

# THE SHANNON — ERNE WATERWAY

## The restoration of the missing link

This week sees the opening of the Shannon — Erne Waterway, now restored after decades of neglect. On these pages, Irish Times writers look at the background to the development of the waterway

WRITING over 150 years ago for his boss at the board of works, an engineer suggested that the Irish railway system should be extended. "For the exchange of commodities," he said, "the interior of this country is virtually more remote than India or America." That same engineer probably bemoaned the construction of the Ballinamore-Ballyconnell canal linking the Erne and the Shannon in the 1850s. If he did, he certainly wasn't the only one.

The canal turned out to be an unmitigated financial disaster and led one landlord to claim that it was "one of the worst pieces of mismanagement in any country — not in Turkey could there be such a piece of mismanagement". In the 12-15 years that it was operational before being abandoned in 1872, the canal collected a mere £18 in tolls and only 15 boats (many carrying gallons of porter) made the journey up or down the canal. It cost £250,000 to build and employed as many as 7,000 people at one time during its construction, which provided famine relief of sorts for some.

For the best part of 120 years the canal fell into a sorry state of disrepair. Locks decayed, water stagnated and plant life consumed long stretches along its banks. Since then, however, the wheel has come full circle as the canal's fortunes have changed rather rapidly.

Following preliminary engineering surveys and detailed environmental studies, construction work on the canal began in the summer of 1991. Over the next two summers approximately £30 million (courtesy of the Irish and British Governments, the ESB, the European Regional Development Fund

make it deeper and wider. The biggest innovation on the waterway was the introduction of automated, electric-powered locks. Instead of heaving massive timber breast-beams to open lock gates, today's users need only press a button.

At two of the canal's main scenic attractions, Lough Garadice and Lough Scur,

low-profile mooring docks have been provided allowing users to get ashore with ease. Undreamed of facilities in the last century such as car parks, public telephones, showers, toilets and pumping-out facilities are standard at all six of the canal's new mooring points.

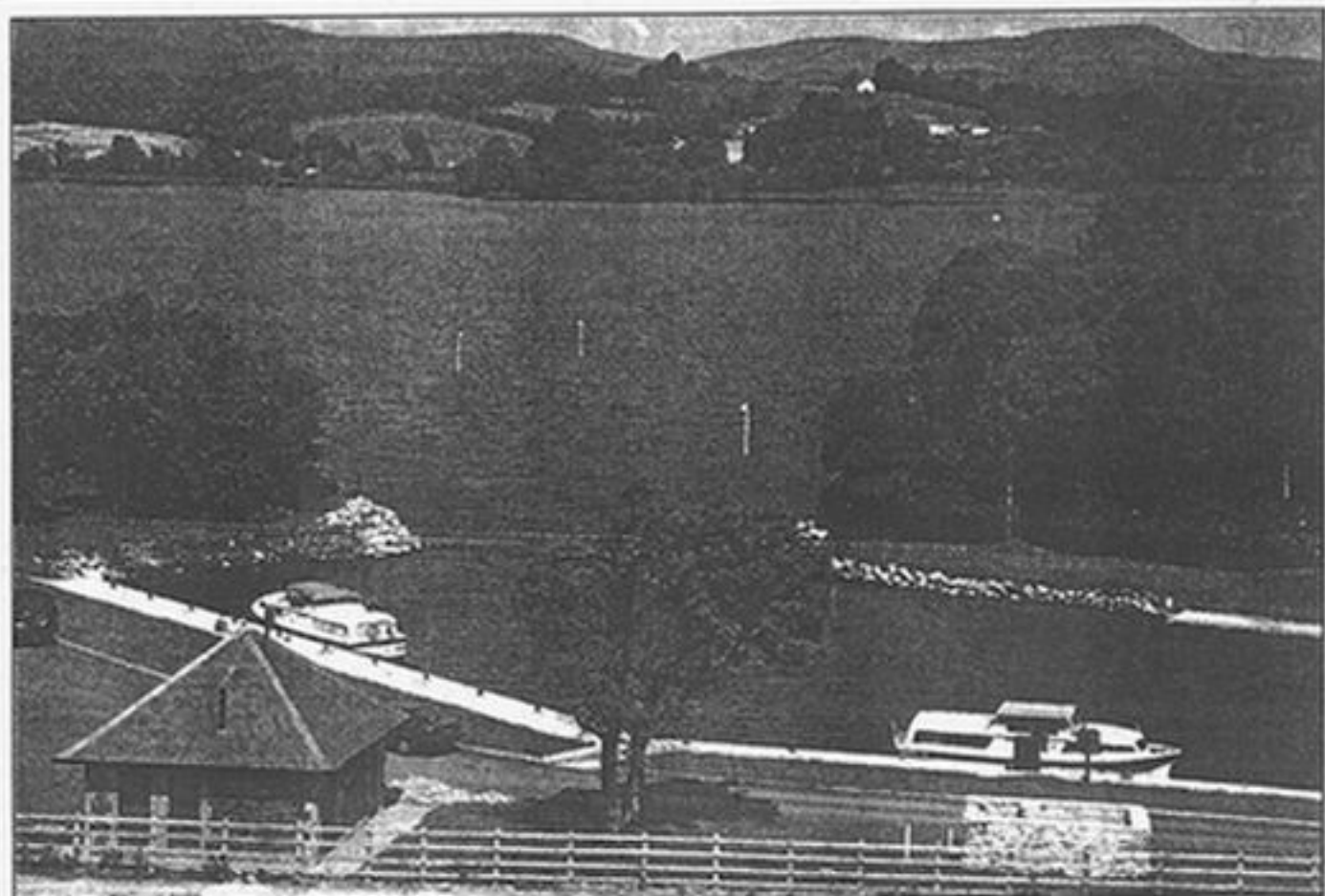
There are also fine examples of the stonemason's

craft all along the new waterway — adding enormously to its atmosphere and charm — and acting as a reminder of the love and labour its original builders invested in it. Notwithstanding this fact, the new waterway is perhaps one of the most symbolic cross-broader projects yet undertaken.

— Justin Comiskey



Carrick-on-Shannon: a good starting point for the Shannon — Erne Waterway, the town is well serviced with facilities for the water-borne holidaymaker



New mooring with service block on Lough Garadice, on the Shannon — Erne Waterway

## A stretch of water unrivalled in Europe for cruising

THE restoration of the Shannon-Erne waterway, which used to be known as the Ballinamore-Ballyconnell Canal, has created a huge opportunity for those from both home and abroad who have a penchant for inland cruising. The Shannon-Erne system, which has been made possible by the re-opening of the 40 miles or so of canal now means that you have 300 miles of waterway stretching from Killaloe in the south to Belleek in the north.

Cruising on the Shannon has, for many years, been a major choice among people from both home and abroad when it comes to choosing a holiday, and the Shannon

scheme is known world-wide for its serene waterways, good coarse and game fishing, waterside inns where you can relax after a long day's cruising, and excellent restaurants close to your mooring place.

For anyone planning a Shannon cruise this year, a new option for them would be to take the route from the Shannon up to the Erne. The old canal was opened originally in 1860, linking the Shannon at Leitrim through eight locks to Lough Scur and along the Woodford River and its lakes to Upper Lough Erne near Belleek. Unfortunately, the fall in commercial traffic led to the canal falling into disuse and,

following 10 years of busy use, it closed soon after.

But all that has changed now, and Emerald Star Line has taken the opportunity to make the most of the new waterway, which gives Irish cruising folk a stretch of water unrivalled anywhere else in Europe. The new waterway can be reached in less than an hour's cruising from the Emerald Star base at Carrick-on-Shannon, or from their more northern base at Belleek on the River Erne.

Passage by cruiser through the new waterway should take you about three days, during which time you can meander along the canal and through the lakes and locks,

enjoy your holiday, and also, in many ways, take a trip back in time.

Emerald Star celebrated the opening of the waterway by establishing their base at Belleek in Co. Cavan, which is at the start of the River Erne navigation route. From Belleek, you can now explore the channels of Upper Lough Erne, which is studded with islands, many of which have carefully maintained historic remains. Once on the Erne scheme, you can cruise as far as Belleek and make a visit to the historic pottery, the products of which are world-famous.

For those using the Belleek base, Emerald Star has done all they can to make life easier for you.



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Following preliminary engineering surveys and detailed environmental studies, construction work on the canal began in the summer of 1991. Over the next two summers approximately £30 million (courtesy of the Irish and British Governments, the ESB, the European Regional Development Fund and the International fund for Ireland) was spent repairing and even replacing parts of the canal and its infrastructure. The project was managed by ESB International in Dublin, which drew up the engineering plans.

While the new waterway sticks faithfully to the 19th-century plan, follows the same route, uses the same 16 locks and preserves the old-world charm of the original, it is actually a total reconstruction to 20th-century specifications. Under the stonework of the lock chambers, for example, lurk precision-built shells of reinforced concrete. Modern cruiser craft are broader in beam, deeper in draught and require more headroom than the vessels which sailed down the old canal.

All the specifications for the new waterway had to be expanded to meet the bigger requirements of today's craft. It meant rebuilding all lock chambers to wider dimensions, raising or replacing many of the road bridges over the canal and re-excavating the 62.5 kilometre long navigation channel to



Carrick-on-Shannon: a good starting point for the Shannon — Erne Waterway, the town is well serviced with facilities for the water-borne holidaymaker

## Drama at Lock No. 15

INDIANA JONES'S first glimpse of the Temple of Doom could not have been more dramatic than my first look at Lock No 15 on the Ballyconnell-Ballinamore Canal at Killarcan, Co Leitrim; we had both hacked our way through dense undergrowth, battled upstream against assorted and hostile creatures (you can get a nasty bite from a butterfly) and had both only the vaguest idea of where we were going.

The enormity of the structure (Killarcan Lock, not the Temple of Doom) and the obvious labour that went into its construction, was stunning, particularly when viewed from the dried-up bottom of the lock.

It was 1987, and I was on a canoeing expedition for *The Irish Times*, with colleagues Paddy Smyth and Michael Foley, following the course of the waterway from Carrick-

on-Shannon to Enniskillen, and reporting on our progress daily to the readers of *The Irish Times*. We discovered a part of Ireland, wild and beautiful, empty and unexplored, where lakes and rivers interconnected in a bewildering matrix that defied our efforts at map reading.

We passed through flooded meadows of water buttercups, banks of willow herb, lakes of wild fowl; we encountered elusive kingfishers, dragonflies, minks on assertiveness-training courses, and even heard the distinctive creak of the endangered corncrake.

In the evenings, we parked our canoe and headed for the nearest oasis where we dined on roast quail over a blazing fire — in the dining-room of the Glenview Restaurant. We were also fortunate in finding excellent lodgings in the many fine B and Bs along the way.

Travelling by luxury cruiser has some disadvantages, however. You are unable to get thoroughly soaked to the skin in the modern cruiser, unless you go about it earnestly; and falling in, which constitutes one of the pleasures of a canoe trip, would require considerable skill in a cruiser. The pubs and restaurants are easily accessible as the forebears of the citizens Ballinamore, Keshcarrigan, Ballyconnell and Belturbet had the good sense to site their towns on the very banks of the canal.

I say "canal" but it is in fact, for most of its length, the lovely, slow-moving Woodford river, with miles of open lake, including the serene St John's Lough and the majestic Lough Garadice. The canal constitutes the uphill part of the journey from the Shannon to Lough Scurl where, as along the entire waterway, the locks are electrically operated by means of what is called a "smart card", depriving explorers of the joy of carrying canoes and equipment on their heads.

These smart cards also allow access to toilets and showers, located at intervals along the route. Instructions on how to use these luxuries, and the locks, are clearly displayed. Placenames, however, are in English only, so you won't know what Aghalane means unless you can check with an Irish translation of the names of the hills and townlands.

— Fergus Brogan

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Upper Lough Erne, which is studded with islands, many of which have carefully maintained historic remains. Once on the Erne scheme, you can cruise as far as Belleek and make a visit to the historic pottery, the products of which are world-famous.

For those using the Belturbet base, Emerald Star has done all they can to make life easier for you. They have a reception centre complete with instructional video on how to manage your cruiser and various cruising opportunities, as well as showers, a TV room, telephones and good car-parking.

Emerald Star is offering three different class of cruisers for hire at Belturbet, which were specially designed for them during 1993 and 1994. These are the Shannon Star, the Lake Star and the three berth Town Star.

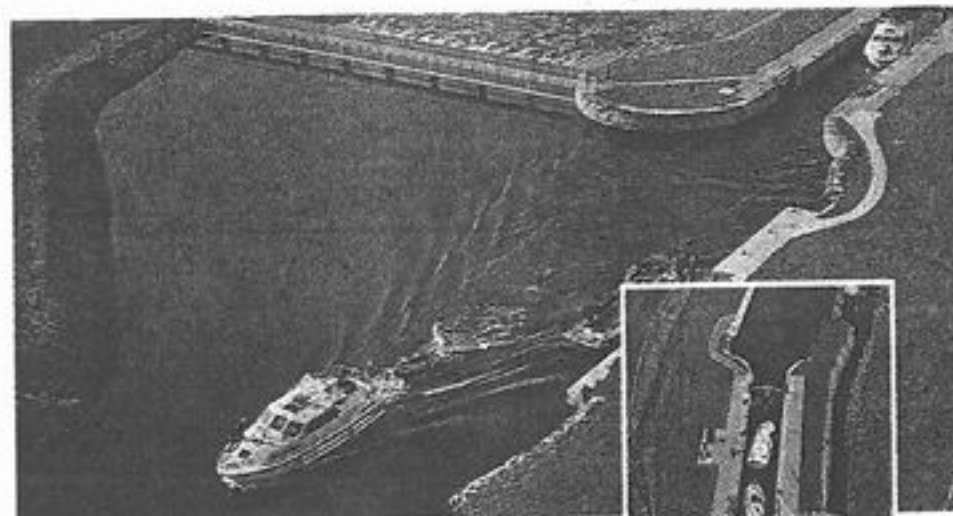
If you start your cruise at the well-known Carrick-on-Shannon base, you can cruise up the Lough Allen Canal and into Lough Erne, and on to Belturbet and the Erne water scheme. The town of Carrick-on-Shannon is also a good place to stop off at on your cruise, as it has myriad mooring places and the town provides good pubs and restaurants where you can enjoy the cosmopolitan company of the many Continental Europeans who flock to the Shannon each year.

— Pat Smyllie



A typical cabin cruiser on the Shannon — Erne Waterway, providing a tranquil for families or groups of friends at any time of the year

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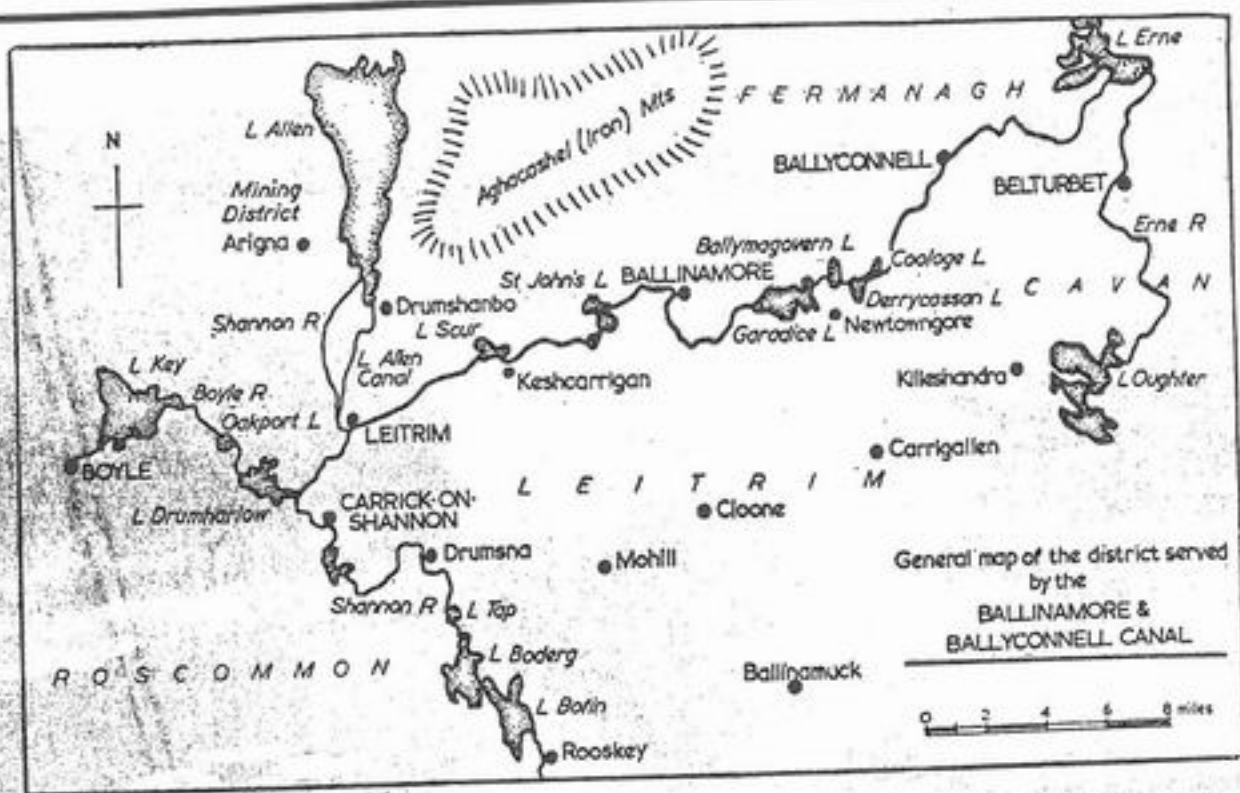
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# THE SHANNON — ERNE WATERWAY

## Along the banks of the cross-border canal



The map, which shows the course of the original Ballinamore & Ballyconnell Canal, is from Patrick Flanagan's book, *The Ballinamore & Ballyconnell Canal*, which gives a most interesting history of the undertaking

## Co-operation makes the waterway run smoothly

**T**HE Office of Public Works has a long-established record as the State's inland waterways authority, and for many years it has been developing and maintaining the navigation of the Shannon. When the Oireachtas passed the Shannon Navigation Act in 1990, the Shannon-Erne waterway was placed under its care, and during the past three years the waterway has been restored by a team of civil engineering contractors under the direction and supervision of the ESB International.

The OPW has worked in close co-operation with the Department of Agriculture in Northern Ireland (DANI) on the project, and now this newly completed waterway passes through more than 30 miles of scenic and largely unspoiled countryside



Association, angling groups and other interested organisations.

There are currently close to 2,000 craft using the navigation of the Shannon, with 450 of them being owned by cruise hire operators. Last year, an estimated 30,000 tourists, 80 per cent of them from outside Ireland, cruised on the river and availed of the services provided along its length, and all this has helped boost the economies of towns and villages along the river.

In order to service the increasing demands along the river by the tourists, the OPW has had to provide the necessary infrastructure to handle all the business, and many new moorings have been provided. But apart from the Shannon-Erne development, the OPW has been busy developing the Grand Canal for navigation from Dublin to the River

**C**HARLES Haughey — a figure who dominated political life in the Republic for 12 years — joked quite a lot while fulfilling what was probably his final public engagement as Taoiseach. He quipped that "some pompous interviewer" would want to know what his last official act as Taoiseach was. "I will tell them," said Mr Haughey, "that I inspected a canal — not just any old canal — but a canal that will link the great waterways of Ireland, the Erne and the Shannon. This canal will flow across political and geographic boundaries."

The canal Mr Haughey referred to was the Ballinamore-Ballyconnell canal which, through the expenditure of almost £30

million, has been recently restored and renamed as the Shannon-Erne Waterway. As the new name suggests, it is now possible to sail a boat up the Shannon, navigate the new waterway and continue up the Erne. Its opening today means that river craft can cruise all the way from the pottery making village of Belleek on Lower Lough Erne, to Limerick.

Robert Travers, marketing development manager at the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB), says that the new waterway "will have a fundamental impact on tourism in the local area and in Northern Ireland generally."

The NITB registered a six per cent increase in visitor numbers from the Republic last year and is hoping that

the new waterway will attract even more tourists. Those who travel along the restored canal will enjoy a remarkable variety of beautiful scenery from the stillwater canal at Leitrim village — through lovely loughs such as St John's Lough and the rich fishing waters of Lough Garadice — to the serenity of the Woodford Reach stretch into Lough Erne.

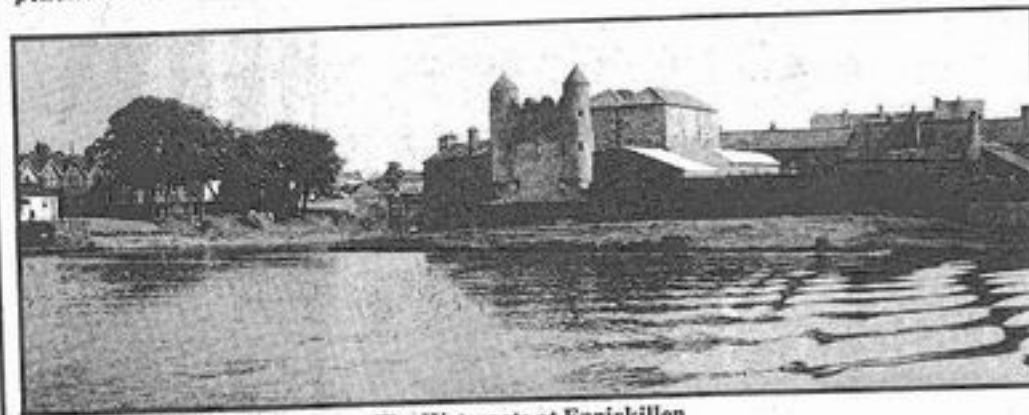
Along the waterway — apart from some of the most rustic small villages in Ireland — you will be able to see a variety of rich wildlife such as otters, foxes, badgers, cranes, kingfishers, whooper swans and six different types of duck. The surrounding countryside, which has not been a major tourist destination before, is substantially unspoiled and littered with

historic monuments like dolmens and crannógs.

An environmental impact statement prepared for the British and Irish Governments outlined one of the waterway's principal attractions as being the tranquil countryside it traverses. The statement noted a "rural setting free from traffic, noise or pollution". Another report, this time commissioned for the International Fund for Ireland (the IFI is one of the project's sponsors), estimated that the restored canal could generate an additional £45.6 million in tourist revenue.

The care and maintenance of the new waterway is being shared by the OPW and the Department of Agriculture Northern Ireland (DANI). The DANI was involved at the project's inception, and the canal represents a major part of its water recreation budget. Funds to promote the project are being provided by the IFI, Bord Fáilte and the NITB. It is worth stating, just as Mr Haughey did, that the new waterway is a worthwhile and solid cross-border link. For many people involved in its planning and construction, the restored canal has come to symbolise what can be achieved through inter-governmental co-operation.

— Justin Comiskey



The Watergate at Enniskillen

## A strategy of quietness

**T**HE NEW Shannon-Erne waterway is being heavily publicised by Bord Fáilte and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which are in close liaison on the project. Together, they have set up a marketing task

force to achieve maximum impact in the UK, Continental Europe and other holiday markets for the waterway. A £650,000 three year promotional programme is now well in hand, with threequarters of the finance

being provided by the International Fund for Ireland, and the balance from Bord Fáilte and the NITB.

The task force is devising a marketing strategy for the entire waterway based on the key attributes of quietness,

solitude, wilderness mystique and the sense of adventure. These are the qualities which they feel summarise the appeal of Ireland as a whole for holidaymakers who increasingly prefer to seek alternatives to mass tourism.

Bord Fáilte's development strategy for the Upper Shannon Basin is strongly influenced by the reopening of the Shannon-Erne waterway which is reflected in the allocation of funds totalling £1.8 million, under the Interreg

## The starting glass



national. The OPW has worked in close co-operation with the Department of Agriculture in Northern Ireland (DANI) on the project, and now this newly completed waterway passes through more than 30 miles of scenic and largely unspoiled countryside through counties Leitrim, Cavan and Fermanagh, offering a variety of navigational experiences as it is made up of a stillwater canal, canalised river sections of the Yellow and Woodford Rivers, and many fine lakes including Lough Scurl and Garadice Lough.

The waterway is entered from the River Shannon at Leitrim village, or from Upper Lough Erne a couple of miles from Belturbet, and has a total of 16 user operated locks throughout its system. People on cruising holidays can make use of toilets, showers, laundries and other facilities provided at six service blocks strategically placed along the route.

The complete work was carried out smoothly by a plan drawn up by the OPW and the DANI, which developed an excellent working relationship during the



A stone figure from Boa Island, Lower Lough Erne

project. During the 1980s a comprehensive study of the feasibility of restoring the navigation between the Shannon and the Erne was undertaken by the OPW, which decided by 1986 that restoration was a distinct possibility.

But it would call for substantial civil engineering works involving clearing and enlarging navigation channels, repairing locks and embankments and strengthening and rebuilding bridges for which designs and estimates were drawn up. In 1989, a decision was taken by the Irish and British Governments to carry

out the project at an estimated cost of £30 million, and the OPW and DANI were charged with the responsibility for the navigation, and the restoration was delegated to the ESB.

The project was overseen by a group set up by the Irish and British Governments and the plan was finally drafted by the OPW in consultation with DANI. As well as the local authorities, tourist boards and fisheries boards consultation continued to be held with the Erne Charter Boat Association, the Irish Boat Rental Association, the Inland Waterways Association, the Irish Sailing

Association and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, which are in close liaison on the project. Together, they have set up a marketing task

As far as the Shannon-Erne waterway is concerned, if the initial interest is a reliable guide, the future will be bright indeed. The OPW is looking forward eagerly to the challenge of working with the local community and with its colleagues in Northern Ireland to develop the navigation to its maximum potential.

— Karl Jones

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markets for the waterway. A £650,000 three year promotional programme is now well in hand, with threequarters of the finance

cord, selling into the United States, the West Indies and Continental Europe as well as to top quality Irish retail outlets. Apart from blowing their own glass, they also import glass and handcut it themselves at Cavan, but the mainstay of their business is still the blown and handcut crystal designed and cut by their own craftspeople.

— Pat Smyllie

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Bord Failte's development strategy for the Upper Shannon Basin is strongly influenced by the reopening of the Shannon-Erne waterway which is reflected in the allocation of funds totalling £1.8 million, under the Interreg grant programme and from the International Fund for Ireland, both of which are administered by Bord Failte.

These priming funds have played a crucial role in attracting commercial capital investment of almost £5.5 million into Shannonside projects and have provided 40 new cruisers and purpose-built holiday barges, three new marinas and two riverside bars, and an equestrian centre.

— Pat Smyllie

## The starting glass

CAVAN Crystal is taking an active part at the official opening ceremony of the new Shannon-Erne which takes place at Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan, today. General manager Peter Pollock and public relations manager, Marie McNamee, presented dignitaries at the function with five blown and handcut Cavan Crystal bowls which were handed over by three

Ladies of the Erne, and Angela Sutherland of the Shannon-Erne Waterway.

The opening of the new waterway coincides with the 25th anniversary of the founding of Cavan Crystal, which has been building up its business over the years, and is now one of Ireland's leading cut-glass crystal operations.

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BY  
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