

Off the beaten track

This begins a series about trips on waterways, or parts of them, that are less used, less well known or even abandoned. Trips can be in large boats, as in this case, or in dinghies, as on the Slaney Branch's admirable expeditions (see page 33), or on foot, as when following an abandoned waterway. If you would like to submit a report, please ensure that it gives enough practical detail to enable others to follow you; Dick Lovegrove's report sets a very good example. Ed.

The Suir Navigation

Dick Lovegrove

The **70M** is a standard canal boat owned by my brother Geoff and myself: 60' long and beam approximately 13' feet. She draws just over 3' and has an air-draft of over 8'. Geoff and I spent four years doing her up in the Ringsend Basin before I delivered her, at the end of August 1998, to the valleys of the Three Sisters via the Irish Sea and Waterford Harbour. For the next eighteen months she was very happily based at St Mullins; we explored the Barrow as far as Graiguenamanagh, the Nore as far as Inistiogue and the Suir as far as the fine new marina in Waterford City. By March 2000 we had decided that we would shortly start the migration to the Shannon, so I knew that this would be the last opportunity to explore the Suir above Waterford.

At first, I found it very hard to get even basic information on the Suir navigation. How deep is it? Is there a marked channel? Would we fit under the bridges? How far upstream is tidal? I couldn't get answers to these and many other questions from those I spoke to in Waterford. The IWAI **Guide to the Barrow** has notes on the River Suir but rumours suggested that the navigation had changed substantially as a result of commercial sand and gravel excavation.

All of these doubts were blown away when I first spoke to Jim Power, Chairman of the Carrick-on-Suir Boat Club. He not only knows the river like the back of his hand, but is a fascinating source of local folklore and history. He offered to act as pilot and reminded me that Morris Oil tankers regularly make the passage upstream as far as Fiddown. All users of the Suir are greatly indebted to Morris Oil, who have charted the river and who provide and maintain a buoyage system as far as Fiddown.

The tide is a very important factor on the Suir: its effects can be felt all the way to Carrick and you ignore it at your peril! From Waterford to Carrick (the upper limit of navigation for most boats) is 20 miles; high water in Carrick is high water Waterford plus fifty-five minutes. The best approach is to calculate how long it will take your craft to travel that distance allowing for, say, 2 knots of tide and plan to leave Waterford so as to arrive at Carrick at high water. If you need exceptional air-draft, it may be safer to leave earlier to be sure of getting under the road bridge at Fiddown.



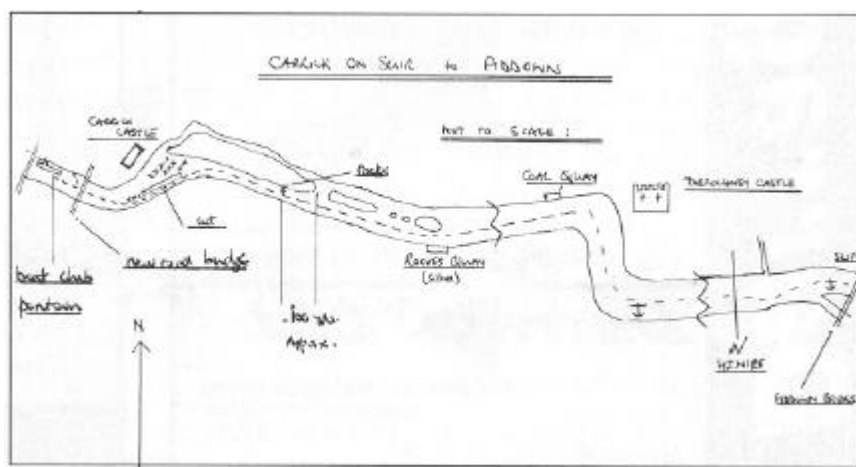
Under the command of Jim Power, the **70M** pulled away from the marina at Waterford, an hour after low water on Saturday 1 April. In addition to Geoff and myself, the crew consisted of John Dunlop and Sam and Rory Grubb, whose forebear, J Ernest Grubb, founded the Suir Steam

Navigation Co, which operated the first commercial steam barges on the Suir. Unfortunately, this company ultimately failed because, as a Quaker, he refused to carry intoxicating liquor, or at least so the story goes — although perhaps the coming of the railways had something to do with it as well!

On the road bridge in Waterford, a red light shows in both directions when the lifting span is down, but even then there is ample headroom for all conventional pleasure craft. Upstream is the old railway bridge from which a complete span has been removed, leaving a wide gap for shipping. Once past this, the navigation channel veers quite sharply towards the north bank, where you should head for the first of a series of white leading lights. As with most rivers, the general rule is keep to the centre, except on the bends when you should keep more towards the outside; this leading light is intended to draw you away from the mud flats which extend quite a distance from the inside of the wide bend which swings the river to the south-west and leads towards Granny.

At Granny there is a jetty with widely spaced piles which would make it an uncomfortable berth for all but the largest pleasure craft, but there is also a new slip which could be useful for launching or retrieving smaller boats. Watch out for large mooring buoys in the navigation channel just off the jetty. These sheer about in the stream and should be given a wide berth. Once past Granny, the river opens out into a straight stretch known as the Long Reach, which posed no problems for us but which, Jim warned, can develop a sharp chop in strong winds, particularly with wind against tide. At the end of the Long Reach is the beautiful Mount Congreve House with spectacular gardens falling steeply to the river.

From here to Fiddown, there are no unusual problems. Stay in the buoyed channel. Although they are hard to see in daylight, you should keep an eye out for the leading lights, which indicate the direction to head for. We stopped for lunch in beautiful spring sunshine, anchoring off Rocketts Castle, which has been converted into a magnificent modern house.



Just below the road bridge, be sure to leave Fiddown Island to port. Jim told us that we could pass through any span of the bridge, but that if you are worried about draft, the centre arch is best. There is a quay at the bridge which could be used for small boats, but this is where the Morris Oil tankers berth and one would want to be certain that no shipping was due

before leaving a boat unattended here. We passed under Fiddown Bridge an hour before High Water with a clearance of 2.5 feet, but we were enjoying neap tides and this clearance would be reduced or even eliminated at springs.

The last three miles to Carrick are not buoyed and do require attention, but there is nothing to worry the ordinarily prudent navigator. It is important to approach Carrick towards the top of the tide, so if you are too soon, drop anchor and enjoy the view of Sliabh na mBan from the pool almost opposite the boat slip just above Fiddown Bridge, or in the pool at the western end of this long reach. About half-way along this reach a high-tension wire crosses the river. Just below this a small stream comes in from the north causing some silting so, at this point, stay closer to the south bank. After the reach, the river takes a short dog-leg to the north; as it turns west again, Tabrochney Castle — formerly owned by the Dowley family, who took over the Grubbs' barge business — appears on the northern bank.

The best route is to align Tabrochney Castle on the stern with the centre of the passage between the south bank (Roches Quay) and the midstream island, which now appears ahead, on the bow. To starboard, you will pass the old Coal Quay where, in days gone by, the barges used to off-load part of their cargo to lighten ship for the passage to Carrick. Roches Quay is badly silted; as you pass it, keep just on the island side of the centre of the channel.

The channel continues between the south bank and a chain of islands. About 100 yards upstream of the gap between the two largest islands is the only major hazard on the navigation. An unmarked reef, covered at high water, runs southward from the island towards midstream, so keep to the south of the midstream line at this point. Sadly, the Carrick-on-Suir Boat Club's proposal to place a mark at the outer end of this reef was vetoed by local fishing interests.

Above these rocks the view of the magnificent Carrick Castle opens up. Jim informed us that this is the only surviving Tudor castle in Ireland, and that Ann Boleyn, later to win fame as a part of Henry VIII's chorus line, was born there. The river in front of the castle is full of rocks, so the channel turns sharply to port and enters a narrow cut with a stone-faced quay, which looks enticing, but apparently is not a comfortable berth because of the strength of the flow through the cut, particularly with an ebb tide. As you emerge from the cut, hold a line parallel to the south bank for thirty yards or so, as a line of rocks, covered at high tide, extends westwards from the island. Once clear of this, follow the centre of the river under the middle span of the new road bridge and tie up between it and the old (14th century) bridge, either at the quayside to starboard or at the more secure Boat Club pontoon, if space is available.

Returning downstream, with the river flowing in the same direction as the tide, there is a considerable current. This could get you into trouble at Fiddown Bridge, if you require a lot of air-draft and your boat is not too handy in reverse. The **70M** falls into this category! We had originally planned to leave an hour before high water but, on local advice, we delayed our departure until half an hour after high water, when the ebb had definitely started. As a result we had at least four feet clearance under the bridge and we enjoyed another delightful and trouble-free passage all the way to Cheek Point.

This is a delightful waterway, with some minor challenges and some lovely scenery and places of historical interest to reward those who visit it. We left the **70M** in perfect safety on the Boat Club pontoon for three weeks for a very modest fee and I would like to take this opportunity to thank Jim Power and his colleagues in the Club for all their help and for the welcome they gave us. They are making a huge effort to improve the facilities for boating at Carrick and on the entire navigation and they deserve support.