The Old Harbour Canal
Part Two:
Crisis Management
1895-1930

by John Rainsford

Introduction
The Letter Book and Log Book of the Old Grand Canal Company is a fascinating read. Bound in dusty black covers, it contains hundreds of hand-written pages by the managers of the old Limerick Canal (1895 to 1930). The inked pages are discoloured from years of inactivity. However, they are vivid in their accounts of working life at this time. The extracts that follow recount a story of everyday working life as told by two strong personalities, namely Thomas Jeffs (1895 to 1900) and John J. Johnson (1900 to 1930). Mr. Jeffs vacated the manager's position around 1900 and John J. Johnson took over until its closure. Johnson's written entries are, therefore, by far the more numerous. He subsequently died on the 24th April 1956. The Log Book, along with a number of loose-leaf business letters, was presented by John Johnson's son, Mr. Dominic Johnson, to the library of Glenstal Abbey on May 7, 1988.

A Great Sweep of Water

Anyone who has seen the Shannon River after heavy winter rains will know how powerful and dangerous it can be. Before 1929, the water was far higher than today's levels, as the dam above O'Brien's Bridge was not yet complete. Barge work could, therefore, be extremely dangerous, especially during these winter torrents. Indeed, the very first entry to the Log Book by Thomas Jeffs concerns an incident in December, 1885, at Corbally Weir, when a local man named John Harris was forced to jump into the freezing river to avoid a barge that had just struck Athlunkard Bridge. Eventually the craft got stuck in just four feet of water near the weir, but took weeks to salvage and remove. Its cargo included over 500 cases of milk, which according to Jeffs, remained 'perfectly dry' throughout.

"O'Callaghan [haultier] seeing that nothing could be done to save the boat cut the line to save the horses. [The] boat was then hauled down the stream with the great sweep of water, the river being very high at present and made for Athlunkard Bridge". [P31]

He warned:

"The whole danger is if the boat is carried downstream and breaks through the fishing weirs and then takes away a portion of the Ennis Railway Bridge". [P35]

In February 1897, Jeffs recalled another incident to managing director, Kirkland, in Dublin. Boat No. 12 left the jetty, where it had been berthted beside the Ballinturkha and struck a large stone projecting from the pier. Jeffs noted the evidence of Master Buckley and how close the incident came to being an outright sinking.

"Master states that if she [Boat 12] was full loaded she would certainly have sunk. They patched up the leak with cement and brought her in here with 8 tons. It would be well to have the boat examined at Shannon as she got a terrible knock". [P48]

Barge masters were frequently blamed for these collisions and it is hard to avoid using modern phrases like 'blame game' when we read these accounts. Jeffs, for example, blamed the boat's master for this incident:

"Buckley will do harm yet if you do not change him sooner. I told you the way he used to work for men when trading in here". [P48]

"Steamer Masters have a habit of turning their steamers with boats tied on to them before entering the pier head". [P48]

In March 1897, a violent storm on Lough Derg came close to killing one crewman, who was 'thrown onto his back' and badly hurt his left shoulder. Jeffs told the managing director, Mr. Kirkland, that it was 'blowing so hard' that the filler was ripped from the man's hand:

"It [shoulder] was so swollen and black that I sent him to the hospital here. The doctor bandaged it up well and told him to give it rest for some days". [P.51]

Later, in an unintended irony, he told Mr. Kirkland:

"We must have men in charge of steamers who will put their shoulder out when necessary". [P.53]

Jeffs himself was a frequent traveller on the barges when he visited stations up the Shannon, such as Scariff, Killaloe and Portumna. One storm in particular made him extremely uneasy:

"I certainly say steamer masters should not be allowed to run risks taking out boats on a very wild day as it is almost impossible for them to sell single-handed in bad weather. I certainly thought we would be beaten back a few times but we got safely to Portumna at 4.20 pm after a dreadful passage". [P.57]

Winter storms not only caused delays for customers who required fresh porter. It also cost the Grand Canal Company considerable revenue in terms of late deliveries. Winter sailing times were seasonally curtailed due to the longer nights, with sailing times put back until 12 noon. Dredging of the canal, which was a frequent necessity, along with widening and deepening sections of the river, could also not be completed.

In 1900, for example, only 1300 cubic feet of embankment had been raised for that year. The poor weather pattern could last for months, to the frustration of canal managers and customers alike. Problems with stale porter or 'Slack Casks' and 'Ullage', or waste, abounded as a result. Before 1905, the Grand Canal Company bore the full cost of 'Ullage'. Thereafter,
The hump-backed bridge at Groody designed for winter flooding

the Guinness brewery itself took part of the loss. John J. Johnson wrote at this time:

"The large stock of Porter kept on hands during the summer months together with the length of time taken by boats coming from Dublin was, Mr. Kennedy pointed out, to me the whole secret of the extraordinary amount of ullage that occurred from time to time during these months". [Letter to MD, George Tough, April 2, 1900]

He continued:

"I quite understand and agree with you that very bad work was done on the Shannon during the past two months but as you are aware the fearfully bad weather was the cause of our not being able to cope with the work to any satisfaction. With all respect I must take exception to the point raised that Mr. Jeffs exercised in any way a more vigilant supervision over the Shannon traffic than I have done". [P.327]

"Owing to the constant rains the Shannon is greatly flooded again. Between Crows Lock and O'Brien's Bridge the banks for 150 yards in one place are covered with water and at another place for 20 yards". [P.401]

"During the winter months while the water was high at O'Brien's Bridge I rode out several times to assist in getting boats and steamers through the bridge in safety and came back each evening. I was told at O'Brien's Bridge by people who are living in the locality for years that the water was never to their knowledge so high and some of them pointed out to me the danger of heavy boats going through the bridge without doing harm". [P.354]

Damage to boats, however, was not always the result of poor weather. Johnson recounted to George Tough, the managing director of the Grand Canal Company in Dublin, how a 'Sandcots' was struck and sunk in 1905. The owner of the sandcots was a Mr. Frawley and the master of boat 26 a Mr. McCormack.

"Boat 26 referred to in the attached left here on Saturday 6th inst and as it appears struck a Sand Cot at Park Lock and sunk her. Frawley (owner) made no report to me about the matter and this is the first complaint I have received. From inquiries I have made it would appear as if the Sand Cot was nearly clear of the lock when it was struck by our boat. Master of Boat 26 should be able to throw all the light necessary on the matter." [P.457]

"These Sand Cots are worked by sculling so that the man in the Cot having his back turned cannot see what is approaching him". [P.457]

"From the particulars I have got I am inclined to think that Frawley tried to get clear of the lock but was unable to do so before 26 arrived at the lock". [P.458]

"I questioned the driver of Boat 26 McCormack about the matter and he informs me that the Master of 26 in order to avoid striking the Sand Cot did all he could short of injuring his own boat to avoid a collision". [P.458]

Johnson himself is very clear that it is the Board of Works who must alter the navigation on the Shannon to suit the Company's interests. He complains that private contractors such as Bannatyne's, Burke and King and Son are doing far better in their requests for improvements to the Shannon than the Grand Canal Company.

"This river is the cause of great trouble and expense year after year and with the most modest calculation I am of the opinion that the company have lost for the past 10 years no less than £100 simply through delays to steamers and boats". [Letter to MD, George Tough, January 29, 1913]

"The Board of Works are absolutely inert and the traders are so far as I can see taking no interest in doing anything to avoid these delays and the necessity devolves on the company to safeguard their own interests". [ibid]

"They [The Board] get nearly 85% of the freights earned by the Grand Canal Company on goods carried from Limerick to Scariff and it ought not to be an unreasonable demand when they assume authority over this portion of the Shannon and charge tolls to maintain navigation in order". [ibid]

"The Grand Canal Company have not asked the Board of Works to spend much money on the Shannon in their interests and they have a legitimate right in making a demand such as I have indicated to them". [ibid]

"There are two arms in this river which are to a very great extent the cause of a good deal of this trouble and if they were removed it would at least in some way help to make this portion of the river more navigable in time of floods. I do not say it would get over the difficulty in its entirety because the drainage of the river itself is the great crux". [ibid]

"The two other principal traders on the Shannon are Messrs Bannatyne and King and Son and they have to my own personal knowledge succeeded in getting the Board of Works to spend very large sums of money for their benefit alone. The Grand Canal Company who are the mainstay of the Board of Works should have a prior claim and should succeed in their demand to have this river put in order so that the trade to Scariff would not be held up as it has been often after a days rain. They are both strong opponents of the company and any improvements made would certainly be the means of helping both King and Bannatyne to carry increased tonnage in their steamers". [ibid]
Pillage and Plunder

Combating crime played a significant part in the life of the canal managers with frequent references to 'pillage' in both the accounts of Jeffs and Johnson. Fr. Dominic Johnson recalled to the Limerick Leader in 1847 that it was common practice for holes to be bored through the gates of the Guinness warehouse and into the wooden casks of porter on the other side. Buckets were then copiously filled with the precious liquor and a quick escape made.

It is hard to quantify the cost of pillage to the company, but certainly customers did worry about the safety of their goods while in transit. In some cases it was a factor in old customers switching allegiance to the railway. Johnson, for example, tried to placate one worried customer in 1901:

"He informed me that about 12 months ago he had to with draw the carriage of his Porter from us on account of several 'slack casks' which we delivered to him. He believed that the Porter was tampered with on the way but I asked him had he Guinness' opinion as to this and he said not". [P.291]

"I then explained to him that Porter could become slack in casks without being interfered with and that we had often cases of 'slack casks' with no evident signs of pilferage as he had a very strong idea that Porter was from time to time pilloaged on the canal. I had great difficulty in convincing him that was not the case-telling him that the company had left nothing undone in stamping it out". [P.291]

The goods pillaged included tea, biscuits, tobacco, whiskey and porters and also clothes and shoes. It is interesting to note the complete lack of incidents of vandalism or violence on the canal, which strongly suggested that the purpose of the theft had more to do with subsistence than commerce. The canal barges carried a diverse set of cargo, including coal, cement, oil, timber, breadstuffs and milk to and from Dublin.

Jiffs reported these ongoing thefts to the police, but lamented that the 'night watch' and ordinary 'constabulary' were not patrolling the (beat) Canal Bank effectively. Before the foundation of the Free State there were only a few hundred RIC officers stationed in eight barracks (20 per barracks) around the city and a whistle was the only means of communication. However, persons caught stealing could expect to serve time in local prisons, one of which was then located in Mulgrave Street.

"Mr. [X] tells me that the last lot of biscuits shipped by him were pilloaged all the boxes having been opened and something taken out of each. Keep a sharp look out and have goods weighed as you take them out". [P.48]

"I reported the matter to the police who have succeeded in capturing one of the felons and four women who were in his company last night at a wake in Clare Street. I expect a second man will be caught also. One of the men left a boat after him and it was by that police were able to trace him". [P.150]

"The police are only on duty up to 12 midnight and the night watch come on after 11pm but are no earthly use. In fact there is no protection here at all night hence the necessity of some person living on or near the premises". [P.150]

In another incident, which Johnson refers to in 1901 as a 'a new daring case of robbery', a man called Thomas Lewis, who was master of boat No. 16, went to bed on the barge at 11.30 pm and claimed to have been woken at 1.30 am by a barking dog. He saw 6 men gathered around the stern, one of whom was kneeling for the purpose of extracting porter from the casks. Lewis claimed to have given chase, but neither caught nor recognised any of the men. Johnson was in Patrol-like form and highly suspicious. How, he asked, were six holes drilled in two casks without Lewis hearing anything and why did the dog not bark while they were drilling?

"I put it strongly to him [Lewis] to know if he knew who any of these fellows were and he said not that the night was very dark and could not identify any of them. The whole case is a very suspicious one and I will go to Kilaloe this evening and investigate the matter". [P.316]

"That six holes could be bored into two casks without him hearing anything. The fact of his hearing a dog on board and that this dog barked makes this matter all the more suspicious". [P.317]

"I think that when the dog barked at all it would bark on the appearance of these six men and not wait until the robbers had finished their work". [P.318]

It is probable that those engaged in pilferage were well known to workers and management alike and in 1905 Johnson said of one incident:

"The parties implicated in the robbery could be seen drunk on the following Sunday at the bridge. Had any of these been arrested at the time it is more than likely that some of the tobacco would be found with them". [P.462]

However in another incident, Johnson is reluctant to blame the accused party, a man by the name of Joseph O'Mara. In a letter to the managing director, H. Phillips, in Dublin, dated 1925, he said:

"I don't think the information you received is quite correct. If it was correct that the men were admitted by this man to the store and that Porter was pilloaged there should be some evidence of it and some casks should show signs of pilferage but we did not notice anything wrong. It would be difficult to get at this bolt from outside in fact impossible. I have by no means a good opinion of O'Mara but never found him attempting pilloaging". [P.665]

Jobs for the Boys

The log book gives an important insight into how employment relations difficulties were resolved at this time. Johnson tells Mr. Kirkland in 1900:

"In order to get work out of them one must be actually on the ground to see that the work is done. Only yesterday morning we had a good deal of work to get through and as I was not very satisfied with the way the work got on the previous morning, I made a surprise
visit the following morning at 6 am
greatly to the discomfort of some of
tem 0269].

"Now is our time to work the Scariff
Station well and if no opposition we can
raise our grain rate.
I guarantee that if a good man was sent
to these fairs he would always get a full
load." [P28]

Both Jeffs and Johnson issued the kind of
blunt assessments that might have landed
them in a courtroom today:

"I visited Scariff yesterday and found Mr.
Rooney in bed, suffering he states from a
bad cold. He has been bad on and off
for the past fortnight". [P77]

"I think he does not seem to care whether
the station is taken from him or not. My
opinion is that you should change him
and send some person that understands
canal work from Dublin to take over the
station. You won't get a Clare man to
give satisfaction". [P88]

There is evidence that other employees
of the company were just as apathetic and
demoralised as Mr. Rooney. Jeffs agrees
that he has been forced by the cold and
damp condition of the stores to work in his
lodgings. On June 22, 1896, he wrote to the
managing director, Mr. Kirkland, in
Dublin about the store:

"I shall be glad you should see the store
here as it looks very bad and will surely
come down some day". [P24]

"He [Rooney] does not drink but has a
very weak constitution, as I have told
you before the least thing knocks him up.
He has to do all his office work in his
lodgings where I found his office is damp
and cold to work in without a store
which he certainly requires badly. The
December manifest is not all entered up
yet neither are there any entered up
for this month. He keeps his books in a
dreadful state". [P77]

A study of references given at the time by
both managers elicits the class of employee
needed by the company but rarely found.
From that point of view, it is a sort of
unattainable ideal worker. Descriptions like
'good man', 'steady man', 'respectable
fellow', 'an obliging fellow', 'temperate',
'sober', 'capable' and 'attentive' abound.

In Johnson's time, the chief jobs on the
canal were 'Checker', 'Storerman', 'Assist-
ant', 'Foreman', 'Barge Master' and 'Horse
Driver'. The latter position was contracted
out to hauliers around Limerick, who kept
suitable horses for the purpose. Relation-
ships with any or all of the above frequently
turned sour.

In relation to a man called A. O'Hanlon,
Johnson complained to managing director
Kirkland in 1900:

"Owing to the number of small but at the
same time important mistakes that you
are making recently I feel compelled to
tell you that unless you make some
improvement towards avoiding these
mistakes I will only have to bring your
name to the notice of the manager and
point out to him how unsatisfactory I
find you". [P275]

On August 29, 1896, he referred to an
application for an increase in salary by a
Mr. J. Reville, who held the position of
head storeman:

"I think an increase would encourage
him to work harder". [P27]

Johnson in 1900 referred to an ongoing
problem with the senior clerk, a man
called O'Callaghan, which necessitated a
series of re-shuffles.

"Jeffs knows well the senior clerk here
requires constant supervision. Removing
Moroney would simply leave me unable
to cope with the work". [P265]

With reference to his perennial problems
with the Callaghan family [hauliers], he
states in 1900:

"The Callaghans have not made any
improvement since Mr. Jeffs went but I
hope however to do something in having
them give more satisfaction". [P270]

By December of 1900, he has replaced
O'Hanlon with a new clerk called Mr.
Anslow. O'Hanlon is then moved to
replace Moroney, who goes to the Carlow
Station as senior clerk. A man called P.
O'Connor replaces Murphy in the porter
store and Murphy then becomes 'Chief
Checker'. O'Callaghan is then fired for
arguing with Johnson in front of fellow
workers and for drinking on the job.

Johnson describes the O'Callaghan
case to Kirkland in 1901:

"I find it very difficult to get my senior
checker of late to carry out any instruc-
tions I give him and no later than today
when I remonstrated with him he
repied back with abusive and insulting
language. When he learned that I would
bring the matter under your notice he
said in the presence of boatmen and
carters he would let you know "how
things are carrying on here". [P295]

Later that year he-affirmed to Kirkland:

"At the time this man's case
[O'Callaghan] was left in my own
hands, I decided upon taking him back
as a daily man giving him 5/- per
day until I would see how he would conduct
himself. He worked for a fortnight and
then said he would work no longer.
During the time I had him absent two or
three times from his work and in order
he got him to do anything I should have
to stand continually over him until the
work was finished. On one occasion he
went up town in the morning and I
saw him at 7.10 am coming from the
direction of a public house with Jack
Callaghan, driver. You will see from this
much that this is hardly the class of a
man one would be inclined to take back
in a hurry". [P309]

Johnson received his instruction from
Kirkland as follows on May 2, 1901:

"Your wire received today. Noted to
- Bennis O'Callaghan on the spot.
-Give a week's wages in lieu of notice." [P295]

Johnson took over from Jeffs in November
1900 and wrote to Kirkland looking for a
raise.

"I have I might say done everything
possible since I came here to minimize
the working expenses of the station and
have also I am glad to say shown
increased tonnage per month in my
comparative returns. I trust if you hear
these in mind you will be kind enough
to see your way to increase my salary". [P290]

Johnson and Jeffs are themselves no
strangers to criticism both from workers
and management.

Johnson wrote to managing director,
George Tough, concerning a complaint he
receives will be levelled against him for the
mistakes of others:

"Notwithstanding all my efforts to pull
up for this lazy and indifferent Motor
Master (Dunne) Mr. Jennings was
greatly annoyed and has informed me he
will bring the whole matter concerning
the irregular arrival of boats with their
Porter at Limerick under the notice of
the brewery".

"I could do no more and even went
without breakfast till 12.30 pm in my
anxiety to have boats in here in time". [Letter to MD, George Tough, July 29, 1913]

Jeffs cited examples of his own problems
in 1896:

"If I do not personally supervise the
loading and discharging of boats the
work is not done quickly as I have not
one man to make them work well as
boat men work. In fact I am called a
slave driver for making them work so
careless and by not getting more work
men". [P18]

"I should be very sorry if you considered
that by taking a few hours leave I
neglected my work. The report which you
have received is merely retaliating for
inspecting the work being carried out [by
boatmen]!". [P391]

One case in particular shows that the
company took a very hard line on bad
debts and also how ordinary people were
prepared even then to seek redress
through the use of solicitors.
"Mr Moran (company solicitor) tells me that Moloney (depositor) called at his office and said he had information from a solicitor that he could not be prosecuted. Mr Moran is writing him again tonight that unless the deficit is paid up by Monday he will take out a summons against him". [P.290]

Managers could themselves be subject to criticism as the cases below reveal.

Johnson wrote to managing director Kirkland in 1901:

"There is no truth in the statement that contractors’ drivers cannot agree with me and anyone of them will admit that they have nothing to say as regards my conduct towards them. I have simply done my duty since you appointed me here and if the contractor thinks otherwise he has his son [Jack Callaghan] to blame". [P.298]

"The contractors’ letter is signed by his son [Jack Callaghan], whom I referred to above. He is a very rare type". [P.298]

Johnson also corrects criticism from managing director George Tough for overcharging in 1907:

"I regret any delay in replying. You are in error in saying I charged the Company First Class Mail fare to Killaloa and you are also incorrect in stating that the Third Class Return to Limerick from Killaloa is 1/". [P.499]

**Noblesse Oblige**

It would be unfair to see the canal managers from this period as unfeeling and Dickensian in their attitudes to workers. Only in the case of O’Callaghan does Johnson appear to hold a long term grudge. As we saw in the case of O’Hanlon, a man who was complained about to the managing director, Johnson, gave excellent references to all those leaving his employ.

One can only assume, as per today’s working environment, that no matter what takes place inside locked doors, there must be a pragmatic policy towards finding a new job.

Take, for example, John Nihill, the former master of the St. Patrick, who was involved in an accident at Newtown on April 2, 1903. He was fined 5 Shillings and refused to pay, choosing to resign instead. Johnson, however, interceded on his behalf and wrote to George Tough, then managing director:

"He regrets I understand having been so hasty and now that he has been idle for nearly three months I am sure you will look at his case favorably. So far as I know there has never been anything against Nihill and is an excellent steamer master". [P.905]

However, in a reference for William McNeerney, fired from the Tullamore Station in 1903, Johnson was less than generous in his summing up:

"I may just mention that it was simply the fellows constant neglect of work that was my reason for putting him away but the lesson he has now received may prove of benefit to him during his life". [P.412]

By 1907, Johnson gave the same man a glowing reference:

"Mr William McNeerney was employed here in the Grand Canal Company office as clerk for 4.5 years and during that time he performed his work diligently and well. He was most attentive to his business and displayed a knowledge of his work which showed he had a thorough understanding of it". [P.498]

The case of the deceased porter storeman, P. O’Connor, who died suddenly in 1914, showed the crucial role the company played in all aspects of workers’ lives. Johnson applied to managing director, George Tough, in Dublin for funding to support the widow, albeit for six months:

"The man who has for the last 15 years been in charge of the Porter Store here died rather suddenly at his home on Saturday morning. He leaves a widow and one child. O’Connor was a very good man, most trustworthy and I had every confidence in him. He has altogether been about 17 years in the company’s employment and although constantly employed he unfortunately died. It is with reluctance that I would respectfully ask you to bring the matter before your Board with the hope that the Directors may see their way to grant a few pounds to help the widow in her present difficulties". [P.595]

"What I intend doing is for O’Connor’s widow to get supplied each week with bread and groceries in a house here to the extent of 4/. I expect to get St. Vincent de Paul society to allow her a few shillings per week so that by this arrangement she may be kept going for about 6 months. PS. There are a few expenses (funeral) which have got to be paid". [P.596]

The emerging power of the ITGWU is seen in another case, where the company are challenged with regard to the quality of the workers’ houses they provided. Clearly the Union does have some power and Johnson speaks to the managing director about the matter:

"This society [Irish Transport and General Workers Union] has already demanded that working houses here should be the same as other establishments in town. I informed him I had nothing to do with the matter and gave them your address. I have reason to believe that an ex-army man whom I have working in the Porter Store is inclined to give trouble and is encouraging the other men to stick on this demand". [P.623]

"I would really ask to have this matter re-considered. It is very difficult to get work done properly now unless one is always on the spot and while I act the role of head bucker and agent from time to time there are occasions when Murphy looks after the men for me. I need hardly say that he can give trouble occasionally and as he has this society [ITGWU] at his back. He would use it for all it was worth. I am of the opinion that as the increase is only temporary if granted to the three I would get sufficient work out of them that would counterbalance the extra expense. Murphy has a very large family". [P.612]

The example below reveals that barge delays could occur for the most romantic of reasons. It also points to the limitations of the company’s largesse:

"Monday was not a stormy day the boat should have left Mountisannon at 7.30 am yesterday but did not leave until 9 am. His [Master] explanation again was that he was delayed by storms. This I do not believe either. Yesterday was not stormy enough to prevent the boat travelling. When the boat arrived at Killaloa the agent had her ready to leave at 12.45 pm but he informs me that it was after One O’clock when "Atky" proceeded ahead and only when the agent pressed the Dockland to do so it was learned that the Master of "Atky" went up the town with a woman who accompanied him from either Scariff or Mountisannon. So Mr. Murphy told me over the phone. I think some change should be made in this boat". [P.676]

In one of his very last letters sent to the managing director, Johnson himself got his knuckles rapped for requesting to borrow a barge for a summer trip with some friends:

"I have promised for sometime past a few friends a trip per the Motor "Atky" from Limerick to Lough Derg and I shall feel greatly obliged if you will allow me the privilege of using her for that purpose on Sunday next. I shall arrange to have the crew and any oil consumed paid for and also the tolls so that the company will not be at any loss". [Letter to MD, George Tough, August 25, 1913]

The managing director replied the next day sternly:

"I do not like the proposal at all but if you have promised you may use the "Atky" on the conditions you mention but you must not on any account accept any monetary payment or enter into any contract with the company. As you know our boats are not certified by the Board of Trade to carry passengers". [Letter to John J. Johnson, August 28, 1913]
Johnson wisely had a change of heart:

"Under the circumstances I have decided not to avail of the privilege on this occasion and have cancelled any arrangements made". [Letter to MD, George Tough, August 28, 1913]

The Burden of Management

John Johnson's son, Fr. Dominic Johnson, recorded in an interview with the Limerick Leader in 1984, that the canal manager worked nearly 24 hours a day during the war years. The barges carried Guinness, cement and flour to and from Dublin. His father's job at the time was to supervise the unloading of all boats and to ensure all barges left the harbour on schedule. 25 people were employed on the quayside loading and unloading vessels with room for 8 barges at a time.

Road transport was limited by petrol rationing then and the canals boomed as a result. Indeed, even in 1984, Fr. Johnson believed that the canals could stage a recovery on the basis that it was cheaper than commercial vehicles. Barges could carry greater loads, he argued. On the downside, he noted, that it could take two weeks for barges to reach Dublin in bad weather and his father had to coax the workmen from the pubs on payday. The barges could collectively hold as many as 1900 to 2900 casks during the busy summer months. Thomas Jeffs wrote to Mr. Kirkland in 1896:

"The fact is I cannot do everything although I put in from 12 to 15 hours per day. You have no idea the amount of work that has to be done here and we are all at our very best". [P.17]

Not surprisingly, Jeffs and Johnston both complained to various managing directors about their wages and made constant requests for increases. Johnston's salary in 1901 was £90 per year, subsequently reduced by £7.16. However, King and Son, hauliers, told Johnson in 1901 that their average earnings were between £950 and £1000 per annum. King at that time was prepared to sign a contract for between seven and ten years with the Grand Canal Company, who wanted him to transport 80 tons of coal for £25 per annum.

Not surprisingly, Johnston wished to leave Limerick and requested managing director, George Tough, to grant him a transfer to Killaloe.

"I asked you sometime ago to consider the advisability of my living at Killaloe instead of Limerick and pointed out to you that I would attend the station and look after the business here about. I would have the advantage of living with my own people who reside at Killaloe". [P.36b]

Johnson also made frequent appeals for salary increases, like the examples given below:

"I really feel the necessity of making this appeal to you knowing full well you can thoroughly appreciate one's difficulty in a place like Limerick where the expenses of living are comparatively higher than in any other town in Ireland. If I were otherwise situated in a country station I should be indeed slow to trouble you with so many applications and I do earnestly ask as this will be my last application while here to give the matter your kind consideration". [P.319]

"It is with great reluctance that I write this letter but only austerity compels me to do so. In 1922 the Board made me a certain grant raising my salary to the not very large sum of £5 per week and I think you will remember what brought this about. The then Chairman corroborated the increase in a personal letter to myself. A few years ago my salary was reduced by £7.16 a year and I know I should have drawn your attention to the matter at the time but did not do so. May I respectfully ask you in all fair play to have my salary levelled up to what was agreed to in 1922. Indeed, with the cost of living as it stands with rents, rates and taxes so high (higher than any other town in Ireland) it requires no small amount of management to make ends meet. In fact it is nearly impossible". [P.678]

"I was successful in getting a house and removed into it on last Friday. It is in
the city and I have of course to pay city rates. Its valuation is £17 and as the rates are 22½ in the £ (the highest in the Free State) I have to pay £15 more than when living in Ballinaclurra. This will make things very difficult for me and I write now to respectfully appeal to you to ask your Board to help me under the circumstances. If I don’t succeed I shall have to deny myself some of the necessaries of life in order to pay the rent. [Letter to MD, H. Phillips, May 3, 1929]

John Johnson had cause to thank the Most Reverend Dr. O’Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick, for a reference written in application for the post of general manager of the Grand Canal Company. He was unsuccessful.

“My Lord, I most respectfully beg to thank your lordship for your extreme kindness in writing for me a testimonial in connection with the vacancy for General Manager of the Grand Canal Company. I was asked by Mr. Stephen McCarthy and George Steel to return your Lordship the enclosed letter from the Chairman of the Company”. [Letter to the Most Reverend Dr. O’Dwyer, Bishop of Limerick, April 16, 1914]

Further in the same year, Jeffs, himself worn out by life on the busy Limerick Canal, asked the managing director in Dublin, Mr. Kirkland, for transfer to Tullamore:

“If Mr. Kirkland allowed me to take over the agency referred to I would be glad to do so. If it pleased you to give it to me I would be well acquainted with all the merchants in this town and would be sure to get plenty of orders”. [P.21]

Rationalisation Strategies

As with any organisation existing today, managers on the old canal were obsessed with cost cutting. Jeffs stated in 1868:

“I am trying to get labour done as cheaply as possibly and keeping down expenses every feasible way”. [P.16]

In 1901, Johnson wrote to Kirkland:

“I have made enquires here and find that I could get stabling accommodation for four pairs of horses at £9 per month”. [P.208]

“I have a notion of everything possible since I came here to minimise the working expenses of the station and have also I am glad to say shown increased tonnage per month in my comparative returns”. [P.239]

“I do not intend asking you to have him [M.P. Deane resigned] place filled as I expect this forward to be able to do his work myself. I am also reducing the labour age further at this station and only intend employing two constant men in future. Both changes will I expect mean a reduction of £80 per year in the expenditure at the station”. [P.374]

In July 1901, Johnson transferred Callaghan’s business to another contractor by the name of Wallis:

“We are now paying 19/- per boat and the probabilities are that next winter Callaghan will make us pay more. Another thing the horses has at present are almost useless and I don’t think what he will replace them should they die. Any of the horses at present hauling the boats would certainly not be able to work during the coming winter. Hence my urging on this matter with Mr. Wallis”. [P.368]

“I gave Mr. Wallis to understand that our contract with Callaghan was 16/6 it would be well to keep to this figure”. [P.368]

Johnson understands that Callaghan will not be happy at losing his contract, telling the managing director:

“As a change of this kind generally brings with it a little hostility. I would feel obliged if you gave instruction to the police at Killaloe, O’Brien’s Bridge and Cloonara drawing their attention to the fact”. [P.369]

Later, however, Johnson has cause to regret making the switch, as Wallis proves just as difficult as Callaghan to deal with.

“You have my several reports about delays to boats and I think you will agree in every case where I reported to you contractors were to blame. I must strongly repudiate any supposition that I have sent you exaggerated reports when boats were delayed and I consider it very unfair to Wallis to make such a charge against me”. [P.467]

Johnson sees the expansion of steam boats as the perfect cost cutting measure. It is an idea that he uses to promote his own transfer to Killaloe:

“If it were possible to revolutionise the whole Shannon traffic with one or two boats what I would suggest would be the building of two steamers such as King built lately. They would each carry 50 or 60 tons would consume only (from what I can learn) half the amount of coal any of our Shannon steamers use and could each be made to make three trips to Limerick direct each week”. [P.330]

With regard to the question of superintending the Shannon trade I would ask you to consider the advisability of my residing at Killaloe instead of Limerick. Killaloe is the terminus for the steamers and I could keep a very close watch on what the do”. [P.330]

In 1926, Johnson makes his first reference to the German Siemens’ Company, then building Ardnacrush Power Station for the Free State. It is clear from the extract below that he foresees little danger to the canal business from the work of Siemens:

“Mr. King told me over a month ago that Mr. James Goodbody and he were discussing the danger of their boats getting through Parteen and that the latter was then in favour of sending all their coal by rail to Killaloe. Mr. Goodbody was afraid the risk was too great as should anything go wrong with the tug of Siemens when rendering assistance that the consequences would be very serious for his firm. I believe that Mr. Goodbody went into the matter very fully with Mr. Fletcher at a subsequent period and that again he was satisfied that there would be too much risk involved in Bannatynes continuing to send their traffic by their own boats to Killaloe. I heard recently that Sirman’s people had under consideration putting down an electric screw to assist boats through Parteen”. [Letter to MD, H. Phillips, December 9, 1926]

The previous year, Johnson had written to managing director, H. Phillips, mentioning the Shannon Electrical Scheme:

“Lord Elveden, his secretary, Mr. Baker and Mr. Jennings visited the stores here this morning and spent a considerable time going through them. Mr. Jennings availed of the opportunity of impressing on Lord Elveden the necessity for a larger store properly heated which could accommodate all their Porter traffic arriving in Limerick. I was introduced to Lord Elveden by Mr. Jennings who made some inquiries regarding our boats arriving in Limerick also asked regarding the Shannon Electrical Scheme. The party arrived here at 10.30 am and left at 12 O’Clock”. [P.264]

Competition From The Railways

Both Jeffs and Johnson were constantly aware of the threat posed by rail in terms of poaching their customers. The main reasons for choosing rail then as now were speed, cost and greater security. Increasing the train was as competitive as the barge in every sector.

Johnson, in a letter to managing director, George Tough, in 1913 revealed the problems and dangers of overworking the men and barges trying to meet delivery targets:

“It is very hard work to have a steamer call on both sides of the lake on the same day and it is specially hard on a motor and is the cause of delay”. [Letter to MD, G. Tough, August 20, 1913]
"She [St. Patrick] has to carry a good deal of deck cargo and with bad weather on Lough Derg I am afraid she would hardly escape getting some of the swells". [Letter to MD, G. Tough, July 29, 1913]

This led invariably to lost orders:

"About 50 tons of Porter arrived here by rail this morning and the excuse of getting it that way was on account of delays by storm". [P331]

"While Mr. King gave me the information in confidence I heard it generally rumoured since that because of the risk at Parteen Bannatynes were likely to send their flour by rail to Killaloe". [P.671] [Letter to MD, H. Phillips, December 9, 1926]

The popularity of rail was seen particularly in 1903, when both porter and whiskey stocks were low and rail deliveries up.

"Guinness are keeping their Porter stock very low and of course this saves a lot of tying of cash. As long as the boats continue to come as regularly as they are doing at present and for the past couple of months (a storm always means extra labour and overtime) it will mean the avoidance of any order coming by rail and also any increased labour". [P.687]

Speed for customers was of the essence and despite romantic talk of porter maturing in the casks, there is little evidence of any real benefit to customers from delays incurred during barge transit. Jeffs stated to Kirkland in 1897:

"I remember going fully into this matter about two years ago but could not get any of the traffic as the merchants objected to the length goods take coming from Manchester via canal. Our rate is very little under the railway rate as well as I remember. If you could carry at a very low rate we might secure some traffic. It is a very important item with the railway that we must cut fine to secure. What would that rate be?" [P50]

Later in a letter to managing director, H. Phillips, in 1926, Johnson said:

"I was speaking to Mr. Jennings today and he informed me he heard that Messrs. Gynn and Sons have entered into some agreement with Great Southern Railway Company to carry their Porter to Kilrush. For a considerable time past Gynn and sons got all their Porter from the Limerick Stores here although at one time it did all come by rail to Limerick and Gynn carried it by their own boats to Kilrush". [Letter to MD, H. Phillips, December 9, 1926] [P675]

The comfort and speed of rail also suited employees of the company from time to time and Johnson, in particular, was keen to use it to reach other stations on the Shannon quickly and safely:

"The train arrangements would suit this station admirably and any night that I would have extra work to look after and could remain here. The train arrives here from Killaloe every morning at 9.15 am and leaves at 7.40 pm". [P331]

Ironically, John J. Johnson himself received his trademark new bicycle, not by barge, but by rail. This represented somewhat of an omen had he but the foresight to have known it:

"I received a bicycle recently by rail from Dublin. It should have been forwarded by canal but through some misunderstanding at the other end it was sent by rail. If you could see your way to make a refund under the circumstances I should feel greatly obliged I enclose herewith the receipt". [P300]

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