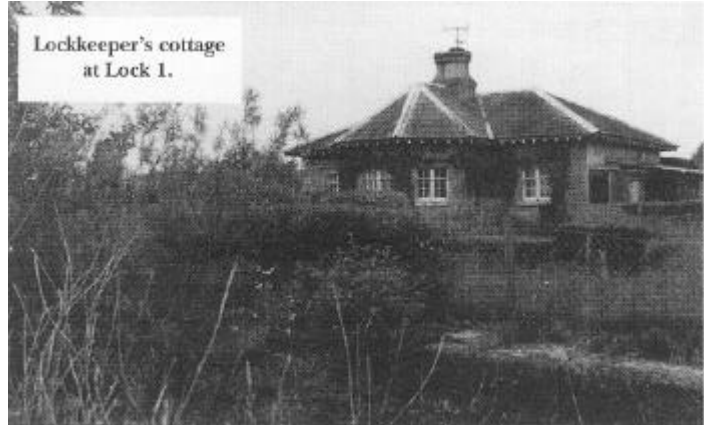


Inland Waterways News

The Ulster canal

Brian Cassells

One of the six North-South implementation bodies agreed by the new Northern Ireland Assembly is Inland Waterways, specifically canal development. The Northern Ireland Branch have been proactive in representations to the main political parties at Stormont and to many interested parties, especially in the mid-Ulster area.



The Ulster Canal was opened in 1841, linking the Erne system with the Lough Neagh basin. It could hardly have been described as a successful inland waterway, for within twenty years of its opening it was virtually derelict. Ironically the completion of the canal network depended on the linking of the Erne and Shannon networks, but by the time the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell canal was opened, the Ulster had fallen into disrepair.

It has to be said the main reason for its demise was the lack of water supply. Although Quig Lough, the feeder lake, had been enlarged, it failed to supply the necessary water levels. By the time repair work was complete, the B&B link had been abandoned.

Perhaps the passage of time has redefined the priority: now we can sail from the Shannon north, but the elusive link is that from the Erne to Lough Neagh. The feasibility study into the re-opening of the Ulster Canal, carried out by ESB International and Ferguson & McIlveen, has made the final link in Irish waterways more of a reality. Congratulations are due to Rivers Agency and to Duchas for a most exciting and significant development to our cultural heritage: this re-opened link with the past will open up vistas of our country hidden and forgotten for decades.

The diverse scenery, from the undulating drumlin terrain to the Benburb gorge, past many of Ireland's Big Houses, journeys through peaceful farmland and yet links esteemed forgotten settlements. Awaiting rediscovery by the discerning visitor are the town of Clones, the village of Benburb with its echoes of past battles, the twin towns of Moy and Charlemont and the metropolis of Monaghan, now a modern mecca for shopping. This cross-border area is crying out for development and regeneration but has much to repay those who make the effort to discover it.

This is not a project where the investment is easily measured. While the boating fraternity will be enriched by this extension to their cruising area, so too will the walker, the cyclist, the jogger, the fisherman and the anthropologist. A British Waterways statistic claims that for each boat that uses the waterway, over eighty people will benefit from it. The cost of re-opening at £68 million is halved for each government and when shared among the various funders, the cost to the taxpayer is quickly repaid in infrastructure benefits. It has been suggested that the project would eventually sustain over 300 permanent jobs, a figure to which any industrial development agency would aspire.

The canal is a gem, an invaluable heritage and cultural resource. It will bring prosperity to a

neglected area. It will generate foreign tourism. It will pave the way for the network to be completed: the re-opening of the Lagan and Newry navigations, the Coalisland link, all will follow, but we need the trunk for the branches to blossom. We cannot ignore the success of the Shannon–Erne link; let's have the Erne–Neagh link: the jigsaw would then be nearly complete.

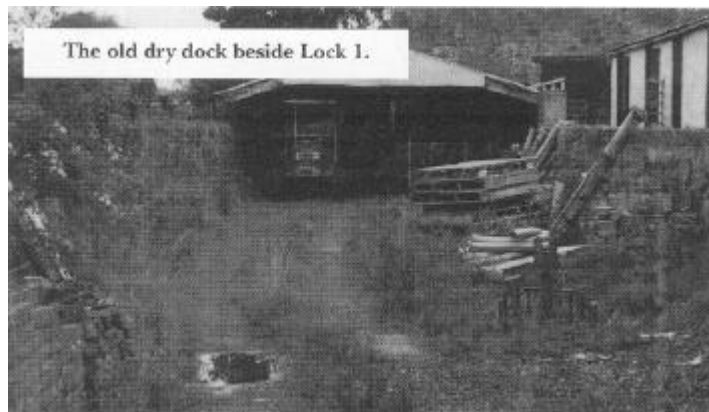
Dawn of a new day?

Brian Cassells

On Friday 29 September, members of the Northern Ireland Branch will host an outing for the members of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Hopefully the minister, Mr Michael McGimpsey, will also be in attendance, with representatives from Waterways Ireland and the various branches that have supported us financially.

The day will begin at 9.00am at Stormont, when a coach will convey the party to Verners Bridge over the River Blackwater, close by the M1 motorway. The Blackwater is a beautiful wide river, which leaves Lough Neagh at Maghera and meanders some 14 miles to Blackwatertown. After a short stop, the party will proceed to Benburb for morning coffee and to view the restored mill, a lock and one of the most spectacular stretches of the canal, along the Benburb gorge.

The coach will proceed to Crom Castle, a National Trust property on the shores of Upper Lough Erne, where cruisers provided by members of the NI and Belturbet branches will convey the party via Foalies Cut, a canalised stretch of the Erne, to the International Village near Belturbet. Lunch will be served in the French Restaurant and members will have an



opportunity to view the sort of infrastructure that can be developed. There will be a short presentation on the many benefits restoration of the Ulster Canal will doubtless achieve.

Members of the Northern Ireland Branch are indebted to the Ulster Waterways Group and to the IWAI Council and Belturbet, Carrick-on-Shannon, Dublin and River Bann and Lough Neagh branches for their generous financial support.

