



Drumshanbo Bridge (Stefan Kupner)

*Information supplied by Norbert Eberle*

The Lough Allen Canal was built in the early years of the nineteenth century to bring coal from the Arigna mines to Dublin via the Royal Canal. That trade did not thrive and, by the time of the Ardnacrusha scheme in the 1920s, there was very little traffic on the canal. The lake itself was used as a reservoir and its fluctuating levels made the canal impassable. However, it was reopened to Acres Lake in 1978 and, after the ESB agreed to keep Lough Allen's level more stable, the canal to the lake was reopened in 1996.

However, according to Waterways Ireland figures up to 1998, Drumshanbo Lock, the double-acting lock at the entrance to Lough Allen, is the least-used lock on the Shannon. Even Drumleague and Battlebridge, the other two locks leading to Lough Allen, saw about 2,000 passages each per year — although that is only about a quarter of the level of use of the next-least-used locks — but not all of those who went to Acres Lake continued to Lough Allen, which remains an underused treasure. One of the people who knows it best is Norbert Eberle, who spent fourteen weeks there in 2001, enjoying the peace and quiet, and who has provided the information for this article.

No doubt the main reason for that peace is that, apart from limited mooring space at Drumshanbo Lock, L Allen has only two sets of jetties, and (until recently) neither of them was connected to the land. On the east side, there is a set of floating jetties at Cleighran More. Some of them sank in a storm; the rest are towed to Drumshanbo each winter. There is no access to the land except by dinghy. On the west side, there are floating jetties at Spencer Harbour, which is about an hour from Drumshanbo. From this year on, there will be access from these jetties to a carpark on land; there will be light



Spencer Harbour at sunset (Stefan Kupner)

and water and a wall has been built to improve shelter.

There is a small pier, suitable only for lakeboats and other small craft, at Cormongan on the east side: it has a carpark and a slipway.

There is no village near either Cleighran More or Spencer Harbour (and no diesel available anywhere: check before you go). Drumshanbo is 12 minutes walk from Drumshanbo Lock; it's the only source of supplies around the lake. Some soundings were taken at the northern end of the lake where the Shannon enters; perhaps navigation could be extended to Dowra.

### Getting there

The turn to Lough Allen is just below Leitrim. It's important to follow the navigation marks at the T-junction. Be particularly careful coming downstream: if you're heading for Leitrim, don't be tempted to cut inside the rocks.

Norbert says that the trip from Battlebridge to Drumshanbo takes at least an hour and a half: it is a canal and a 5km/h speedlimit applies. The section from Battlebridge to Drumleague lock is narrow: in some places too narrow for two boats to pass. However, there are no rocks. Between Drumleague and Drumshanbo, though, there are rocks near the bank and it is advisable to go slowly. For those who like exercise, Norbert says that "from Battlebridge to Drumleague Lock is a nice walk on a dry road and there are enough places to get back on board if the feet become tired before reaching Drumleague."

The shortest lock on the canal is 19.8m and the narrowest 4.1m; each has a radio for calling the lockkeeper. The lowest bridge is 4.1m (higher than Lough Tap). There is an electrically-powered lifting footbridge north of Battlebridge that is usually left open; if it is closed, the lockkeeper will assist — which is just as well because land access is difficult on the north side.

There is a new marina just below Battlebridge Lock. Bins and water are available at the lock and there is a pub within walking distance. Wider boats may need to watch their fenders in the lock itself. The lockkeeper Paddy Joe Carty (086-8127522), replaced by Pat O'Malley during his holidays, is responsible for the three locks and the footbridge, usually with the assistance of part-timers in summer.

Drumleague Lock also has water and, shortly after that, you reach Acres Lake, which has moorings, water, bins and an amenity area with tennis court, swimming pool and children's play area. It is fifteen minutes walk from Drumshanbo [www.drumshanbo.net](http://www.drumshanbo.net), which has fifteen pubs (some with traditional music), good shops and, from this year, an ATM cash dispenser.

Drumshanbo Lock itself is a double-acting lock (featured as Mark's Mystery in our last issue): it can work whether the level of the lake is above or below that of the canal. It has moorings, water, light, a shower and toilet block, a lockkeeper's office, a pumpout and bins. It's twelve minutes walk to Drumshanbo.



Old brick factory (Norbert Eberle)

### Lough Allen weather

It seems that many visiting boats — unless they have anglers aboard — simply make a circuit of Lough Allen before returning to Drumshanbo Lock, or further downstream, for the night. Perhaps the lake's reputation for strong winds is to blame: the improved jetty at Spencer Harbour should provide better shelter overnight.

The winds can get up very quickly, but they are stronger north of the old ESB power station (on the west bank) than to the south. The other danger is fog, which can remove all visibility. Norbert says it usually lifts by 10.00am but doesn't always do so — and sometimes it closes down again after lifting.

Norbert's advice is to consult the lockkeeper about the weather before leaving Drumshanbo.

### **Around the lake**

The narrow route north from Drumshanbo to the open lake is well marked, and it is important to stay between the markers. Norbert advises looking back, once you pass Inisfale Island, to ensure that you will recognise the entrance to the narrows on your return.

The lake gets deeper as you move north: about 7m near Cormongan, 12m near the power station, up to 25m in the north with some 35m — and even 42.5m near where the Shannon enters the lake. However, because the ESB can change the levels, Norbert advises using your depth-sounder, especially if you're likely to go near the shores. The bottom is mostly rock, with some mud, and the banks rock with some gravel and with sand in some places.

Navigation around the lake is straightforward, but there is one potentially confusing marker at the north side of the entrance to Spencer Harbour: it has a red and a black on the same stake. The red is intended to show the route around the lake, and thus to be kept on your left if you're heading northwards; the black is to mark the harbour entrance and should be kept on your right if you're entering the harbour.

Watch out for the salmon cages opposite Cleighran More. Young salmon are reared there until they are about 70g, 12cm long, then transported ashore by helicopter.

### **The attractions**

Many people have bemoaned the shortage, on the Shannon, of those quiet jetties, away from everything, that you find on the Erne. Lough Allen provides that quietness in the middle of a region full of historical artefacts.

It caters for the angler: the shortage of reeds and weed means that there are not as many fish as on other lakes, but they are there: large ones at the north end, smaller fish but in greater quantities at the southern end. There's an outdoor adventure centre just north of Cleighran More.

For those willing to venture inside the markers, there are anchorages and strands accessible by dinghy. Given Lough Allen's reputation for wind, and the possibility that sandbanks can shift, if you decide to try these you should take extreme care and you do so at your own risk: the IWAI, **Inland Waterways News**, its editor and Norbert Eberle accept no responsibility for the consequences. Do bring the official charts and note the warnings thereon.

North Strand (300m of sand) is at the north end of the lake, to the east of Drumman's Island: there is good anchor ground off it, but keep away from the river that enters near the island because it throws up a sandbank. East of that is gravel and stone, then Corry Strand, which has a carpark and picnic ground.

Further east again, there is a sheltered anchorage, with 2m–3m of water, behind Inishmagran Island, near where the Shannon enters the lake. The approach is from the west of the island, going between the red and black markers and turning to the east.

For those who like to get away from it all, Lough Allen deserves a visit. But don't all go at once, otherwise the peace and quiet will be lost.



**Norbert Eberle confirms there are fish in L Allen**  
(Norbert Eberle)