

# History flows through Shannon

**L**IMERICK, it was often said, had the best stout in Ireland. This was because of the way it was brought here.

The timber barrels of the famous black brew was taken down the Liffey in barges from the great Guinness brewery in the west of central Dublin. From there the barges entered the Grand Canal. Then they sedately ringed their way south of the city centre and out to the great flat lands of Kildare, Laois and Offaly, past Allenwood and on to Philipstown, through Tullamore and onward to enter the great Shannon river at Shannon Harbour, near where the Suck, which drains much of East Connacht, adds its waters to the deep and ponderous Shannon.

Turning south, the barges had the benefit of the slow-flowing river to bring them past Banagher, one of the many Shannon towns (including Limerick) which had been constructed with their backs to the very river from which they were later to derive life. Onward between the clutter of little islands, they went, and on to Meelick weir and through its lock. That weir alone was responsible for maintaining the water level at a navigable depth right back as far as Athlone, far to the north. This portion of the Shannon is wide and sluggish and subject to extensive flooding in winter.

The ESB study tells us that a major feature of the landscape is the eskir ridges, running roughly east-west. These are the beds of glacial rivers, the stones having been wrenched from mountains by the descending ice, carried considerable distances, and deposited where the ice melted and cavernous rivers cascaded through the glassy mass.

A few miles further on they came, to Portumna - another town which palpably ignored the river, being constructed a mile distant. There, at its low, swing bridge, the barges, with many others, queued and waited for the span to open at pre-ordained hours.

After that it was on to the most perilous part of the journey - the trip under sail, or in convoy under tow, through the temperamental inland sea that is Lough Derg. Then, as now, the delightful villages of Terryglass, Dromineer and Garrykenedy on the Tipperary side, and Mountshannon and (via its own access canal) Scariff were available for shelter when, as is often, the wind whining in between, Slieve

flood plains, oxbow lakes, levees, alluvial soil, etc.

The Shannon at Killaloe and in Lough Derg is 36 metres (117 ft) above sea level. It has an average flow of 178 cubic metres per second. That may also be expressed as 178 tonnes per second.

There is a lot of energy in 178 tonnes falling through 36 metres every second.

It was decided to harness it to make electricity.

One Dr Thomas McLaughlin, a scientist, who had worked in Germany, met the then Irish Minister for Industry and Commerce, Patrick McGilligan, in London one day, and outlined his plan. The book carries a transcript of an interview with the late Dr McLoughlin.

The book explains the thinking at the time and the principles employed:

"The conventional way (to produce hydro-electricity) was to build a high dam with a power station at its base, to span the river valley and back up the waters into a large reservoir. Many years later, this design was used by ESB on the Liffey and the Lee.

"But the Shannon had to be different. Because of its flat middle course, any backing up and raising of the river levels would have caused severe flooding. This was considered totally unacceptable.

"Instead, a great weir was built five kilometres south of Killaloe at Parteen-a-lax. This backs up the river to the level of Lough Derg, but more importantly, it divides the river in two.

"To the left is the old river course. In order to keep the river fresh for fishing and environmental purposes, ten tonnes of water per second is released down this channel."

This means: The massive headrace canal, 100 metres wide and 12 metres deep, has a head of water of 30 metres (100 ft) when it arrives at Ardnacrusha. In all, 94 per cent of the Shannon water flows through Ardnacrusha and less than 6 per cent goes down the old course past O'Brien's Bridge.

In fact, at Plassey, it is probable that more of the passing water had originated in the Mulcair than had come down from Castleconnell.

The ESB was established in 1927 to manage the enterprise, which was already under construction. There were 5,000 men speaking Irish, English and German, using the 138 loco-

THE ESB has produced an astonishing set of videos about the Shannon which has been circulated to every second-level school in the region.

It is designed to fit in with the Junior Cert geography course, but is, in fact, much, much more.

Apart from being a stimulating account of the physical and historic characteristics of the river from Cavan to the sea - a distance of 344 km (215 miles) - it touches on everything from mythology to fluid mechanics, to industrialisation, to military strategy to religion and on to discuss the potential for job creation of the great artery which serves Limerick and its region so well.

In this special article, MARTIN BYRNES examines the Shannon in the context of the ESB's pioneering work.



The high and the low of it. The headrace (left) takes most of the Shannon flow, while the old river (right) receives ten tonnes of water each second to keep the ecology going. The difference in height is some 15 metres at that stage.

Pictures: NIAL ST. JOHN



factories.

It tells the student that the 5,000-year-old settlement at Béal Ború had the advantage of water, with fish and fowl; fertile soil for livestock and crops; wood in abundance; a safe crossing point at the ford downriver from Killaloe, and a high and dry point above the worst floods.

We are shown how Clonmacnoise was at the junction of two major trans-national routes, running atop Eskir Riada, the east-west gravel ridge which rose above the often-flooded plains of the midlands.

The history given for early Limerick is a bit fanciful, but is the accepted version for schools.

A few paragraphs to illustrate: "In 922, a fierce band of Scandinavian warriors known as Vikings, led by their chief, Tomar, sailed up the Shannon Estuary. Their mission - plunder, death and destruction. Shannon's shores, with its great monasteries, were to prove a rich hunting ground. Their large seagoing ships eventually reached these shallows known today as Curraghur Falls. They could go no further."

"They went ashore on the east side to discover that they were, in fact, on an island about 1.5 km long and 0.5 km wide... Tomar quickly realised that he had discovered the perfect settlement location; surrounded by water, yet located at the first fording



the towpath upriver of O'Brien's Bridge has milestones. This one tells that it is four miles to Killaloe and eight to Limerick.

point on the Shannon with easy access to the surrounding countryside, the river teeming with fish, the countryside flat and fertile.

"High ground in the centre of the island, now the site of the 12th century St Mary's Cathedral, provided a dry-point and a commanding view downriver; and the river itself was to be the highway for plundering raids inland and for trade with other Viking settlements in Western Europe."

**T**he Vikings, we are told, held Limerick for 300 years. After Brian Ború defeated the Limerick Vikings in 977, just 55 years after they had first set up here, they concentrated on trade.

When the Normans came, they saw Limerick as a strategic military location, and fortified it heavily, the castle being the best example of their handiwork.

And here is how the ESB managed to cram the period 1400 to 1900 into just 143 words:

"By the 15th century, Limerick had developed into a fortified medieval city. With the ancient site now called English Town and, across the Abbey River, the Gaelic Irish built their Irish Town and fortified it



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The falls of Doonass plunge the Shannon down a further several metres. The river falls again at Plassey, at Corbally and at Curraghmore.

Aughty to the north and Slieve Bernagh to the south, whipped the lake into an unstable fury. The glory of the Arra mountains, extinct volcano, occupy the eye on the Tipperary shore.

Then it was calmer waters which brought them to Killaloe.

There they went into a canal again, because the river dropped immediately after Killaloe, and was un-navigable. A short canal, with locks, allowed the boats to descend to the level now obtaining at O'Brien's Bridge. But there another problem arose, because the river plunged down a further hundred feet at the Falls of Doonass. To avoid this, another canal, the Errina, took off just below O'Brien's Bridge, cut through Clonlara, and re-entered the Shannon below Plassey falls at Plassey Mills. That canal, though overgrown and impassable, still carries water today.

After cruising the still waters along by Plassey, the barges finally entered the city canal, which bypassed the effects of Curraghmore Falls. Guinness themselves had their city store on the canal. Barges carrying passengers and general cargo could enter the Abbey river at high tide and navigate to the city docks for loading or unloading.

This situation obtained until the 1920s, at which time the Shannon Scheme was built. Canal trade had been significantly lost to the railways after the middle of the 1800s, but the river was to remain open to traffic.

The ESB video uses aerial photography to illustrate many of the physical and geological features of the Shannon basin, such as meanders,

motives, and over 1,700 wagons which had been brought in from Germany to cater for the huge earth-moving work.

The design was for the production of 150 million units of electricity annually, but the entire national consumption was just a third of that. But by 1935, just six years after it started producing, Ardnacrusha's capacity was fully taken up.

From a local point of view it is worth noting that Parteen school was moved from a point just beyond what is now Longpavement dump (weren't they lucky) up to the village (which was then called Ardnacrusha).

Ardnacrusha post office was at what is now Fairfield, and that was sent across the tailrace to the townland of Lakyle. It took the name "Ardnacrusha" with it, and the village of Parteen came into existence - even though only two slender pieces of land on that side of the tailrace are in Parteen townland. Parteen village is, in fact, in Ballykeelaun, and Fairfield is in Garraun.

The Shannon has been the creator of home for as long as the island has been inhabited.

The video takes the student through pre-Christian settlement, using Béal Ború, near Killaloe, a so-called dry-point settlement. It chooses Clonmacnoise as its example of the nodal monastic settlement - one which acts as a hub for a region.

It takes Limerick as a Viking city, founded primarily for defence and for trade. It chooses Athlone as a Norman bridge-point, and Shannon as a dormitory town to its airport and



Keeper of the falls . . . Eugene Sherlock, new owner of the celebrated Anglers' Rest, At Doonass, says that the area will still attract huge numbers during the summer months, and foreign and Irish campers are a growing feature of tourism in the area.



Parteen-a-lax weir lets down ten tonnes of water a second. The other 168 tonnes make electricity.

## Limerick no den of thieves, irate Eamon tells writer

By JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY

LIMERICKMAN Eamon O'Connor, now living in Florida, was quick to come to the defence of his native city following unfavourable comments attributed to a hiker, by a travel writer, in his local newspaper, the Sun Sentinel.

He wrote to the editor of the 200,000 circulation newspaper and told him to get his "facts".

Travel writer Thomas Swick, wrote that while touring in the South he "picked up Michael and Priscilla", he, from Cork, and his wife, from England.

He wrote: "We talked about his homeland. There was a strong rivalry, he



Eamon O'Connor . . . defending Limerick.

said, between Cork and Dublin; Limerick was full of thieves. 'It's the worst city in Ireland,' he said. 'I wouldn't want to spend an

hour there.' Kilkenny, where I had decided to spend the night, 'was a very nice place'.

Mr O'Connor, a former RTE award winning cameraman, was so incensed at what he had read that he immediately contacted the paper's editor.

He told him that he failed to understand how a reporter sent out to cover a story could skip the third largest city in the Republic because of the off-hand remark of a hitchhiker, especially one from Cork, "which is notoriously jealous of the fine city of Limerick".

Why, he asked, bother to travel to the Emerald Isle if the only opinion of the country are given by losers met along the way.

There were, continued Mr O'Connor, many historic, and modern, facets to Limerick and its surrounding county.

He concluded: "So, Mr Swick, the next time you travel to Ireland, do not rely on the opinions of disgruntled hikers, but get the facts, man."

Within days, Eamon had a reply from Mr Swick, who promised him that on his next visit to Ireland he would definitely include Limerick.

"I just could not allow such remarks, as appeared in this important newspaper, to go unchallenged," concluded Eamon, who returns to Ireland each year to present summer entertainment at various hotels in the region.

had developed into a fortified medieval city. With the ancient site now called English Town and, across the Abbey River, the Gaelic Irish built their Irish Town and fortified it with walls. This aspect of town building, with an English and Irish town became common in this era, other examples being Dublin and Kilkenny.

"But it was in 1691, at the final stand of the Jacobite forces of James II against William of Orange, that Limerick as a defence settlement was to receive its decisive test. The great walls withstood the first siege of 1690, but in 1691 Limerick's defences fell, the medieval city was destroyed and the Irish resistance finally signed away on Limerick's Treaty Stone.

"Through the 18th and 19th centuries, the defence function gave way to trade and commerce, and the city expanded and prospered."

Shannon town, we are told, is uniquely qualified for its air-age - flat, fog-free and the first natural stop-off point between America and Europe. The foundation of the town, starting with Drumgeely in 1961, is catalogued, as are the later developments, social and industrial.

The tourism generated by the Shannon River is discussed in the third video by Alan Condell, who runs his own activity and leisure centre at Killaloe.

The industrialisation of the estuary concentrates on Aghinish, Money-point, Tarbert and Shannon, with looks at the operations at Foynes.

All in all, these three videos, with their accompanying book, are a treasure for every school, and should be studied with great care and application.

## OF INTEREST TO WOMEN NOTICE OF SMEAR CLINIC

DATE: Thursday, 8th April.  
TIME: 10.00 a.m. - 12 noon.  
LOCATION: Rixtown Health Centre,  
Rixtown Terrace,  
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N.B.: Prior appointments are NOT necessary.  
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