

Inland Waterways News

The Wonder-Working Canal

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At the dawn of the eighteenth century, East Tyrone was regarded as one vast coalfield — while in Dublin, the new aristocracy didn't relish being at the mercy of a British monopoly to heat their fine houses. Some of them, who were also Tyrone coalpit owners, felt it ridiculous to pay eighteen shillings (90p) per ton for imported fuel when they were part-owners of a massive coalfield. The problem was transporting the coal to Dublin: the cost of hauling it by horse and cart, even just to the port of Newry, was prohibitive.

In 1729, Francis Seymour, who owned coalmines in Brackaville, Co Tyrone, wrote his pamphlet ***Remarks on a Scheme for Supplying Dublin with Coals***. He wanted to build a canal from the main deposits in Drumglass, outside Dungannon, to connect with the Torrent and Blackwater rivers, allowing access to Lough Neagh. From there, the Upper Bann and another canal would lead into Newry, whence seagoing vessels would carry the coal to Dublin.

That same year the Commissioners of Inland Navigation were set up to initiate civil engineering projects using funds from new taxes; they immediately authorised the Newry Canal. Work had barely begun when they realised that the waterway would never fulfil its purpose, since it would not come anywhere near the Tyrone coalfields. A north-west extension was needed; a rushed and haphazard survey plotted a course over 4.5 miles of bog and sand. The instructions stated that this extension, with its grand title **The Tyrone Navigation**, would begin at a chosen **point** on the River Blackwater, a landmark that still bears that name, and proceed to the rising ground of Gort na Sgeach, the field of the thorns, where a large pool or basin would form its terminus.

Late 1732 or early 1733 witnessed the final planning; many of the future problems stemmed from ill-informed decisions at this stage. The most serious flaw was placing the terminus four miles from the main mines in Drumglass, despite the fact that the waterway was supposed to eliminate costly overland haulage.

One view is that the planners were courageous pioneers from whose mistakes later canal builders were to learn much; another view is that they were a mixture of charlatans and idiots. In any case, these men found themselves engaged in an enterprise requiring skills they did not possess and a technology that had yet to be developed. None of the early canal builders were qualified engineers in the modern sense; the most knowledgeable of them were only millwrights. Their understanding of physics was superficial and their limited experience of large machinery proved of little benefit in their predicament.

On 28 March 1742 the first cargo of Tyrone coal sailed into Dublin on board the **Cope**, but although the coal had been mined in Drumglass and delivered via the newly opened Newry Canal, it had been hauled by horse and cart from the pits to Lough Neagh.

By 1750 apprehension was growing in the capital at the lack of progress. A parliamentary sub-committee appointed a Mr Parkinson to investigate; his report is an account of inefficient management, bad workmanship and serious engineering problems.

By 1752 the disappointment of private investors was turning to anger. One irate Dubliner wrote to the commissioners: "It is above twenty years since this wonder-working canal was first set about. And except for a few puffs in Faulkner's Newspapers, what relief has the city of Dublin had by the mighty produce of the Tyrone Collieries?"



The Navigation Board, the new umbrella organisation incorporating all the commissioners since 1751, replied that "excessive rains" that summer had prevented the completion of the works. This misleading reply gave the impression that the canal was almost finished. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

By the early 1770s a basin had been dug but its feeder river, the Torrent, was filling it up with silt and stones, making the first two locks unworkable. There was a large flat area out in the middle of this basin for dumping coal; this "coal island" would give its name to the town that would grow up around it.

As each engineering fiasco came to light — leaking locks, rugged towpaths, flooding, draining and sinking machinery — more and more money was spent to correct it. Why did this unmitigated disaster seem to have unlimited resources? The answer lies in Dublin politics. An anti-English parliamentary faction, the Undertakers, seized control of the financial committees in 1755, empowering themselves to deny the English Crown certain taxes on the grounds that expenditure in Ireland warranted it. But when the pro-English faction regained control, resources remained unaffected because canals were becoming successful in England: the theory was that a little more effort would make Irish canals workable too.

Just as the operation reached crisis point, resources were diverted into a major calamity. In an attempt to extend the canal to the main coalfield, a Franco-Italian architectural engineer, who became known as Daviso Duckart, attempted to drive a new channel over the ever-rising ground to the pits. He dispensed with locks and introduced three "inclined planes", later called "dry hurries": large sloping stone bridges with up to 12 arches. Barges were to be hauled up and down them on rollers and then deposited in the adjoining levels of the waterway. The vain and desperate struggle to make these structures operate is an entire story on its own; as the dry hurries failed, the expensive extension — and Duckart's reputation— went down with them.

In 1787, after 55 years, the Tyrone Navigation was officially opened. Tyrone coal reached the Dublin market at 28 shillings a ton, but the citizens of the capital preferred the dearer foreign fuel because of its superior quality. A story of the time tells how the MP for Monaghan said that when a gentleman's house caught fire accidentally, the best way he knew of putting out such a fire was to shovel on plenty of Dungannon coal!

Trade in other goods was slow and parts of the canal fell into disuse. Fortunately, one Daniel Monks made a very detailed report with suggestions for improvement. After another injection of £20,000, the Tyrone Navigation, or Coalisland Canal, was saved. Locks were rebuilt, the basin was dredged and properly walled, wharves were constructed, towpaths were gravelled, lock-keepers' cottages were provided and puddling clay was used for the first time. Sheds and stores were erected around the basin, soon to become the permanent dwellings of the workforce and merchants who would build the foundations of Coalisland.

Although profits remained low, the Coalisland Canal provided a means of transport for goods to and from several towns and villages in a wide hinterland. Towards the end of the 19th century the railways posed a serious threat — as did the motorised lorry after World War 1. The peak tonnage was 57,000 tons in 1931, but a steady loss of faith in water transport could be seen in the attitude of local companies, even though John Stevenson and Company remained loyal to the end. That came in 1946 with the sailing of the last commercial lighter; 1961 saw the filling in of the basin. One lighter, the **Eliza**, was buried where she lay — just where the carpark of the Cornmill Heritage Centre is now situated.