

Pre-Famine Passenger Services on the Lower Shannon

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In the early years of the 19th century the lower Shannon was a very busy river, literally teeming with traffic. The war with Napoleon provided a great stimulus to food exports and this was reflected in the many ships laden with food going to Britain from Limerick, Clare (castle) and Kilrush. There were also boats of the Royal Navy with occasional visits from larger ships. In September 1810 we find that Messrs. Paterson and Spaight of Kilrush were appointed agents for supplying His Majesty's vessels in the Shannon with rum.¹

There were visitors of another kind too. In July 1813 an American privateer entered the Shannon and burned a merchant vessel on its way to Limerick.² And there were also the smugglers, attempting to land their cargoes of tobacco, wine, brandy and silk, while hoping to avoid the attentions of the revenue cruisers. Not all were successful. The *Clare Journal* of 24 March 1808 tells us:

Thursday last, the brig *Cassamare*, De Cevert, from Bourdeaux, with wine and brandy, put into Kilrush, having been captured by H.M.S. *Diana*, Captain Grant—she will sail immediately for Limerick.

As well as the larger boats, there were hundreds of smaller ones. Many of these were engaged in bringing turf from West Clare to Limerick, which depended to a very large extent on this source for its fuel supplies. In 1816 there were up to one hundred boats in the harbour of Kilrush alone, which were used in the turf trade and herring fishing.³

Possibly the first regular passenger and freight service on the lower Shannon was one advertised⁴ between Clare and Limerick in 1792:

The *Kitty* of Clare

Joseph Cox begs to inform the Public, that he has purchased a complete SLOOP, which he has manned with sober, diligent and expert hands. She will ply, regularly, TWICE in each week (wind and weather permitting) between LIMERICK and CLARE, and flatters himself that this expeditious mode of conveyance will be found peculiarly advantageous, as she is fitted up in such manner as to stow every species of merchandize and luggage with perfect safety.—For Freight apply to the hands on board, or to Mr. Cox, Mill-street, Ennis.—The terms for Freight will be found remarkably reasonable.

¹ *Clare Journal*, 24 September 1810.

² *Clare Journal*, 2 August 1813. It was captured in the open sea by a British warship three weeks later.

³ William Shaw Mason, *A Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland*, 3 vols., Dublin 1814-19, vol. II, p. 477.

⁴ *Ennis Chronicle*, 14 June 1792.

Another twenty years elapsed before a regular service was provided between Kilrush and Limerick. The man who started it was James Paterson, a Scotsman. Paterson first arrived in the area in 1797 as a lieutenant in a gunboat, part of a squadron sent to guard the mouth of the Shannon. When he was discharged, he settled down in Kilrush and quickly built up a thriving export trade in agricultural produce.⁵ In 1812 he started the first regular boat service between Kilrush and Limerick and in the following year he had a second boat on the river.⁶ The growing village of Kilkee was the main beneficiary of the new service, as up to this time holiday makers from Limerick had had to take a turfboat down the river if they did not wish to make a very difficult road journey.

In 1817 Mr. Paterson embarked on a new venture. The first steamships to operate in Ireland were giving pleasure cruises in Dublin Bay in 1816. In June 1817 Mr. Paterson's *Lady of the Shannon* steamboat arrived in the lower Shannon and made its way to Limerick. The *Clare Journal*⁷ described the boat and its progress up the river:

LADY OF THE SHANNON STEAM BOAT

Monday, at two o'clock, this beautiful vessel arrived in this city [Limerick]. She left Kilrush at seven in the morning, but Mr. Paterson laid to until the then falling tide was completely against him, in order to exhibit in uncontrovertible manner, the great superiority this ingenious invention gives to vessels worked in this manner, over those navigated in the ordinary way.—As she passed along, the people at both sides of the river, for many miles down, hailed her approach with tumultuous shouts of applause and illuminated the shores with bonfires—curiosity was strongly excited and gratified in the fullest degree—universal admiration was apparent to behold a vessel scudding against a rapid current, without the assistance of sails or oars, in the most perfect and easy motion—a thing never witnessed before in the river. When she reached the pool, she was immediately recognised, and was enthusiastically cheered as she passed by, by immense crowds which lined the different quays. From all parts of the city crowds are continually flocking to Shannon-quay, where she lies—she is 84 feet by 25, has a state and steerage cabin, a third cabin, particularly for ladies, with comfortable beds, two water closets and a library. The state cabin is elegantly furnished with tables, chairs, and a stuffed seat all round. The partition between the cabin and the engine room is double, and the space is filled with charcoal dust, thereby rendering the cabin perfectly cool, which is not the case in many vessels of the kind. She has two engines at ten horse power. The wonderful utility of a Steam Packet is undeniable, being in no wise dependent on the wind, passengers will not therefore be subjected to disappointment in going down or coming up the river. Much credit is deservedly attached to Mr. Patterson of Kilrush, not only for her speedy completion, but the manner in which she is finished.

Soon afterwards the *Lady of the Shannon* was providing a regular service on the river between Limerick and Kilrush—and this may well have been the first service of its kind using steam in Ireland. Despite the enthusiasm which greeted its arrival, the *Lady of the Shannon* was not a success. Its two ten horsepower engines generated insufficient power to enable it to proceed against the tide when there was a strong headwind. After four or five years it was withdrawn from service and broken up.⁸

⁵ Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 472.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 474.

⁷ *Clare Journal*, 26 June 1817. One wonders if this was the boat mentioned in the following brief item from the *Clare Journal*, 15 June 1815: "Saturday evening an elegant steam boat was launched at Passage near Cork. A similar steam boat is building to ply on the river Shannon."

⁸ Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick: its History and Antiquities*, Dublin 1866 (reprinted Cork 1967), p. 468. Lenihan does not say when it was withdrawn from service. The *Clare Journal* of 21 May 1821, however, mentions that it had commenced its new season's work between Limerick and Kilrush a few days previously, showing it to have still been in operation in that year.

For most of the 1820s passengers from Limerick going west had to rely on the *Royal George* sloop, commanded by John Mahony, which sailed once⁹ or twice a week¹⁰ from Arthur's Quay¹¹ or Honan's Quay, Limerick, "wind and weather permitting."¹² This boat was described affectionately as "neither schooner nor turf boat, but a happy tar barrel a mixture of both with a pilot (Mahony) that knew every rock and shoal."¹³

What was a journey on the *Royal George* like? One traveller has left us a reminiscence written fifty years later.¹⁴ On a Thursday evening the passengers, twelve in all, were ready, having stocked up with whiskey, tea and sugar. However, it was decided not to leave until the following morning, when a start would be made punctually at seven. At nine the *Royal George* eventually left Honan's Quay, and by evening had progressed as far as Tervoe. Then, sailing through the night, they were off Beagh Castle on Saturday morning. When they reached Labasheeda Bay that evening they were becalmed for some time, but this provided an opportunity to get some fresh milk from shore. Eventually Kilrush was reached on Sunday, no later than the passengers had expected on embarking.

This particular passenger finished his journey to Kilkee on a turf cart with a feather-bed. If he had been lucky he might have got a low-backed car, again with the inevitable feather-bed as cushion. At that time the road from Kilrush to Kilkee was bad, even by prevailing standards. Large stones which had been used in paving it made the journey "tedious" and "to delicate persons insupportable."¹⁵ Clearly, a journey to Kilkee was quite an adventure.

In 1829 a new attempt at an up-to-date service was made by the City of Dublin Steampacket Company. In May of that year, the *Mona*, a hundred horsepower paddlesteamer arrived in the Shannon, having previously seen service on the Dublin-Liverpool run.¹⁶ It had been built in Liverpool in 1825, and was 125 feet long by 20 feet in breadth, with an iron hull.¹⁷ Like the *Lady of the Shannon*, the *Mona* met with problems, though of a different kind. Because of its size it could only reach the quayside at Limerick at high tide, and even this was not always possible. Passengers, therefore, often had to use small boats to get to and from the *Mona*—a circumstance which caused many to postpone their journeys until the vessel could be boarded direct at the quayside.¹⁸ As well as carrying passengers, the *Mona* also brought what can only be described as a mixed cargo. The *Limerick Evening Post & Clare Sentinel* of 13 November 1829 commented:

We noticed on last Wednesday landing from the *Mona* steamer at Limerick, several hundred firkins of butter, a large quantity of corn in bags and 95 live pigs that had been embarked only five hours before at Kilrush Formerly three days were lost on the passage.

⁹ Hugh Hogan, *A Sail down the Shannon and Visitors' Handbook for Kilkee*, Limerick 1863, p. 13.

¹⁰ C. K., "Glittings of the Shannon—Kilrush and Kilkee 50 Years Ago," *Munster News*, 9 July 1870.

¹¹ Hogan, *loc. cit.*

¹² C. K., *loc. cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hogan, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Limerick Evening Post & Clare Sentinel*, 19/22 May 1829.

¹⁷ D. B. McNeill, *Irish Passenger Steamship Services, Volume 2: South of Ireland*, Newton Abbot 1971, p. 188.

¹⁸ *Limerick Evening Post & Clare Sentinel*, 1 June 1830.

In January 1830 the *Mona* was replaced by the *Kingstown*. This was probably the ship of the same name which operated Wexford-Liverpool and Wexford-Dublin services in the late 1820s. It was built in 1826 at Chester and had a wooden hull.¹⁹ There is no record of its measurements. However, it was not as large as the *Mona* and could come in to the quay at Limerick at a little over half tide. At Cappa (Kilrush) it had no problems, even at low tide. Although the problems with the tide were not as great as in the case of the *Mona*, a high tide at 4 a.m. meant that the *Kingstown* would have to start from Limerick sharply at 6.30 a.m.²⁰

The fare from Limerick to Kilrush was 5/-, and there were stops on the way at Glin and Tarbert. Some idea of what could be seen on board can be got from the following conclusion of an advertisement:²¹

Servants, Mechanics, Labourers on Deck, Half Cabin fares. Children under 12, half price. No Charge for Children under 5 years of age.

N.B.

The fares from passengers alone being inadequate to support the vessel, a charge will be made for the carriage of Parcels, Beds, Furniture, Wine, Stores, Provisions and all Articles, Travelling Luggage excepted, and for which no charge will be made unless the quantity be unreasonably great.

Cars, Gigs, Carriages and Horses carefully shipped.

The *Kingstown* was soon in trouble because it could not pay its way²² and after about a year was withdrawn from service. In the summer of 1831 we find the *Royal George* and another sailing ship, the *Lady Frances*, without any steamboat rival, bringing passengers from Limerick to Kilrush for as low as three pence a head.²³ The *Kingstown* could scarcely hope to compete with fares as low as this.

However, the summer of 1831 was to be the last one for a long time without a steamboat service. In the spring of 1832 the City of Dublin Steampacket Company decided to make another attempt to run a profitable service, and in May of that year sent the *Clarence* to the lower Shannon.²⁴ The *Clarence* had been built in Dumbarton in 1827, and was 92 feet long by 16 feet wide, with a wooden hull.²⁵ Again, the service proved unprofitable during the summer of 1832.²⁶ Despite this further setback, the company decided to continue with the venture and, as there are no further mentions of losses, it must have soon become financially viable.

It seems very likely that profit was achieved by making economies which reduced

¹⁹ McNeill, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99 and 201.

²⁰ *Limerick Evening Post & Clare Sentinel*, 1 June 1830.

²¹ *Limerick Evening Post & Clare Sentinel*, 29 January 1830.

²² *Limerick Chronicle*, 14 January 1835.

²³ *Limerick Evening Post & Clare Sentinel*, 12 August 1831. Lenihan, *op. cit.*, p. 468, mentions three sailing packets which carried passengers—the *Royal George*, *Lady Frances* and *Vandeleur*. The *Vandeleur* was named after the wellknown Kilrush landowning family. Is Lenihan correct in describing it as a sailing packet? He assigns it to the period c.1817. However, at this time there was a revenue cruiser of the same name based in the Lower Shannon (see *Clare Journal*, 21 September 1818 and 6 September 1821). It is rather unlikely that two ships of the same name would have been operating in the same area at the same time. Although I have come across no reference to a *Vandeleur* sailing packet it is, of course, possible that the revenue cruiser ceased to operate in the late 1820s and that the *Vandeleur* sailing packet then arrived on the scene. Just to complicate the matter further, there was a steamer of the same name on the river in the second half of the 19th century.

²⁴ *Clare Journal*, 24 May 1832.

²⁵ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

²⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 14 January 1835.

the quality and efficiency of the service. In November 1834 a group of dissatisfied customers met and threatened to form their own company as they complained that "manifold inconveniences are daily occurring in consequence of the non-efficiency of the Boat now running on this River, and the monopoly under the present system—high charges, bad accommodation and uncertain passages" ²⁷ William Smith O'Brien was one of those appealed to for support. His reply indicated his personal dissatisfaction: "The company already in existence have invited, if they have not almost compelled, competition, by neglecting to provide during the last season, a suitable vessel with adequate accommodation, at a time when their steam boat was thronged with passengers of the first respectability." ²⁸

Meanwhile the City of Dublin Company was about to provide an answer to the complaints. In mid-December 1834 the paddle-steamer *Garryowen* arrived at Kilrush, having been built specially at Birkenhead for the lower Shannon. It was 125 feet long by 22 feet in breadth, with ninety horsepower engines, and was said to have cost £16,000. At the time of its launching it was the largest iron ship in the world. It was also the first steamer anywhere to have iron bulkheads, and it was these which saved her from destruction when she broke away from her moorings in Kilrush on the Night of the Big Wind in January 1839 and went aground. ²⁹ Not surprisingly, then, Paddy O'Neill, an itinerant musician who entertained passengers on the *Garryowen* with fiddle and bagpipes, wrote verses about the ship which he sang to his own accompaniment: ³⁰

Oh, Garryowen is no more a wrack;
Whoever says she is, is a noted ass;
She's an iron boat that flies like shot
Against the strongest storum.

The *Garryowen* spent over a quarter of a century on the lower Shannon and in later years, when people looked back with nostalgia at the time when the paddle-steamers reigned supreme, it was invariably the *Garryowen* they remembered although there were many others as well. It is thought to have ended its days on the west coast of Africa about 1870. ³¹

Although the *Garryowen's* first trip from Kilrush to Limerick took only three hours and twenty minutes ³² it usually took much longer, particularly if animals had to be loaded at Tarbert. Occasionally a trip could almost take as long as on the *Royal George*. A traveller on the *Garryowen* towards the end of its days on the Shannon described one such trip: ³³

We started at half-past nine on Saturday morning last, in the *Garryowen* from Limerick for Kilrush, and expected to be in the latter place at two or three o'clock at farthest; but, after proceeding a few miles, owing to the fog, or whatsoever cause, we came to a halt at Tervoe,

²⁷ *Limerick Chronicle*, 15 November 1834.

²⁸ *Clare Journal*, 20 November 1834.

²⁹ McNeill, *op. cit.*, pp. 149 and 221; *Clare Journal*, 1 January 1835 and 10 January 1839.

³⁰ W. R. Le Fanu, *70 Years of Irish Life being Anecdotes & Reminiscences*, 2nd ed., London, 1893, p. 85.

³¹ McNeill, *op. cit.*, pp. 150 and 221.

³² *Clare Journal*, 1 January 1835.

³³ *Munster News*, 2 January 1861. See also *Limerick Chronicle*, 16 January 1841—"The fog was so thick on the river this week that the *Dover Castle* steamer was obliged to anchor between Glin and Tarbert and remain so for nearly four hours."

and there we cast anchor, and there we remained the live long night. We had about thirty persons in the cabin with a proportion of deck passengers; and all that could be mustered, in the matter of eatables, for so many mouths, was one leg of mutton! The air on the river is good off Tervoe, and 'pon my conscience, Mr. Editor, myself grew rather pickish towards evening, and by the time night fell, I won't pretend to say I wouldn't make a hole single handed in that one leg of mutton. Anyhow, it disappeared in a twinkling; and then what were the ravenous people who got nothing at all, to do for some sort of provender?

Faith, Sir, the question became very serious after dark, as I discovered . . . I got up on deck, and went on to the fore-castle; and every bit of me began to tremble as I passed a knot of people who had their heads together, whispering and muttering words of dire import, as I thought, to our worthy Captain. They had a black, wolfish kind of look, and, when I caught the name of the Captain, and heard it coupled in an undergrowl with the words "nothing to eat"—"I am dying of hunger," "bore a hole in him," "let's be at it," and such like, dhar an aferin³⁴ but I began to fear they meant to make their Christmas dinner beforehand off my old seafaring friend . . . I can't tell you how I was relieved, when, after shrinking back a little, I heard the debate take a distinct turn for a cask of whiskey, which was fortunately aboard, and a unanimous declaration made that it should be tapped to take off the hunger and cold. So it was. The air of the river was biting hard at the time, and good luck put the whiskey in the way, or I would not answer for what else would happen before the morning.

When daylight came we started down the river again, and brought to opposite Glin, the humours of which we could not appreciate out in the river; and we left it behind us, and paddled away for our final destination, where we arrived at last, two hours or thereabouts after midday, half famished, and as fierce as ten furies after our two days voyage, doing the distance between Limerick and Kilrush.

Freight was carried as well as passengers. When travelling to Limerick from Kilrush and Tarbert, the freight usually consisted of animals and agricultural produce, while on the westward journey it brought goods for the shops of North Kerry and West Clare. An indication of the capacity of the *Garryowen* and similar paddle-steamers is given when we are told that one of them (either the *Garryowen* or the *Erin go Bragh*, a companion ship of the *Garryowen's* in the 1840s) carried 900 pigs from Kilrush to Limerick in a single haul.³⁵

The summer months were very busy ones for passenger traffic as Limerick families made their way to Kilkee, some of them bringing with them horses, carriages, servants, and even supplies of food. The shopkeepers of Kilkee were particularly conscious of the large stocks of food being brought and were anxious to assure their visitors that goods were cheap in Kilkee and that nothing was saved when freight charges had been paid. When Pat Kean of Kilkee was advertising his Grocery and Spirit Establishment in 1842, he concluded by recommending his "Old Cork Whiskey, Tea, Coffee and Sugars to Visitors to Kilkee, who may be thus saved the trouble of bringing a supply of these articles at the cost of freight, land carriage, and risk of damage."³⁶

When the travellers arrived in Kilrush they were met by Mr. O'Brien, the Steam-packet Company's local agent. Paddy O'Neill pictured him helping the ladies as they made their way across the gangplank:³⁷

On Kilrush Quay there's brave O'Brien,
Of ancient line, without spot or slime;
In double quick time, with graceful smile,
He hands ashore the ladies.

³⁴ Possibly a version of the Irish *Dar an Aifreann* (By the Mass), used here as a mild oath to give emphasis.

³⁵ *Limerick Chronicle*, 5 January 1842.

³⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 19 July 1843.

³⁷ *Clare Journal*, 1 January 1835; Le Fanu, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

One wonders what was O'Brien's reaction on the day when the gangplank broke and six to eight passengers from the *Garryowen* were sent tumbling into the water! Fortunately, all were rescued, none the worse for their experience.³⁸

Many of the passengers, especially during the summer months, would continue their journey to Kilkee, and the only means of conveyance in the 1830s and 1840s were open jaunting cars. The charges were 1/- per person, or 4/- per car. But when the competition between two rival steamers, the *Garryowen* and *Dover Castle*, had knocked down steamer fares in the summer of 1840, the car drivers shoved up their prices to 6/-, 10/- and even 15/- per car, to the loud protests of visitors. The *Limerick Chronicle* felt that their action had "raised a feeling of dissatisfaction in the public mind so strong as to prejudice the owners of those vehicles most seriously in general estimation, and it must also peril the welfare of this favourite watering place."³⁹ As the prices rose, some people reacted by threatening to compete with the car owners in the following season by putting two four-wheeled, two-horse, vehicles on the road.⁴⁰

The best known of the car drivers was John McInerney, or Shawn Bawn as he was generally known, who frequently wrote letters to the newspapers and styled himself as "Propriethor an' dhrivur ov the easiest an' most commodious car, an' the kindest an' most indefatigable horse in all Kilkee."⁴¹ Paddy O'Neill also had a line for him in one of his songs:⁴²

Here's ould Shawn Bawn, from early dawn,
His white grey mare smart dhrivin,' Sir.

The competition between the car drivers was intense and as soon as the steamer arrived at Cappa they jumped aboard in search of passengers.⁴³ It was probably the same spirit of competition which led to some furious driving on the Kilrush-Kilkee road, sometimes with one car forcing another off the road.⁴⁴

With the arrival of the *Garryowen* on the lower Shannon, the City of Dublin Steam-packet Company then had three steamers operating there, at least during the summer months. The *Clarence* mainly served Clarecastle and Limerick, while the *Kingstown*—or, sometimes, the *Clarence*—assisted the *Garryowen* between Limerick and Kilrush during the busy summer months.⁴⁵

We have already seen that in 1834 there was dissatisfaction with the service being offered. Even after the introduction of the *Garryowen* this dissatisfaction continued, and in 1838 came to a head with the purchase by the Limerick Shipping Company of the *Dover Castle*, at a cost of £4,500.⁴⁶ The *Dover Castle* was smaller than the *Garryowen*, 112 feet long by 15 feet in breadth, with a wooden hull. It had been built at Shoreham in 1833,⁴⁷ and purchased in London.⁴⁸ When it went into service in late

³⁸ *Limerick Star & Evening Post*, 23 September 1836.

³⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 19 August 1840.

⁴⁰ *Clare Journal*, 20 August 1840.

⁴¹ *Limerick Reporter*, 3 July 1840.

⁴² *Limerick Chronicle*, 11 September 1841.

⁴³ *Clare Journal*, 3 April 1851.

⁴⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 August 1849.

⁴⁵ *Clare Journal*, 20 March 1837; *Limerick Chronicle*, 22 March 1837.

⁴⁶ *Clare Journal*, 10, 27 September 1838.

⁴⁷ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

⁴⁸ *Clare Journal*, 10 September 1838.

November 1838,⁴⁹ a battle began between the two companies in which profit was eventually forgotten and the travelling public were the big beneficiaries as each company tried to break the other.

At first the competition for customers seems to have been at a low key. However, at the beginning of summer 1839, as the holiday traffic began, it livened up considerably. The *Clare Journal* reported:⁵⁰

There will be a lively competition between the steamers on the Lower Shannon this summer. The *Dover Castle* went into Kilrush on the first of May, in a superior style, elegantly fitted out for the season, decorated with flags from stem to stern, and exhibiting a beautiful garland of flowers on her boom end.

The *Dover Castle* provided three or four services a week each way.⁵¹ The City of Dublin Company, on the other hand, provided a service each way each day, using the *Garryowen* and the *Kingstown*.⁵²

A passenger from Kilrush to Limerick about this time has left us a vivid picture of the scene at Kilrush as both the *Garryowen* and *Dover Castle* prepared to depart at the same time:⁵³

Nothing could surpass the bustle and confusion when we reached the pier at Kilrush, where the two rival steamers, the *Garryowen* and *Dover Castle* (between which there is at this moment a fierce competition), were drawn up and smoking alongside of each other. Each jaunting car as it descended the hill bearing its freight towards the pier, was eagerly beset by the emissaries of each vessel, and the occupants severally accosted with "Are you for the *Garryowen*?" "Are you for the *Dover*?" the questioner departing in triumph or crestfallen according to the reply given. Our party were for the *Garryowen*, and as it lay the farthest from the quay, we had to cross the *Dover Castle* to reach it. When we had safely overstepped and cleared our way through all obstacles—no easy task—we were able to look about at the scene of confusion on the pier. Jaunting cars were coming full gallop along the quay crowded with eager-looking passengers fearful of being late; men, women and children pushing and jostling each other on the pier, some brought there by business, others attracted by curiosity; goods of every sort piled up . . . pigs yelling as only pigs can yell; the creaking crane surging backwards and forwards, with its weighty cargo—a huge barrel, a fat pig slung by the middle or a bag of oats or potatoes; and loud above all the din, the unearthly bellowings and hissings of the steam engine.

Another group who added to the confusion were the fruit-women who went aboard the vessels with their merchandise, trying to make sales to passengers before their departure.⁵⁴

The competition between the two companies soon brought innovation, as the *Dover Castle* began to make Sunday excursions from Limerick to the mouth of the Shannon and back again—spending a few hours of the afternoon in Kilrush.⁵⁵ There had been no Sunday sailings up to this time, and to some the new departure was a grave violation of the Sabbath rest. One such person wrote to the *Limerick Chronicle*⁵⁶

⁴⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 1 December 1838.

⁵⁰ *Clare Journal*, 6 May 1839.

⁵¹ *Limerick Reporter*, 6 August 1839.

⁵² *Clare Journal*, 20 May 1839.

⁵³ M.F.D., "Letters from the Coast of Clare" in *Dublin University Magazine*, XVIII (Dec. 1841), 685.

⁵⁴ *Limerick Star & Evening Post*, 12 August 1836.

⁵⁵ *Clare Journal*, 16 May 1839.

⁵⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 8 June 1839.

after he had seen a poster advertising a Sunday excursion:

It occurs to me, should I listen to the Syren suggestions of the placard, I incur a fearful risk. Providence may see good to blast all my pleasures, by causing the boiler of the steam-vessel on which I purpose to embark this day for a trip of pleasure, to burst.

But there were other more earthly reasons which might deter prospective passengers. The *Limerick Chronicle* reported that on one of the excursions "several of the passengers were so violent and intemperate from a too liberal indulgence in Bacchanalian orgies, that the Captain and crew could not preserve order and several conflicts took place on board."⁵⁷ Obviously, the public houses in Kilrush did a roaring trade. And when the *Dover Castle* was withdrawn from service for a short while in late August 1839, Shawn Bawn added his own caustic comment:⁵⁸

The Doverers got tired, so they did, ov' dhrawin' Ladies and Jintlemen on sportin' Sunday parties, ruinin' [sic] the Sabbath day, for they used to be croostin' an' killin' each other, an' dhrinkin' like real divarters; to say nothin' ov all the grand shop-boys from the City, swaggerin' about Kilrush, lock arms, an sportin' chains, an' canes, an' bushy hair, an' talkin' inglifed.

One suspects also that the proprietors of the *Limerick Chronicle* were not very anxious for the success of the *Dover Castle*.

The main battle was between the *Garryowen* and *Dover Castle*, and speed became a major consideration. In 1837 the *Garryowen* had been using turf as fuel⁵⁹ but in all probability this was no longer the case in the summer of 1839. At the beginning of June it was reported that the *Garryowen* travelled from Kilrush to Limerick in four hours ten minutes, including stops at Tarbert, Glin and Foynes. On the same day the *Dover Castle* left Kilrush at the same time and took twenty-one minutes longer, although it made no stops on this occasion.⁶⁰

Shortly after this a race was arranged, each leaving Kilrush at 7.50 a.m. The start "brought a large and fashionable concourse to the pier and strand. The start was beautiful; the *Garryowen*, however, had a slight lead. As Captain Bingham, her popular commander, was desirous of fair play, he backed the paddles until both vessels were, in old parlance, yard-arm and yard-arm. The captains declared they were satisfied and the word went to both crews—"full speed." The *Garryowen* was a decisive winner, as it arrived in Limerick three hours and forty-five minutes later, thirty-six minutes in front of the *Dover Castle*.⁶¹ For the moment the *Garryowen* had the upper hand. Then, in July, the owners of the *Dover Castle* played a new card:⁶²

The Proprietors of the *Dover Castle*, having had under consideration the very great inconvenience which the public had received by the delays occasioned in the stoppage at Glin and Tarbert (for landing goods) have determined to run the *Dover Castle* direct from Limerick to Kilrush, and back on each alternate day.

⁵⁷ *Limerick Chronicle*, 5 June 1839.

⁵⁸ *Limerick Chronicle*, 31 August 1839.

⁵⁹ *Clare Journal*, 21 August 1837.

⁶⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 5 June 1839.

⁶¹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 8 June 1839.

⁶² *Limerick Standard*, 6 August 1839. On the days when it did not sail direct the *Dover Castle* stopped at Tarbert, Foynes, Cahercon and Glin.

Fares were also reduced drastically. In early August the cabin fare on the *Dover Castle* from Limerick to Kilrush was 1/- and the deck fare was 6d—and the *Garryowen* had to follow suit! But the *Dover Castle* claimed a victory:⁶³

Support the company who first reduced the fares. Competition will always ensure to the public cheap travelling and civility.

Despite the low fares and improved service, the *Dover Castle* was losing the battle and before the end of August an announcement was made that it was being withdrawn from service:⁶⁴

Dover Castle

The Directors of the Limerick Steam Company have to announce to the public that they have been compelled to withdraw their boat from the Limerick and Kilrush station, as they find there is a general feeling (on what principle they know not), to support a strict monopoly, with the consequent attendants, high fares and little civility. The directors have done their utmost for the public accommodation, but they regret to no purpose; they were the first to make the fares as they should be—Reasonable, and insist on their servants giving the due civility and courtesy which the public had a right to expect

But the move proved to be purely a tactical one. Within a month the *Dover Castle* was back in action, after some improvements had been made to her paddles which increased her speed.⁶⁵ One suspects also that its owners hoped the City of Dublin Company would raise the fares if they thought the opposition had ceased. In fact they did not,⁶⁶ probably being aware of the fact that the withdrawal was only temporary.

The battle again began, although the holiday season was now drawing to a close. The *Dover Castle* made a test-run to Kilrush in three hours twenty-seven minutes. On its return journey to Limerick it left Kilrush at the same time as the *Garryowen*. Near Tarbert the *Garryowen* drew ahead. According to Captain J. W. White of the *Dover Castle*, "The conduct of the Kilrush agent, captain and crew of the *Garryowen* was most indecent and insulting, jumping on the paddle-box, shouting and hallooing, and firing cannon in triumph, when passing us near Tarbert"⁶⁷ Seemingly the *Garryowen* then made a call at Tarbert, because, coming to Tervoe, the *Dover Castle* was leading. What happened after that is not clear. Those who favoured the *Garryowen* claimed that as she was again about to pass the *Dover Castle* the latter almost rammed her.⁶⁸ But the *Dover Castle*'s captain maintained that the *Garryowen* tried to pass on the inside, contrary to the established rule. There was insufficient room in the channel and so, to avoid running aground, she bore down on the *Dover Castle*, which did not yield ground. The *Garryowen*'s captain then had second thoughts and went on to the mud.⁶⁹ After this, probably because the holiday season was over and traffic was thin, there were no more major incidents in the remainder of 1839.

In April 1840 the *Dover Castle* was put up for sale. Some offers were made but as

⁶³ *Limerick Reporter*, 6 August 1839.

⁶⁴ *Limerick Reporter*, 23 August 1839.

⁶⁵ *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 September 1839.

⁶⁶ *Limerick Chronicle*, 4 September 1839.

⁶⁷ *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 September 1839.

⁶⁸ *Limerick Chronicle*, 14 September 1839.

⁶⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 18 September 1839.

they did not approach her value it was decided to put it on the Limerick-Kilrush run for another season.⁷⁰ The competition was now verging on the suicidal, as fares dropped as low as 3d for deck passengers.⁷¹ For Kilkee this meant a boom season, as large numbers availed themselves of the unbelievably cheap fares. In late June the *Clare Journal* commented that Kilkee had never been so crowded in the early part of the season.⁷² And during the weekend of 8-9 August the place was so full that hundreds could get no lodgings. The police barracks opened its doors to provide shelter for some, while others had to manage as best they could under the stars.⁷³

A chapter in the history of the lower Shannon closed in April 1841 when the *Dover Castle* was bought by its arch-rival, the City of Dublin Company. Instead of competing with the *Garryowen* it would henceforth provide a support service.⁷⁴ Later in the same month a new steamship, the *Erin-go-Bragh*, arrived in Limerick. It had just been built in Liverpool, specifically for service in the Shannon Estuary,⁷⁵ and was 126 feet long by 22 feet in breadth with an iron hull.⁷⁶ It replaced the *Kingstown*, leaving three ships available to sail between Limerick and Kilrush—the *Garryowen*, *Dover Castle* and *Erin-go-Bragh*. However, only two of them were used at any one time, making a sailing each day in opposite directions in summer. With the ending of competition, fares immediately shot up — from 1/ to 2/6 for cabin passengers; from 3d to 1/3 for deck passengers.⁷⁷ Paddy O'Neill added the praises of the new boat to his repertoire:⁷⁸

Ye'r welcome all, both grate and small, the *Garryowen* or *Erin* by,
 Three hours the run! sure that's the fun, an' see they all stand starin' by;
 All bowl'd along to Paddy's song, a mighty civil engineer,
 Wid his "Queer old dad"—an' "Jack's the lad"
 —oh! that's the pleasant singin' near;
 Or bugler John sped the *Erin* on, that slap up spankin' boat, sir.
 Till on Cappa pier the folks did hear his regular quay-note, sir.

So far we have mentioned only the regular services provided by the steamers. There were also excursions for special occasions and, occasionally, the steamers were used for purposes outside their normal role. In October 1835, for example, the *Garryowen* was employed by the British Admiralty for an investigation into the behaviour of magnetic compasses in iron ships. The results of the experiment, carried out in Tarbert Bay, were communicated to the authorities by Captain Francis Beaufort, whose name is still remembered in the wind scale called after him.⁷⁹ The steamers were also used to tow becalmed sailing ships to Limerick or, occasionally, a ship which had been damaged in a storm or run aground.⁸⁰

⁷⁰ *Clare Journal*, 27 April 1840.

⁷¹ *Limerick Standard*, 15 June 1840.

⁷² *Clare Journal*, 22 June 1840.

⁷³ *Limerick Reporter*, 11 August 1840.

⁷⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 17 April 1841.

⁷⁵ *Limerick Chronicle*, 7 April 1841.

⁷⁶ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 221. The *Limerick Chronicle* of 28 April 1841 gives larger dimensions, 134 feet long by 26 feet in breadth.

⁷⁷ *Limerick Reporter*, 4 May 1841.

⁷⁸ *Limerick Reporter*, 11 September 1841.

⁷⁹ MacNeill, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150.

⁸⁰ *Limerick Reporter*, 21 April 1843.

Father Mathew, the Apostle of Temperance, provided quite a lot of business during the height of his campaign in the six years before the Great Famine. At the end of July 1839 more than two hundred people from south west Clare went to Limerick on the *Garryowen* and *Dover Castle*, on their way to meet Father Mathew in Cork.⁸¹ Four months later Father Mathew came to Limerick, and was mobbed by thousands of people who wanted to take the pledge from him. Eventually an escort of Scots Guards was sent to the Court House to help him get away. This they succeeded in doing with the assistance of Father Michael Comyn, Parish Priest of Kilkee, who then brought Father Mathew to the steamboat quay, where seven hundred men who had travelled from Kilrush by steamer were waiting to disembark. Father Mathew went on board to administer the pledge, as they would only have swollen the throngs of people and increase the confusion if they had gone ashore.⁸²

A year later Father Mathew visited Kilrush to preach the sermon at the dedication of the new Catholic Church. The town was crowded for the occasion, and a figure of 20,000 people was mentioned, including many from Kerry. The City of Dublin Steampacket Company provided the *Garryowen* to bring the Kerry people to Kilrush in the morning and back again in the evening.⁸³

In 1842, when Father Mathew was invited to Carrigaholt to preach a charity sermon, he went westwards from Kilrush in the *Garryowen* after a send off which would have befitted royalty.⁸⁴

"On Sunday . . . he proceeded to the Steamboat Quay, accompanied by a procession of teetotallers, led by the highly-gifted pastor, the Very Rev. J. Kenny, and Rev. M. Meehan,⁸⁵ our indefatigable president, who, in addition to the Kilrush and other teetotal bands . . . had also in attendance an amateur band of his own formation . . . When our vessel was under way, the Knight of Glin's yacht bore alongside, having on board an excellent band, and mounting guns, which were discharged on suitable occasions."

Father Mathew was accompanied on the *Garryowen* by seven hundred followers who, when the steamer anchored off Carrigaholt, had to be ferried ashore by a multitude of small boats.

There were sporting excursions, too. In the 1830s informal race meetings were held on the strand at Kilkee. However, in August 1842 a more ambitious type of meeting was arranged—to be run at the rear of *Atlantic Lodge*, the residence of Jonas Studdert, the local middleman.⁸⁶ There was a lot of advance publicity, and because of the interest aroused the proprietors of the *Garryowen* announced that it would leave Limerick at 6 a.m. on the opening day to allow the passengers to arrive in Kilkee before the first race.⁸⁷

Not all the passengers who went to Kilkee by steamer were people of means. During the summer, when provisions were scarce and the new potato crop was not yet ready, many poor people left their native place to go elsewhere to beg. Kilkee

⁸¹ *Clare Journal*, 1 August 1839.

⁸² *Limerick Reporter*, 3 December 1839.

⁸³ *Limerick Reporter*, 1 December 1840.

⁸⁴ *Limerick Reporter*, 4 October 1842.

⁸⁵ This was Father Michael Meehan who later became a household name because of his 'Little Ark' at Kilbaha, built when he could not get a site for a church.

⁸⁶ The race course would roughly correspond with the present golf course and G.A.A. pitch. Only a few race meetings were held on this course.

⁸⁷ *Limerick Chronicle*, 3, 27 August 1842.

received more than its quota of these, and it was estimated that it had about two hundred strolling beggars from June to August "following the quality." A witness before a government commission in 1834 remarked:⁸⁸

The beggars have been much increasing for the last three or four years. The markets are getting every year lower and the rents higher; the village is increasing in size, and the bathers more numerous; added to which, the facilities of getting from Limerick to Kilrush by the steam-boat, owing to the kindness of the owners, who will generally give their passage to the poor going to the salt water gratis, when their grievances (their wretched condition) are made known to the captain. All these things send a great number of strange beggars from all parts of the county Limerick and Kerry to this parish.

Much of the business in summertime came from passengers on their way to Kilkee. The steamers, as we have seen, brought them to Kilrush and from there they were at the mercy of the local car drivers. However, in 1838, when the Lord Lieutenant, the Marquis of Normanby, visited Kilkee, a rather unusual proposal was made to him—that Kilkee would be benefited by the building of a canal, a little more than a mile in length, which would connect the town with the Shannon Estuary at Blackweir. It was argued that if this was done people and goods could be brought directly from Limerick to Kilkee when the tide in the river was favourable.⁸⁹ Three and a half years later this idea was still being considered, and a resolution concerning it was among those adopted at a meeting in Kilkee in January 1842.⁹⁰ But no further progress was ever made.

A more serious threat to the car drivers came in May 1840, when it was reported that Mr. Williams of the City of Dublin Steampacket Company was considering the laying down of a railway between Kilrush and Kilkee. The expense was calculated at between £400 and £500 per mile (probably an Irish mile) so that a total of about £3,000 would be quite sufficient.⁹¹ Mr. Williams evidently had second thoughts shortly afterwards. A conventional railway would be too expensive—but there was a cheaper alternative: a tramway could be laid down and a horse on this tramway would be able to move at the rate of 12 m.p.h., carrying four tons weight. In this way the journey could be made in half an hour.⁹² This was the suggestion, but, like many other projects for railways between Kilrush and Kilkee in later years, it never got any further.

One final attempt was made before the Great Famine to provide a railway to link Kilkee with the steamer at Kilrush. In 1845, when "railway mania" was at its peak, a Kilrush-Kilkee Railway was one of those proposed. It was hoped also, by building an embankment, to reclaim about a thousand acres in Poulmasherry Bay. Passenger traffic, it was estimated, would be 35,000 people per annum.⁹³ Colonel Vandeleur of Kilrush declared his willingness to contribute a generous sum towards the cost, and in mid-August three engineers arrived from Dublin to survey the route.⁹⁴ In mid-

⁸⁸ *Appendix to First Report from the Commissioners for Inquiring into the State of the Poorer Classes in Ireland*, in *Parliamentary Papers* 1835 XXXII(i), 624.

⁸⁹ *Limerick Chronicle*, 5 September 1838.

⁹⁰ *Limerick Chronicle*, 12 January 1842.

⁹¹ *Limerick Reporter*, 12 May 1840.

⁹² *Limerick Reporter*, 26 May 1840.

⁹³ *Limerick Chronicle*, 11 June 1845.

⁹⁴ *Limerick Chronicle*, 28 May, 16 August 1845.

October the *Limerick Reporter* carried a half page prospectus for the "Kilrush, Kilkee, Dublin and Belfast Junction Railway with power to extend the line as far as Ennistymon."⁹⁵ But two months later it was announced with regret that the plans of the railway had not yet been lodged with the Board of Trade.⁹⁶ They never were.

* * * *

Nowadays we tend to look on large waterways such as the lower Shannon as barriers preventing easy travel. In earlier times, and this was still true of the first half of the 19th century, the Shannon was not a barrier but a "bridge" between south-west Clare, Limerick and north Kerry. Before the coming of the railways overland, travel was slow and uncomfortable. Public transport was dear and available only between the larger centres, and, therefore, to a people who regarded boats almost as we now regard motor cars, the river was a great boon.⁹⁷ The turf boats forged the first links between south-west Clare and Limerick. Then the holiday-makers from Limerick made the journey westwards to Kilkee in sailing ships and steamers. As a result south-west Clare had much stronger social and commercial ties with Limerick than with the remainder of Co. Clare, and these remained long after the steamers had gone out of business.

The river traffic also meant that there was a good deal of movement between south Clare and north Kerry, as exemplified by the presence of many Kerry people at the dedication of Kilrush Church. However, the Clare-Kerry links were never as strong as those between south-west Clare and Limerick.

The coming of the Great Famine did not mean the end of the steamers. Although the opening of the Limerick-Foynes railway affected them to some extent, they remained the main means of transport westwards to Clare until the opening of the South Clare Railway to Kilkee and Kilrush in 1892. After that business declined, and the steamers were eventually withdrawn from service during the 1914-1918 war.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Limerick Reporter*, 17 October 1845.

⁹⁶ *Limerick Reporter*, 19 December 1845.

⁹⁷ Patrick F. Wallace has dealt comprehensively with public road transport in his article on "The Organisation of Pre-Railway Public Transport in Counties Limerick and Clare," *N. Munster Antiq. Journ.*, 15 (1972), 34-58. However, he refers only briefly to passenger boat services in one paragraph on page 47.

⁹⁸ McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 148.