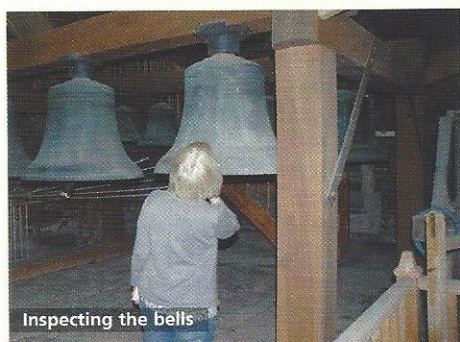


# THE BELLS OF ST. FLANNAN'S



We were clearing out some files belonging to my late father and came across this story he had written about a trip on the Shannon many years ago. We think he may have submitted it to the Sunday Miscellany program on RTE Radio 1 though as far as we know, they never broadcast it. – ed

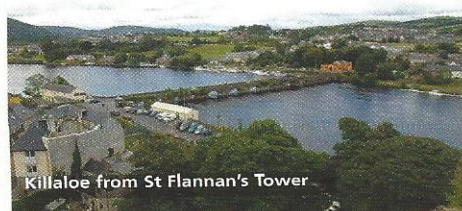
It was in the summer of 1939 that Brendan, a friend from college, and I purchased between us a Folbot, a German folding canoe, and set off from Athlone on a trip down the Shannon to Killaloe. We had assembled the canoe once before and had a trial run on the Liffey at Palmerston, and this was our only experience of paddling a canoe.

We had borrowed a small bivouac tent in which we proposed to live for the duration and we had bought a small Primus stove, a kettle and a small aluminium pot and with these and various other essentials we set off one Sunday afternoon from below the weir in Athlone.

We paddled off down the Shannon until we arrived at Clonmacnoise where we decided that we had done enough arm work for our first day, so we picked out a large field which seemed to be empty of livestock and pitched our tent in the corner of it for the night. We were rudely awakened at dawn the following morning to hear our tent being torn in two by a young bullock which had caught his hoof in a guy rope and panicked.

When we had disentangled him, we were faced with the long job of laboriously stitching the tent together again and hoping that it would remain waterproof. The remainder of the day was spent exploring the ancient monuments and in the late afternoon we set off down the river again.

The next night was one of torrential rain and while our repair job on the tent remained



waterproof, we had to go out into the storm and dig a trench around the tent to stop the water flooding in.

Otherwise our trip was uneventful until we arrived in Portumna, which could easily have won the Tidy Towns Competition if that contest had been around in those days. It was there that we met our first big obstacle – Lough Derg! We made several attempts to paddle across it but were defeated each time by the weather. In the end, we returned to the Grand Canal Company's depot in Portumna and begged a lift on one of the Company's barges heading for Killaloe.

Very kindly they obliged and that night we crossed the lake in the relative comfort of the warm little cabin, with the canoe tied safely on the deck. When we arrived in Killaloe it was still pitch dark and after we thanked our hosts, we lifted the canoe onto the quayside then carefully felt around with our feet until we found a patch of grass where we could pitch our tent. We crawled inside and were soon asleep.

Very early in the morning we were awakened by a man who informed us that we were trespassing on the Grand Canal Company Depot, of which he was the Manager, and he wanted to know what we were doing there. The barge on which we had arrived the previous night was gone, but when we explained the circumstances he proved to be very friendly and told us to have our breakfast and he would come back later and show us the sights of Killaloe.

Back he duly came after about an hour and brought us to the Protestant cathedral which dominated the town. The cathedral was closed and locked, but undeterred he led us round the side where he managed, somehow, to open a door and let us in. He now got very excited and agitated. He led us up to the belfry to inspect a bell which had an inscription engraved on it which he claimed was very offensive to Catholics.

When we had seen

the bell and duly read the inscription, he insisted that we climb up a long ladder to the roof of the tower and see the view. By this time he was so agitated that we thought it better to humour him, and obediently climbed up and out onto the roof, leaving him below in the belfry. I'm afraid that I did not really appreciate the view as my one concern was that he would pull away the ladder and leave us stranded up on the roof.

However, in the event we got down safely, and by this time he had calmed down and we parted as friends. The only thing that bothers me is that, for the life of me, I cannot remember what it was that was inscribed on the bell that upset him so much.

## Vincent Becker

It turns out that there is an inscription on one of the bells in St Flannan's Cathedral, Killaloe that might have been the cause of the man's agitation. The calling bell, the oldest in the tower, bears the inscription:

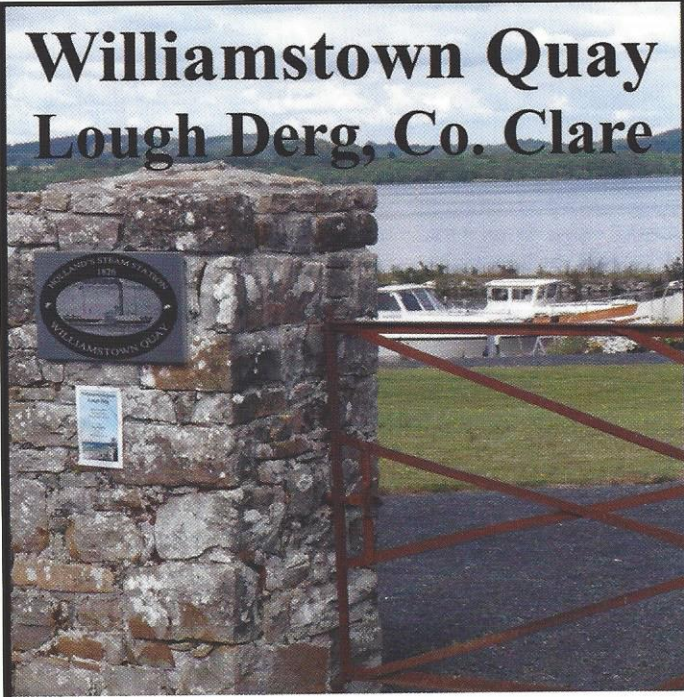
NO SURRENDER. LIBERTY. J. FOGERTY, LIMERICK. 1837

Local research has failed to uncover any details about J. Fogerty in Limerick or indeed what the inscription was referring to.

Photos: Pat Nolan

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