

Inland Waterways News

Royal Canal journey

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The Royal Canal begins at Spencer Dock on the north bank of the River Liffey, half a mile upstream of the Grand Canal tidal locks at Ringsend. Prior to closure in 1961, Spencer Dock connected with the river via a sea lock, the lower gates of which were situated under the innermost of the pair of lifting bridges on North Wall Quay. The dock itself was formerly a wide stretch of waterway extending for over half a mile and crossed by Sheriff Street drawbridge and the high-level bridges carrying railway lines into Connolly Station.



In the 1970s part of the dock was infilled by CIE but should soon be restored to its original size as a condition of the planning permission granted for the redevelopment of the area, which includes the new Conference Centre. The only restoration work so far undertaken has been the removal of the derelict gates of the sea lock and the dredging of a navigation channel. As the lifting bridges are not operational, the dock is navigable only at certain states of the tide.

At the upper end of Spencer Dock is the infamous railway lifting bridge which, at time of writing, has still to be brought into use. Immediately beyond it is the 1st lock, which at present functions

as a tidal lock and can only be used at high water.

After passing under Clarke Bridge, the canal narrows as it enters the newly-constructed concrete channel at the rear of Croke Park, returning to its original width on the far side of Clonliffe Bridge. At Binns Bridge, Drumcondra Road, the canal begins its steep rise through the city by a succession of double locks, the first four within a distance of a little more than half a mile. However, this is a pleasant stretch of waterway which, beyond the 3rd lock, skirts the wall of Mountjoy Prison.

Beside the 5th lock an old mill has been converted into apartments, completely changing the appearance of this stretch of canal. Lock 6 is another double and above it the south bank opens out to form a wide expanse of green in front of the houses in Shandon Gardens. One wonders would the residents be agreeable to a simple wooden jetty being built here — a spot to stop and relax a while after all those double locks.

The bridge carrying the Sligo railway line over the canal, beside the 7th lock at Liffey Junction, has the lowest headroom (10 feet) of all the bridges over the Royal Canal. From here to Broombridge, unfortunately, the waterway tends to attract more than its fair share of the detritus emanating from the nearby industrial estate.

Beyond the 8th lock, though, there is a welcome improvement as the city begins to recede. After the 10th lock at Ashtown the canal assumes a rural aspect, which continues until the recently-constructed complex of bridges associated with the M50 motorway interchange on the outskirts of Castleknock.

After crossing the motorway by an impressive aqueduct [see front cover], it is not far to the 12th lock, another double and the deepest. Beyond it stretch 7.5 miles of level water. This area too has been transformed in recent years. Talbot Bridge over the tail of the lock no longer carries the main Navan Road and Blanchardstown Mill, its tall chimney once a landmark, has been demolished to make way for more apartments.

After passing under Granard Bridge, the canal gradually enters a cutting through Carpenterstown Quarry. For a distance of about two miles to Clonsilla, it passes through what is known as the Deep Sinking: at its deepest part, the towpath is carried some thirty feet above the water. Care has to be taken when passing through this stretch as the channel width is very restricted; judicious use of the horn may well be advisable. This was the scene, in November 1845, of a serious accident when the evening passage boat from Dublin to Longford struck the side of the cutting, heeled over and filled, drowning sixteen people.

Beyond the cutting the canal passes between the masonry piers of a bridge that once carried the Dublin & Meath Railway line to Navan, and may well do so once again according to some media reports. After Pakenham Bridge, at Barberstown, the canal passes into more open country to the north of Lucan before shortly crossing the county boundary into Kildare. This is marked by the slipway, boathouse and amenity area jointly developed by the RCAG and the Dublin Branch of the IWAI over 20 years ago.

Perhaps not a spectacular stretch of waterway, but certainly a varied and interesting mix of townscape and landscape in the eleven miles between the River Liffey and the outskirts of Leixlip.