

Inland Waterways News

The old canal

Ardnacrusha made the Killaloe canal redundant and bypassed the Plassey-Errina Canal, but the lowest stretch of canal remained in use because it was there, at Lock Quay, that the Grand Canal Company (GCC) had its depot and Guinness had offices and storage. Boats came down through Ardnacrusha and into the Abbey River, but instead of turning right under Baal's Bridge, they turned left and entered the canal from the bottom.

The canal-boats took four days to reach Limerick from Dublin — when conditions were favourable. Old-timers claimed that that period was just right to allow the Guinness to mellow, so that the stout served in Limerick was the best in Ireland. When the *Limerick Leader* reported on the changeover from water to rail in 1960, one Guinness employee was quoted as saying

I can't see the rail-transported stout being better than the canal stout. The shunting and the stopping of the trains will not do it any good.



Staff at Lock Quay in May 1959 (reproduced by kind permission of the *Limerick Leader*)

John Johnson

Fr Dominic Johnson OSB is Prior of Glenstal Abbey at Murroe, outside Limerick. His father, John J Johnson, was manager of the Grand Canal Company in Limerick. They lived in the former canal hotel, which is still, albeit derelict, at the Abbey River entrance to the canal. The Madigan family lived across the lock: Dinny Madigan was skipper of the *Fox* when she was the Shannon Navigation maintenance boat and, like his son Kevin, a diver. When L T C Rolt met the *Fox* in 1946 he noted the diving suit, now in the Waterways Museum in Dublin, and said

... her captain told us that one of his last jobs had been to take up the buoy anchorages at the old seaplane base at Foynes, made obsolete by the opening of Rineanna.

Note for younger readers: Rineanna is now known as Shannon Airport.

John Johnson was not just the manager: he was also a passionate waterways enthusiast. He wrote eloquently about the use of the waterways for leisure pursuits; in one article he commented favourably on the efforts of "the goodly company of the Shannon cruiser, the **St Claire**, to put the Shannon back on our country's map."



John Johnson's elegant boat *Ibis*, with the young Dominic Johnson nearest the bow

St Lua's Oratory was in what is now the Flooded Area; it was moved in 1929 to stand beside the Roman Catholic church at the top of the hill in Killaloe. Fr Johnson writes

My father was responsible for getting that removed from the lake, stone by stone, because it would have been submerged by the lake — the Shannon Scheme They moved it all by horse and cart. He always took pride that he was the one that pushed the idea

There might be up to eight canal-boats tied up in Limerick at a time. Most of them carried Guinness, cement or flour from Dublin, with up to 25 people employed unloading them. The bell in St John's Cathedral was carried by water from Dublin. John Johnson was responsible, inter alia, for ensuring that the GCC boats left on schedule; on payday, that sometimes meant persuading the boatmen to leave the pubs.

But the GCC boats were not the only ones to use the harbour: sand-cots discharged their cargoes there, and L T C Rolt has an interesting description of seeing a cot with a dredging spoon, loaded with eight tons of sand, being bow-hauled down the canal. The Frawleys had been engaged in this trade for 300 years; the sand was dredged from below Plassey and brought down the canal, which was officially disused. According to Séamus Ó Cinnéide, the opening of large rural sandpits, accessed by lorry, ended the sandcotman's ancient trade in the 1950s.

Restoration?

Fr Johnson has campaigned tirelessly for the restoration of the canal. Its banks provide a pleasant walk to Plassey, where the University of Limerick is located; a ferry or waterbus could carry people between university and city, and the quayside would make a lovely location for a harbour with a waterside pub and restaurant.

A Canal Restoration Association and the Limerick Civic Trust have promoted restoration and development over the years, with the area tidied up and painted, trees planted, the restoration of the brick bridge (Limerick's oldest) and the construction of a new footbridge. However, as it was off the beaten track, insufficient use was made of the area and much of the benefit of the work was lost to vandalism.

Now, however, there is renewed hope. Several commercial developments are planned along the line of the canal. And Limerick Corporation intends to use it to store storm water and relieve the flooding of Clare St that is caused by the Logger stream. In the process, they will restore the two locks: the lock wall at the lower lock is weak and both locks need gates. At the lower lock, the top gates will be doubled, with one set pointing uphill in the conventional manner and a second pointing downhill to resist the tide. It would take little more to dredge upstream as far as Plassey and to improve facilities along the banks.

