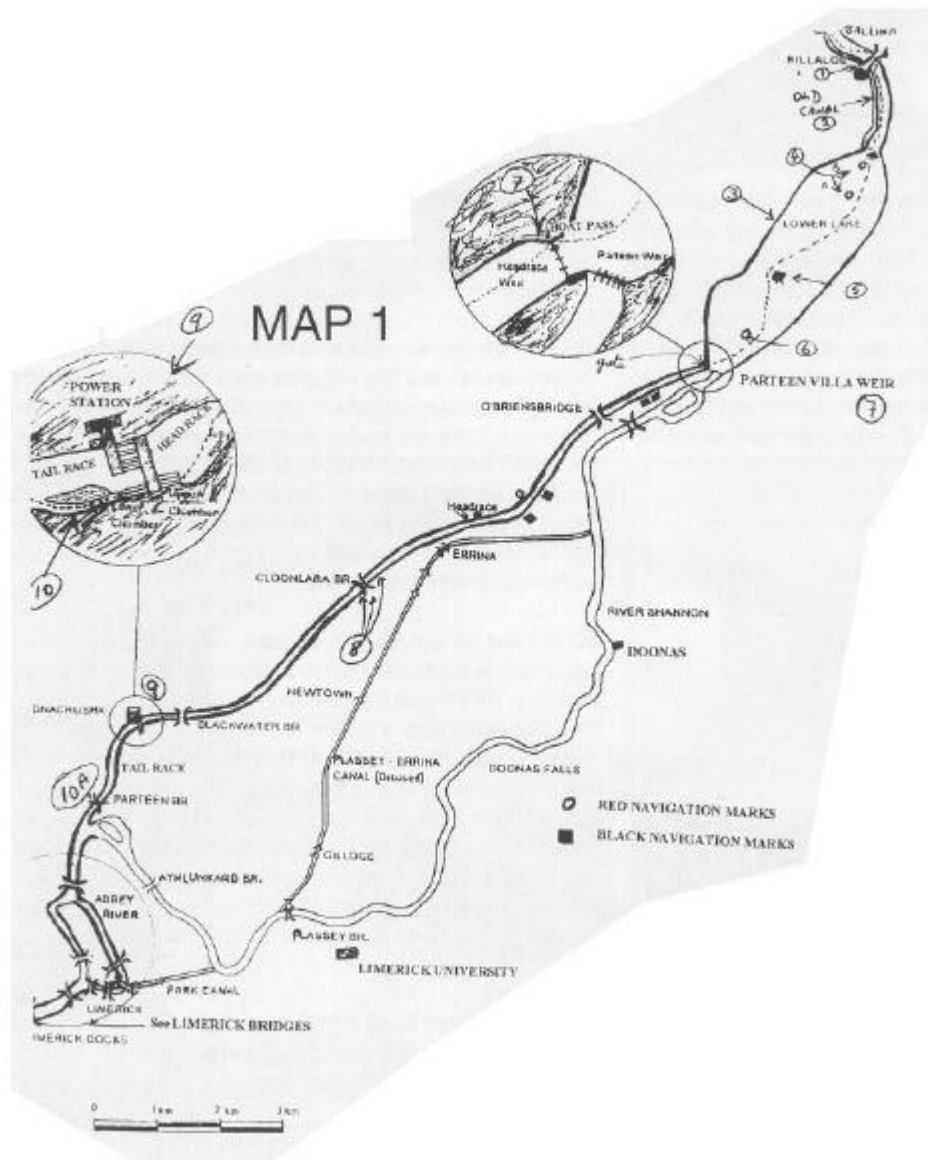


Inland Waterways News

Limerick - Navigation history



The Shannon falls only 12m in the 185km between Battlebridge and Killaloe, but drops 30m in the 19km between Killaloe and Limerick. As a result, the bottom end has been more difficult to tame than the top.

In 1755, Thomas Omer began work on the middle reaches of the Shannon for the Commissioners of Inland Navigation. He built short canals at Meelick, Banagher, Shannonbridge and Lanesborough, the last three with single-gated flash locks. He built a longer canal at Athlone, used the River Camlin to bypass the shallows from Tarmonbarry to Lough Forbes, built a lateral canal at Rooskey and cut a canal across a loop in the river at Jamestown. Omer's employment ended in 1768 and all this work was finished some time in the early 1770s.

At the southern end of the river, William Ockenden began work in 1757, just two years after Omer. But progress was much slower: it was not until 1799 that boats were able to travel the 19km from Limerick to Killaloe, and even then the navigation was far from satisfactory: there were no towpaths on the river sections and there were shallows in summer and floods in winter.

Before Ardnacrusha was built, the Limerick–Killaloe navigation (going upstream) used a short (1.5km) stretch of canal, with two locks, cutting across a loop of the river. Then boats rejoined the river as far as Plassey (Annabeg), from which the Plassey-Errina Canal, with eight locks, bypassed the Falls of Doonass below Castleconnell. This canal rejoined the river south of O'Brien's Bridge. Finally, a lock and a short stretch of canal enabled boats to get through Killaloe.

After Ardnacrusha

When Ardnacrusha hydroelectric power station was built, most of the old navigation was bypassed. Flooding the area below Killaloe raised the level and made the lock unnecessary. Further downstream, a weir at Parteen now sends most of the Shannon's flow down the headrace to the power station; except in winter floods, the Falls of Doonass are a shadow of their former selves. A double lock allows boats through Ardnacrusha into the power station's tailrace, whence they rejoin the Shannon.

Then the navigation leaves the main line of the river and goes down a backwater known as the Abbey River, thus avoiding the Curragour Falls. The Abbey River passes the bottom of the old canal and then goes under a number of low bridges before rejoining the Shannon downstream of the Falls.

The problems

The navigation is tidal up to Ardnacrusha, and there could be very strong flows (up to 5 knots) on the ebb, especially when the turbines were running at Ardnacrusha. But the worst part was Baal's Bridge in the Abbey River. Most of the time, the water level was either too low or too high. There were only 20 minutes on spring tides (and 70 on neaps) when air draught, water draught and water velocity were acceptable. So a slight miscalculation might mean that you would have to wait for the next tide, with a distinct shortage of safe moorings either above or below Baal's Bridge.

In 1998 there were about 100 boat movements through Ardnacrusha. Most were passing straight through Limerick, from the lake to the estuary or vice versa, often for sailing; few came to visit Limerick.

The solution

Shannon Development (responsible for tourism promotion), Limerick Corporation and Waterways Ireland came together to tackle the problems so that more boats could come to Limerick or pass through easily. Limerick Corporation came up with a clever idea: to route one of the interceptor sewers in their new main drainage scheme down the Abbey River and through the old tidal lock at Sarsfield Bridge. The sewer would form the base of a weir; installing gates at the old tidal lock would hold a certain minimum depth at all times from Sarsfield Bridge up to the Abbey Bridge.

So of the two main problems, too much water under Baal's Bridge and too little water under Baal's bridge, the second would be eliminated: there would always be at least 1.7m in the

channel. (Note, however, that at very low spring tides, there may be less than 1.7m below Sarsfield Bridge.) There is no effect on the problem of too much water: there will be times when air draught is insufficient to allow passage under Baal's Bridge. Overall, though, the navigational window is widened to 6 hours on spring tides and 9.5 hours on neaps. It is also expected that water velocities in the Abbey River will be reduced, although at time of writing final dredging has not yet taken place.

Going to Limerick will never be as simple as going to Athlone, but access from both upstream and downstream will now be significantly easier than it was.

