

Inland Waterways News

Coal and gas in the north

Shane Belford



Canal Quay, Coalisland, Co Tyrone

The Ulster Waterways Group's Fourth Annual Conference was a two-day event this year (21–22 September 2001). Themed as **Ulster's Coal Canals**, it focused jointly on the Newry and Coalisland canals, built complementarily to bring new-found coal from Tyrone to emerging markets in Dublin.

Held appropriately in the well-appointed Canal Court Hotel, which sits on the edge of the sadly disused canal where it runs through the centre of Newry town, the conference opened with official updates by Nigel Carson of Stormont's Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and John Martin of Waterways Ireland. Both gave enthusiastic reports on how their respective organisations were gearing up for the all-Ireland remit and stressed the importance of voluntary interest being manifest at conferences such as this, in lobbying and in publicity. Apart, however, from hearing about one or two small, though valuable, developments to improve access to the western shores of Lough Neagh and to the River Blackwater at Maghery, and to upgrade the towpath on the Coalisland Canal (so vigorously nurtured by its champion, Councillor Jim Canning), no news was forthcoming from either of these speakers on firm proposals for the restoration of any of Ulster's interlinking waterways.

John Douglas, long-serving Secretary to the Newry and Portadown Joint Canal Committee, reviewed the history of this, Britain's first summit canal. He told of two recently unsuccessful attempts to raise money for its restoration (from Heritage Lottery and Millennium Funds) but enthused about the Sustrans Millennium project, which had renewed the entire towpath from Portadown to Newry as part of an overall national cycle route.

George Ballinger from British Waterways Scotland brought us up to date on the UK's largest Millennium project, to reconstruct the Glasgow Edinburgh Waterway, where neither motorways nor town centre bottlenecks were being allowed to interfere. He urged everyone to see the spectacular space-age lift now going on site at Falkirk.

CEO Roger Hanbury explained how the British Waterway Trusts had been established to raise funds, from both public and private sectors, where British Waterways alone could not become involved. He was careful to point out that enabling legislation included Northern Ireland. Watch this space?

A coach and walking tour of the canal in the afternoon included a visit to the ship canal below Newry town. Day 1 concluded with a dinner when local Assembly Member and Chairman of DCAL's Advisory Committee, Mr Eamon O'Neill, was keynote speaker. Again kind words of encouragement — but no firm commitments as yet.

On Day 2 delegates transferred to Coalisland's Heritage Centre, on the filled-in basin of that canal, to hear champion Jim Canning give a passionate and personal review of his local waterway and how important its reconstruction would be for the town when the Ulster Canal is reopened. Councillor Canning afterwards conducted a fascinating tour when the remnants of Ducart's inclined hurries were inspected.

Before the tour, the conference concluded with a resumé of activities and possibilities emerging on Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann by Professor Brian Wood (LN&LB Advisory Committee) and a riveting presentation from Director Mike Palmer on the work of his dynamic UK-based Waterways Recovery Group and the importance of homework before embarking on such voluntary activity.

All associated local councils in Northern Ireland contributed to costs, permitting the publication of a conference booklet ***Ulster's Coal Canals***, edited by Erskine Holmes, which can be obtained (for Stg£3.00) from UWG Secretary, 4 Brown's Brae, Holywood, Co Down BT18 0HL. Next year's Conference 2002 is being planned as a blitz on the all-important Ulster Canal.

