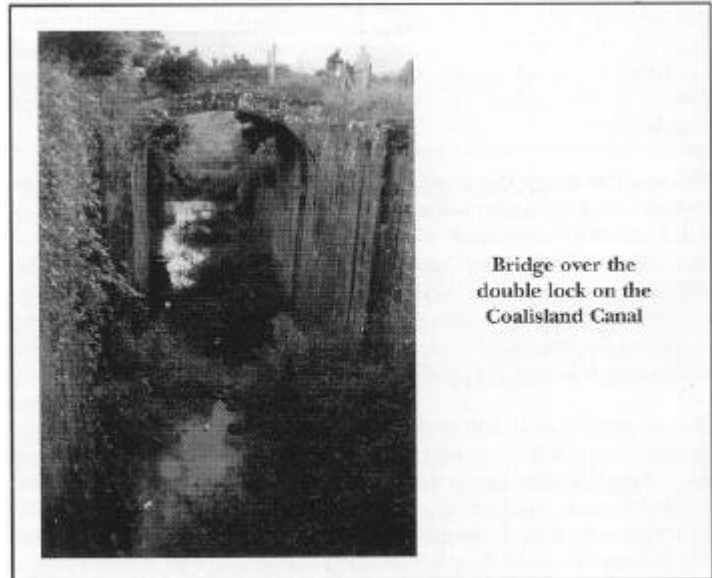


Inland Waterways News

The Coalisland Canal

Jim Canning

My earliest memory of the canal is standing on the footpath in front of our house and shop at Harbour View and catching the grains of Indian corn as they bounced from the high-sided carts carrying the grain from the lighters in the Basin to John Stevenson & Co's mill on the Dungannon Road. The carts were painted with orange lead and pulled by large Clydesdale horses, which were so well used to the routine of drawing from the lighters that they could have done without the carters who accompanied them. The grain was scooped into a barrel and lifted from the cargo hold of the lighters by a tripod (sheerlegs) and then tipped into the high carts on the quayside. It all looked well-regulated and orderly as each carter strode along at the horse's head, with his arm through the reins as he filled his pipe with Warhorse tobacco and lit up.



Stewart's Mill didn't need horses and carts: their mill was built right on the edge of the canal and the grain was lifted by elevator into the mill from the lighters drawn alongside. Further down Lineside, imported coal was lifted from lighters for Kilpatrick's Coal Yard nearby, a reversal of the role for which the canal was built in 1733 (to bring Coalisland coal to Dublin).

Across the Basin on Main Street, sand was dropped down a chute into the lighter below for transport to Belfast, while at the top of Washingbay Road the men from Ulster Fireclays carefully loaded their clay sewer pipes and bends of all shapes and sizes into the hold of a lighter moored opposite the works.

How times have changed. Since the fifties Harbour View has become "The Square" and the Basin has been drained and filled in. About half of it is used as a carpark, a toilet block and a roadway, which links Lineside with Main Street. The remainder is a grassy area and, from the second lock, the canal lies stagnant to the Blackwater River, 4.5 miles away.

The Basin and the canal, as far as the second lock, are now the property of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, which last year agreed to sell the basin area for car-parking for a proposed supermarket; thankfully this has not materialised. The Rivers Agency owns the remainder of the canal, including both towpaths.

The new Dungannon and South Tyrone Area Plan 2000 contains a very strong policy statement on Coalisland Canal. It states that the line of the canal must be protected and preserved for its eventual restoration as a working canal and that even "permitted development" will be withdrawn if it is considered to impinge on the ultimate re-opening of the waterway. This very positive attitude of the planning service is much appreciated.

In the past, both Enterprise Ulster and Ferguson & McIlveen have done studies for the local council on the proposed re-opening of the canal. Both were positive but the funding has not materialised. The re-opening of the Ulster Canal is the key to connecting Lough Neagh and all the canals of Ulster to the rest of Ireland's waterways; with that now almost certain, Coalisland Canal is a definite runner.

To let local people show their affection for the canal and to raise awareness of it, some fellow-enthusiasts and I — under the banner of the Friends of Coalisland Canal — held a Canal Walk on the evening of 16 August 2000. Old photographs and maps of the canal were begged, borrowed and gathered for an exhibition.

Joe O'Neill of Derrytresk agreed to mow the waist-high grass on the towpath and make it walkable. Collie Biggs offered one of his buses to transport the walkers from the Cornmill at the head of the canal to The Point on the Blackwater where the walk would start. Refreshments were arranged by some ladies and supplemented by two local supermarkets. Local and national newspapers gave us good publicity, as did BBC Radio Ulster, and we were ready to go.

We had expected anything between 30 and 100 people, but despite very heavy rain, 150 walkers started from The Point just after 6.30pm. The weather was ignored as people chatted about canals, boats, walking, nature, fishing etc. There was a real feeling that we were expressing in a positive way our support for the clean-up and eventual restoration of our canal.

At Moor Bridge, Macks Bridge and other places, people joined the walk and, some two hours after we began, over 200 happy people reached the Cornmill where they were greeted by many more and given a welcome cup of tea and sandwiches.

The community floor of the mill, which can seat 200 people, was unable to accommodate everyone and many had to stand in the foyer. The capacity audience listened attentively as Tommy McIlvenna, a teacher in St Joseph's High School who has studied the building of the canal, gave his detailed and sometimes humorous account of the building of the Coalisland Canal.

Afterwards many people contributed tales of the canal in former times. Tommy John Quinn spoke about working on the lighter of his father, Billy John Quinn; Paddy Skelton from Portadown remembered visits to Coalisland Basin with his grandfather, lighterman James "Jap" O'Neill, in the early forties. Roy Wilkins from J Stevenson & Co gave us a light-hearted account of the many lighters owned by his firm and the characters who ran them; James Walshe, Sean Campbell and Joe Rafferty remembered growing up on the canal banks. Peggy Carberry reminded Sean that her late husband Kevin had saved his life by pulling him from the canal. There was a touch of sadness as Sean remembered his father Paddy, who looked after the locks, putting him for a short ride on the lighter **Kathleen**, the last boat out of the canal in 1946, and telling him that he was witnessing history.

The walking club said that they would use the towpaths regularly in the future and at 11.00pm we reluctantly went home, feeling that a strong message had been delivered to the powers that be that Coalisland Canal must immediately be cleaned up pending its inevitable restoration as a fully working canal. Actions speak louder than words, so the voice of over 200 people of all ages, creeds and classes, walking 4.5 miles in driving rain, must surely be heard and acted upon.

Sean Campbell was on the last lighter to leave Coalisland Basin; may he be on the first boat back into it.