

A LOST AND FORGOTTEN WATERWAY

THE OLD LIMERICK – KILLALOE CANAL

THE MAGIC of the Old Canal Harbour, in Limerick City, got me hooked on canals while still only a mere child.

One sun-drenched evening in 1931, my father took me by horse and cart from my mother's green grocery shop in Mungret Street, in the Irishtown, to collect a consignment of potatoes from a boat at the Old Canal Harbour. Not only did we collect the potatoes, but, having been a year at school, my spelling was good enough to get the name, "The Sandlark", on the prow. In a kindly way, the boatmen brought my father and myself down into the fore-castle cabin, delightfully pervaded with turf-fire smoke, and gave me a mug of tea and brown country bread and told me they and "The Sandlark" sailed from Garrykennedy, where they'd take me when I got bigger.

After that first magic experience, the Old Canal Harbour became a magnetic place for me. First on Sunday walks with my father and his pals and later as an avidly-curious, far-ranging explorer.

Across the side-entablature of the cargo shed ran the proclamation in large letters: "Shannon Navigation – Limerick to Lough Allen". The noticeboard, beside the cargo office, listed alluring, poetically-named ports of call.

Some of them, "Killaloe, Mountshannon, Garrykennedy, Shannon Harbour Scariff, and via Athy to the Barrow Navigation" still reverberate in the mind, half a century on.

In 1929, with the building of a giant dam just above O'Briensbridge for the E.S.B.'s Hydro-Electric Power Station Canal via Ardnacrusha, the Old Limerick-Killaloe Canal became a sacrificial victim to progress. The Old Canal Harbour – near where the Dublin road begins out of Limerick City – happily got a thirty year reprieve.

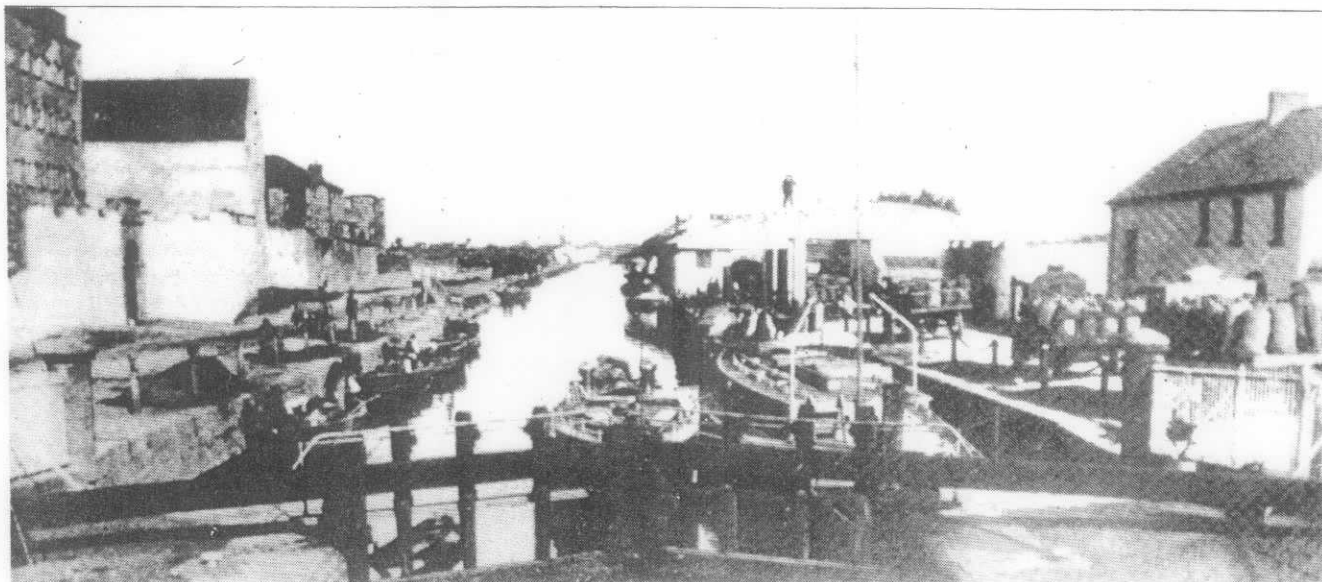
The Grand Canal Company's commercial barges (mainly with Guinness stout) and a few freelance barges like "The Sandlark" then sailed down the E.S.B. Canal Headrace from O'Briensbridge via the huge lock at Ardnacrusha and the Tailrace and a bit of the Shannon and the Abbey River and docked at the Old Canal Harbour.

After she ran aground on a sharp underwater ridge below the E.S.B. Tailrace at Corbally in the autumn of 1941, we never saw "The Sandlark" at Limerick anymore. She was one of the forty barges a week that Jim Ryan, of Annaghbeg Lock (at Plassey) recalled sailing the Limerick-Killaloe Canal route before the 1929 closure.

My explorations of the Old Limerick-Killaloe Canal were not restricted to its physical remains. There was folklore collected from surviving former workers and canalside residents who saw its last years and gleanings from historical records.

Before that closure, on the down trip they came via O'Briensbridge, via Clonlara, Newtown Lock, Gully's Lock and Annaghbeg Lock (Plassey) and through an idyllic stretch of the Shannon via The Head of The Old Canal and into the Old Canal Harbour.

At McMahon's Ferry-Keeper's house at The Head of The Old Canal, its last resident, Mrs. Mary Ryan, told me that her Hewitt ancestors had an expedient lighthouse in the garden. It was a lantern, hoisted aloft at night on a high



pole, to guide the barges into The Old Canal. Mr. Jimmy Madden (whose late father worked for the Shannon Navigation Company at Plassey, in pre-closure times) recalled his romantic way of school travel by barge.

In the mornings, Jimmy and his sister Kathleen, would listen for the familiar bugle sounds (warning the Annaghbeg lock-keeper from an approaching barge) and the loud putt-putt of the diesel engine. The minute they heard these sounds, they hurried across The Black Bridge, boarded a barge at Annaghbeg Lock and sailed down via the Shannon, into The Old Canal, disembarked at Park Lock (now Troy's) and walked down Pennywell Lane to St. Patrick's School on the nearby Dublin Road. Jimmy Madden added that all the captains and crewmen were very friendly, and for him, as a young schoolboy, there was the added thrill of a turn steering the barge.

The cottage Jimmy Madden spent his boyhood in, near a defunct 19th century mill at Plassey, was a ferry-keeper's house before The Black Bridge was built in the 1830's. Directly across from it on the Clare shore of the Shannon, are the barely noticeable remains of the earthen walls of a small cottage. This site known in local folklore as Peg's Height. Still before The Black Bridge was built, the horses that towed the barges were ferried across from one shore to the other on a raft. The ferryman on the Plassey Mill shore and one Peg O'Brien on the Clare shore operated the raft winches. For the solace of thirsty bargemen and passengers, Peg operated a shebeen - an illicit tavern!

During its 30 years reprieve, the Limerick Old Canal Harbour was crowded with barges daily. The majority, which brought Guinness stout in wooden casks from St. James Brewery in Dublin, added a peculiar strand of colour to the folklore tapestry of Limerick City.

In the second half of the 1800's, Guinness's undercut the nine or ten then operating Limerick city breweries by shipping their stout to Limerick and closed them all in a few years.

Until The Old Canal Harbour was closed in 1960, Limerick Guinness drinkers swore that the leisurely three or four days transport of Guinness stout in wooden casks from Dublin to Limerick city by canal barge, gave it a deliciously nutty flavour. "The Fox" - the Shannon Navigation Company's maintenance barge, now owned, sailed and painted pink by Sid Shine of Athlone - used the Limerick Old Canal Harbour as her home port. Denis Madigan, the company's driver, resided in one of the harbour houses. Often we watched with fascination as Mr. Madigan descended the murky depths of the Tidal Lock at the Harbour, to inspect the lockgates.

On the quays opposite the cargo quays, the Sandcotmen, the Frawley's, the Shanahans and Crowe's (of St. Mary's Isle Parish) discharged loads of river sand and gravel, dredged from the sandbeds near the confluence of The Old Canal and the Shannon, below The Black Bridge at Plassey, until the lorry fleets and the huge country sandpits of the late 1950's building boom ended their trade.

Happily, but not before L.T.C. Rolt - in "Green and Silver", an account of his late - 1940's Shannon cruise - recorded a delightful cameo of these Sandcotmen and their stout craft and quaint trade methods.

For hundreds of young people of my generation, the Old Canal Harbour, from the First (or Tidal) Lock to The Head of The Old Canal, was a romantic boating, swimming and coarse angling nursery - it held abundant shoals of perch, bream and roach and swarms of eels and some fabulous pike.

With its mini-armada of barges and its peculiar technology and the readiness of the bargees and shore workers to let us know everything about the canal, we found it an instructive navigation school. For myself, there was the added thrill of learning how to rig and sail model yachts there from two old Limerick model boatmakers, Harry Williams and Tommy Cleary, from The Irishtown.

In the 1820's, barge crews were truculent, and the lock-keeper at Cussanne (near Killaloe) asked for firearms to protect himself. The agrarian rebellion (led by the Ribbonmen) in Limerick and Clare in the 1810's - 30's, intruded on the Old Limerick - Killaloe Canal. In 1817 a military escort, a sergeant and twelve (12) soldiers travelled on Wednesdays on the Limerick - Killaloe and on Thursdays on the Killaloe - Limerick barges. However, Johann George Kohl (of Dresden) a typical example of the 19th century travel writers, met hazard than the rather eccentric, happy-go-lucky Irish way of doing business in his canal experience at Killaloe and O'Briensbridge, en route to Limerick city, in 1842.

He reached Killaloe after coming down Lough Derg by steamer. As the river below Killaloe was impassable due to rocks and whirlpools and the canal link-up still uncompleted, Kohl disembarked at Killaloe. Passengers and baggage for Limerick city were taken by sidecars to O'Briensbridge for Limerick city. This wild, Irish way of doing things, amused Kohl vastly.

Kohl and another travel writer, J.H. Wakeman (1844) found the canal boats as comfortable as those in Holland though more costly for passengers. Wakeman recorded that the locks between O'Briensbridge and Limerick were so narrow, a gentleman had his skull completely smashed while looking out a barge window!

Now, despite dereliction and dense weed and tree growth, the Annaghbeg to O'Briensbridge section runs through a charming and companionable landscape.

All along it, there are scenic views of the East Clare mountains from Killaloe to Cratloe, grey-walled, ruined castles and the villages of Clonlara and O'Briensbridge with their homely pubs pleasantly punctuate the travellers way. The locks are gateless and the reduced water croons sadly over their sills. Dense alders and sally trees obscure stretches

that once were long perspectives of silver water and green banks. Most of the charming old lock-keepers cottages survive. In one of them, at Gillogue Lock, Jim Gully, a patriarchal survivor of a long race of lock-keepers, still nostalgically reminisces about the barges, crews and captains — including Captain Jim Kennedy, who commanded the last up-canal barge to Killaloe.

The Limerick - Killaloe Canal project was started in 1757 by a combination of Limerick gentry and businessmen —aided prestigiously by Edmund Dexton Pery, MP, Speaker of the Irish House Of Commons — and after many crises, completed in Progressive, expert engineers like Brownrigg (1757 — 1810) and John Gratham (who died at Limerick City in 1830) who successfully introduced steamboats from Limerick to Killaloe, helped to achieve its eventual efficiency as a commercial and passenger waterway.

There was also the humane Grand Canal Company Engineer, John Stokes, who, in 1830 laid out a line of the canal from the head of the falls at Parteen to the deep hollow below O'Briensbridge, hoping to relieve the wretched, impoverished local people by giving them gainful employment, as well as improving the navigation. In 1836, it carried 14,600 passengers and was handed over to the Shannon Commissioners. In 1834, the parts of the Telford organ for Limerick's medieval St. Mary's Cathedral were transported by barge from Dublin. In the 1860's the great bell for St. John's Cathedral was transported by barge from Dublin to Limerick Canal Harbour.

Is the Old Limerick - Killaloe Canal irremediably derelict? While the cynical might say yes, a group of forty enthusiasts have recently started cleaning the Old Limerick Canal Harbour with the objective of restoring it as a small boat marina and coarse angling grounds.

The restoration of the remaining stretch to O'Briensbridge is not a quixotic dream. With modern technology and a roller-lift from the E.S.B. Headrace Canal (between O'Briensbridge and Clonlara) this stretch could be made navigable for shallow draught boats. Seeing the romantic pleasure the Old Limerick-Killaloe Canal gave me, my vote is against hopeless capitulation to its eternal dereliction.

SEAMUS O' CINNEIDE

FOOTNOTE:— ANYONE wishing to learn the full, complicated history of the Old Limerick-Killaloe Canal, are recommended to read Charlotte Murphy's article, "The Limerick-Killaloe Navigation Company, 1697 — 1836", in the North Munster Antiquarian Journal, Volume XXIII 1980. Photostat copies can be obtained from Anne Thornhill, Reference Department, City Library, Pery Square, Limerick

PAST RALLY COMMODORES AND THEIR BOATS

YEAR	RALLY	COMMODORE	BOAT
1975	ONE	Willaim J. Knight	"Golden Hours"
1976	TWO	William Lysaght	"Sunasado".
1977	THREE	David Knight.	"Humming Bird"
1978	FOUR	Richard O'Donoghue	"Brijella"
1980	FIVE	Frank Van Den Berg.	"Argent Brach".
1981	SIX	Thomas A. Duffy	"Lotus Two".
1982	SEVEN	Bryan Brislane	"Lady Sarah"
1983	EIGHT	EDWIN BECKER	LADY G