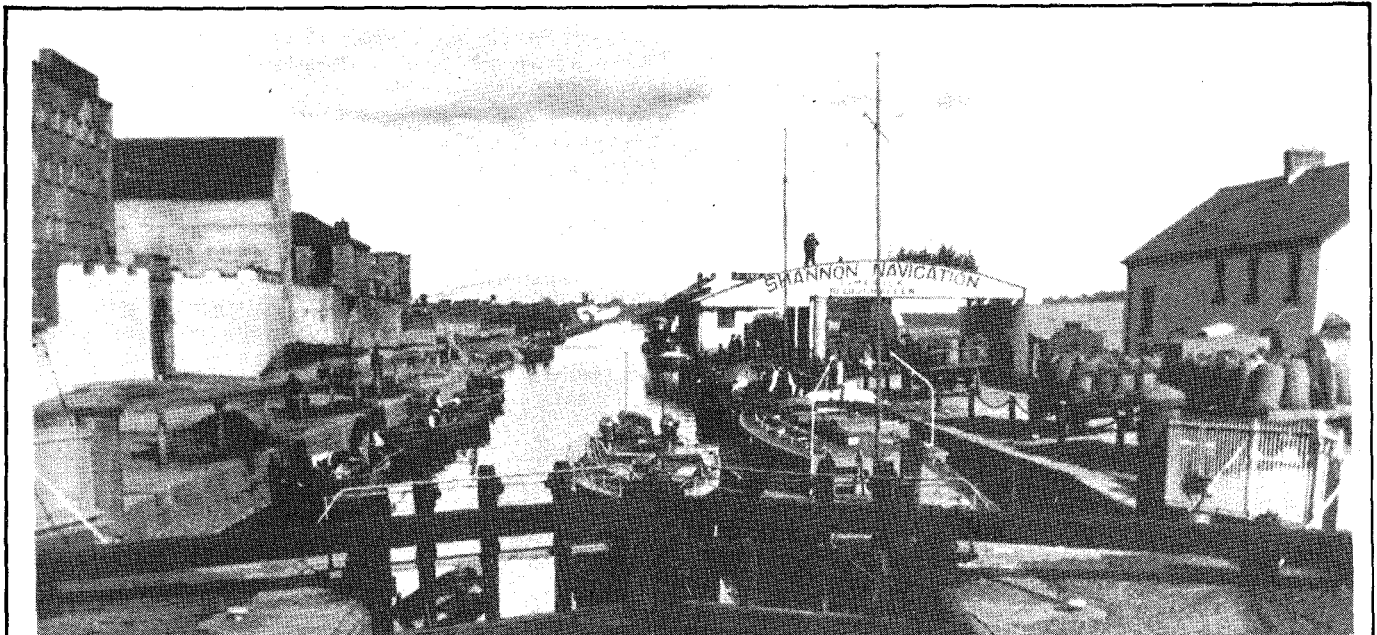
The work went on for years with indifferent success, until 1767, when the Act was passed setting up the Limerick Navigation Company to finish the work. This company also having failed, the work was completed by the Inland Navigation Commissioners, who took over in 1780. Newtown Bog has been mostly reclaimed now, but in those days it was a great swamp and sanctuary for wild fowl.

The Clare Blackwater had to be diverted a little below Mount Catherine Bridge, and a new channel cut to the Shannon at Annabeg. The old watercourse of this river, with its very limited catchment area, can be seen as it enters the parent river a quarter of a mile below the spawning beds of Doonass.

The cutting above Clonlara was a slow process. Even today the observer must wonder at the enormity of the labour which had to be faced by the ill-fed, pick-and-shovel men. The cut is more than seventy feet deep for a painfully long stretch, and just as wide at the top.

The last part of the canal west of the Shannon was completed without difficulty at Killaloe.

Trippers to Plassey are often puzzled by the milestone mid-



The Canal, with the Lock Gate, some pleasure craft, barges, sand cots, and the Lock Mills and the Cooperage in the background.

way between the bridge and the garrison wall. This stone bears the inscription: 'Limerick 2 miles; Killaloe 12 miles', and upstream from the canal track, people are bewildered by its position. This circumstance is a reminder of the days before the erection of Plassey Bridge, when the towing horses were ferried across the river on a special raft which was winched from one side to the other.

The machinery was operated and maintained by winch keepers, who resided on the spot. The keeper's house on the Limerick side can still be seen a short distance above Plassey Bridge. The one on the Clare side has long since disappeared, though its foundations can still be traced behind the hawthorn tree at 'Peg's Height'. The last person in occupation here was, according to tradition, Peg O'Brien, hence 'Peg's Height'.

This milestone, therefore, marks the terminus of the canal system at the Limerick side. The building of Plassey Bridge saw the end of this difficult, and dangerous operation. The milestones were erected between Limerick and Killaloe, in 1814, and marked the mileage both ways. The distances were set out in Irish miles.

In common with all other waterways of its kind, the Canal has been the stage for its own brand of drama and tragedy. Of all the drownings that occurred there during the past two hundred years, perhaps the most pathetic was that which took place in the darkness of Good Friday night, 1902, when a young factory worker fell from the jetty, where she had been dancing with more than a hundred others. On the evidence of a number of eye witnesses, no attempt was made to save her.

Three very popular salmon anglers, Thomas Anslow, John O'Connell and Thomas Madden, were swallowed up in the freezing waters of the river they loved so well, on Sunday night, 2nd February, 1930, their boat having been smashed to pieces against one of the piers of Plassey bridge. A passenger, the late John Airey, who clung to part of the wreckage, was rescued by the McMahon brothers, Jim and Pat (R.I.P.), across the Bridge from their house at the head of the Canal.

The fishermen plied their nets ceaselessly in powerful current all through the following week in their search for the bodies. Since their season did not begin until February 12th, an undertaking had to be given to the Limerick Fishery Board that any salmon caught would be returned to the water.

This tragedy marked the end of salmon angling as it was known up to that time. From 1931 salmon angling from boats was prohibited by the Abbey fishermen, who had purchased the remaining rights on the Shannon where they operated.

Another tragedy was the accidental drowning nearly 90 years ago of Thomas Sheehy, the Lock keeper at Annabeg (Plassey), who was one of a crew of four on a barge which foundered in the Shannon about half a mile below Plassey Bridge. The barge, which was an old wooden structure, was loaded with rock from Gully's quarry (Gilloogue). His body was recovered at Coonagh on the first anniversary of his death.

The Lock Mills, which stood on the northern bank of the Canal near the Abbey River, were built in 1765 by Andrew Walsh, and the noted engineer of the period, Uzuld. (The latter was also the builder of the beautiful bridge which stood on the site of the present Mathew Bridge.) The mills were of considerable power having six pairs of millstones for grinding corn, four boulting mills, four tucking mills, and many unique devices, including mechanical hoists which could be operated to raise loads to the top stories while the mills were working normally. All this power was transmitted from two water wheels which were turned by water from the Canal.

During the very depressed times of 1771, a large crowd of poor and famished people gathered outside the mills demanding bread for their starving families. On the instructions of the Mayor, Christopher Carr, the mills were occupied by a detachment from the Garrison. A volley was fired at the crowd, killing three persons on the opposite side of the canal. The disturbances continued again on the following day, and three more people were killed by the military, including a poor Park woman, who was killed while sitting beside her milk can in Broad Street.

With the coming of the paddle steamers, 'Lady Lansdowne'

and 'Lady Burgoyne', early in the nineteenth century, the Limerick navigation system was linked up with the Grand Canal Company's waterway between Shannon Harbour and Dublin. Barges and passenger boats were towed up and down the lake between Killaloe and Shannon Harbour. Thus the journey between Limerick and Dublin became a regular service for passengers and goods.

The passenger craft were known as flyboats, and were towed at a fast rate by horses in charge of gaily uniformed postilions. The horses worked day and night, and were changed at specified distances. These poor animals must have suffered considerably in the wintertime, and especially towing the heavily laden craft against the full might of the Shannon current between Rhebogue and Plassey.

I would like to think that there was a little more kindness shown to them in those days than there would be today.

The flyboats, whose masters were armed as a protection against highway men and robbers, had first and second-class cabins, and were tastefully laid out with bars and diningrooms. The crockery and utensils were of the finest quality. The spoons were of solid silver. The journey from Limerick to Dublin took four days. It was a safe and tranquil method of travel, far removed from the bumping and jolting of a hundred and twenty miles of potholes.

Fine hotels were established at Shannon Harbour, Tullamore and Portobello for the convenience of passengers.

Before this hotel was built passengers were accommodated at the home of Richard Harrold of Pennywell. This fine house stood in the corner of the "Nuns' Field", close to Madden's Lock. The ruin, known as the 'haunted house', stood well into the twenties, has now disappeared to the foundations.

The charges at these hotels in the early 1840s were as follows: breakfast with eggs, 1/8; dinner 2/2; tea or coffee, 1/-; room, 3/3; and full board and bed for one day, 8/1. These prices were high for this period if one considers that a servantboy or girl would have to slave for a whole year if they were to enjoy the cuisine of the 'haunted house' for two days.

Only well-to-do persons could afford a journey by canal those days, and there appears to have been a great number of this class, for it is on record that 100,000 passengers availed of the service annually in the opening years of the nineteenth century. Among the many famous people who favoured the flyboats were Daniel O'Connell and Gerald Griffin.

It is interesting to note that Dr. Emmet, father of the "Darling of Erin", was a director of the old Grand Canal Company; so was Napper Tandy, of 'The Wearin' of the Green' fame.

The canal system was invaluable in the transport of heavy goods, which would otherwise have to be drawn along wretched roads by horse teams. Much of the marble quarried at Ballysimon was conveyed to its nearest destination by canal barge. The great bell in the tower of St. John's Cathedral was transported in the same way from Dublin.

Things are very quiet there now. There is no activity. The barges, the sand cots and the workers are gone. The harbour buildings are crumbling to decay. There are no heaps of wet sand on the sand quay, and the Canal itself is stagnant and choked up with rank vegetation, and here and there, the convenient repository for an unwanted car body. It is quiet and still by the water meadows of Rhebogue, where the boom of distant traffic is shattered by the lonesome piping of the curlew. It is a sad place, where nothing wakes but memories of the past.

At the Limerick terminus the hotel was situated where the Canal joined the Abbey river. This building, now in ruin, was once the venue for meetings of the "Independent Club", founded in Limerick by Tom Steele, O'Connell's best friend. "Independent Clubs" were formed throughout the country in opposition to the "Brunswick Clubs" which were founded by the landlord class after their set back at the Clare elections of 1828.

