



78M (with Bolinder) below the bridge at Graiguenamanagh

*David Beattie*

The River Barrow is generally accepted to be the most scenic of all of Ireland's waterways. Given the splendid scenery to be observed on the other waterways, this is quite an accolade. However one has to ask, if this is the case, why is it so little frequented? The answer is, of course, that its reputation precedes it. However, with a suitable approach and a little bit of foresight and planning, the Barrow is not difficult and certainly rewards the visitor many times over for the modicum of trouble required to be taken.

I first travelled the length of the river in 1971 (in a canoe) and on the journey from Vicarstown to New Ross met only one cruiser, incidentally with Seamus Kelly (then Quidnunc of *The Irish Times*) aboard. Since then I have brought such disparate vessels as narrow boats (from Celtic Canal Cruisers), the **Charles Whitton** and **Schollevaer** down the river.

Being based at Killinure, I have developed the opinion that Barrow cruising does require a different frame of mind to Shannon or Erne cruising. One needs to plan passages a little more carefully and approach them with a certain sense of adventure. If one does this then one will be rewarded with wonderful scenery, uncrowded waterways and a warm welcome. Others in this issue are dealing with the formal attractions of the river so I shall constrain myself simply to mentioning some incidental pleasures.

"Sense of adventure!" you exclaim. "That's not why I boat on the Shannon. This sounds worse than shooting Baal's Bridge!" So what are the problems to be faced by a Shannon or Erne

cruiser and how does one deal with them? In essence the issues to be addressed are exercise, support, weed, water and headroom, and each can be dealt with in a satisfactory manner.

### **Exercise**

There are a lot of locks between Shannon Harbour and St Mullins Quay, including three doubles. While all are manned, one lockkeeper may handle several locks and they haven't yet mastered the art of bi-location. Therefore, unless you are prepared to wait until a lockkeeper turns up, you will need to buy a lock key and to learn how to operate them yourself. There are those of us who prefer to do this anyway; indeed we miss the opportunity on the Ballinamore–Ballyconnell! Even if a keeper is available, it is bad form not to assist him or her.

Operating the locks also means getting ashore before the lock and you should not expect a jetty at each lock. You will become adept at tossing the lock key on to the bank and then leaping after it. It's all good fun and, on the more heavily locked stretches, conducive to stretching one's legs between adjacent locks. Much of the towpath is now recognised public walkway and there are many opportunities to observe nature in the raw. I have seen otters, kingfishers and mink on these walks and they are guaranteed to work up a good thirst! Which leads on to the pleasant concept of waterside pubs that have not all succumbed to catering solely for us boatie folk.

### **Support**

Private boat owners on the more heavily frequented waterways have grown accustomed to a significant level of support and infrastructure. I don't think it's possible on the Shannon, Shannon/Erne and Erne systems to be more than 20 miles from a refuelling point or hire boat base with engineering support, and in most places the distances are much shorter than that. However the Barrow and the Grand Canal are in no way a desert in this regard. Assistance is available at the drop of a mobile phone and the hire bases are uniformly helpful. They are, however, more scattered than elsewhere and fuel purchase, in particular, should be planned in advance if long treks with jerry cans are to be avoided. You should arm yourself with a list of addresses and phone numbers before departing and fill your tanks wherever possible.

### **Weed**

Let's face it, weed can be a problem on the Grand Canal and an even greater problem on the Barrow because one is dealing with a flow of water. I can remember bow-hauling eight tons of **Charles Whitton** several miles upstream near Leighlinbridge in late August, because the screw was fouled by weed after less than one minute's running time. Partly this was caused by lack of depth of water and partly by weed. However, it is a problem that can be faced. In the (good?) bad old days, CIE used to flush thousands of gallons of weed killer down the Barrow Line every July and this dealt a mortal blow to the weed growth in mid-summer. In our more environmentally friendly times this is not acceptable and weeds are only cleared by cutting and by the regular passage of boats. Nowadays you need to come prepared. If your screw is not easily reached from above the water, consider fitting a weed hatch. This will enable you to clear the screw from inside the boat, getting only an arm wet. It will be of considerable use back on the Shannon or Erne and is a valuable safety feature.

At the same time, or as an alternative, consider fitting a weed/rope cutter on the shaft. This will eliminate much of the problem, except in overwhelming weed, and avoids facing the emotive task of cutting a large hole in the bottom of one's boat!

Ensure that you have a satisfactory filter on your water intake. Ensure that it is easily accessible and that you have a new gasket fitted and a replacement in stock. Get into the habit of checking your cooling water regularly or fit a vacuum gauge to the inside of the seacock. There is one of these on **Schollevaer** and I can read it on the instrument panel. If it moves, I know that I must either clear the filter or stop the engine within 15 minutes if I am to avoid over-heating.

Finally, use your head. Do not plan a trip up the less frequented parts of the Barrow (especially north from Graiguenamagh to Carlow) in late summer when weed growth is at its height and water levels are likely to be at their lowest.

## Water

Water levels on the Grand Canal are pretty predictable and reasonably static. A vessel leaving Shannon Harbour eastbound will certainly know quite quickly whether or not she is destined to encounter problems with her draught. I would say that if she reaches Tullamore without incident then she is unlikely to encounter any problems north of Carlow in this regard.

One needs to understand that the water characteristics of the Barrow are quite unlike the Shannon. The Barrow falls steadily over its length, hence the regularity and number of locks along its length. It also reacts very quickly to rainfall in the Midlands. This characteristic has, if anything, been enhanced in recent years because of the extent of bog removal and drainage improvement in the headwaters. The sponge that used to be the Bog of Allen and neighbouring bogs is very much smaller and rain in Laois or Offaly now rapidly converts into flow in the river. Dick Warner spent much of his time in **Waterways 3** worrying about the impact of that on his voyage south in the old **Charles Whitton**.

The water factor is the most potentially difficult. However, it is very easy to deal with it. Use your eyes! Do not venture out on the river if it's doing 6 knots and your pride and joy has a fine "bone in her teeth" while still moored to the bank! On most occasions you will be able to tell the likely level and flow in the river from your office in Belfast, Athlone or Dublin. You can then decide not to travel to your boat or, if you are like us, you will go in order to check it on the spot and be delighted if you can't move the boat as there will then be time to visit some of those delights of the south-east accessible by car — and they are many.

Once you are out on the river, there are a couple of things to watch out for. First, mind the gap! The weirs, I mean! They are unguarded and generally run midstream parallel with the flow, with a downstream hook. In other words they are shaped like a capital letter **J**. It is quite easy to slip sideways on to them and not easy or safe to get off. The flow would have to be enormous (ie near lunacy to venture forth) before most cruisers would be pulled over the weir, but don't take a chance.

Second, keep strictly to the boatstream. The Barrow Navigation was designed and built for horse-drawn traffic. Remember which side the next lock is on and try to imagine that your boat is being pulled by a draught horse from that bank. Generally, if you keep about 10 feet out from the towpath bank, taking avoiding action for the occasional tree, you will be fine. There are one or two obstructions charted: remain aware of their whereabouts so that you can avoid them. They are not buoyed or marked so it is up to you to read your chart before you set off and maintain an awareness of which page you are on and its main features. This should be a pleasure and in any event is something you should do even when in home waters.

Third, decide whether you are likely to need a form of brakes. The flow in the Barrow can be quite strong and the nightmare scenario is of having a weir or a bridge downstream and your engine either stopped because of a blocked filter or rendered temporarily ineffective because of weed on the screw. On recent excursions down the Barrow I have carried an old 56lb (half hundredweight) weight made on to the stern by a heavy warp and short length of chain. If it all starts to go wrong, all one has to do is heave (kick) it over the side and life will immediately slow down. You can control the speed of downstream progress by adjusting the scope (length of rope let out). The more out, the slower you go. By moving its attachment point to your hull, you can steer your boat or turn it. By motoring with it out, bouncing along on the bottom, you can control your progress with a great degree of precision. Because it has no flukes, it won't catch in rocks or weed in the same way as an anchor. It simply bounces along on the bottom and comes up shining like new. These weights were often used as ballast in older craft and there are lots of them lying around.

## Headroom

This is really about Carlow Bridge, because if you can fit under the bridge at Shannon Harbour and the footbridge in Tullamore then the only other constraint is Carlow bridge. The dimensions are given in the **Barrow Guide** by reference to the water level at the old towpath just at the bridge. The measurements in the **Guide** will enable you to tell if you are likely to be able to get through; if not, a voyage to Carlow and back is still very pleasurable, but you really should see



the downstream stretches and feel the mounting excitement of the trip on the tideway from St Mullins to New Ross (to my mind the most spectacularly beautiful stretch of navigable river I have seen anywhere) and then the overwhelming sense of space and change of scale as you meet the sea-going ships at New Ross.



Carlow Castle (Charles Niessner)

On arrival upstream of the bridge at Carlow, go alongside. Inspect the level and the rate of flow. Then decide whether you can fit and if it is wise to do so. At Easter in 1988 I towed the 56lb weight through behind the **Charles**. In 1997 I turned **Schollevaer** and went through backwards, allowing the stream to do the work and using the engine to give steerage way. On the four other occasions I've been able simply to go straight through. Coming upstream does not have the same sense of drama as one can control speed and direction much more easily. However, in 1964 the **Charles** went straight through, although her wheelhouse didn't! The log, reflecting the laconic style of her then owners, Peter Dobbs and Maureen Denham, simply records "... shot Carlow bridge, vessel now centre cockpit, no injuries ...."

### Practicalities

To my mind these simply boil down to when to go and for how long. A voyage to and then down the Barrow, from the Shannon, is always a delight and any inland waterways boat owner who hasn't done it is missing out far too much. I think that, while in theory one can go when one likes and for as long as one wishes, if one wishes to do so with the minimum of fuss then there are two basic approaches, either a relatively short trip, being away from the Shannon for up to a month, or alternatively staying for most or all of a season. Both choices are rewarding. One can leave the Shannon at any time from Easter onwards. However I would recommend that, if you want to be certain of being back on the Shannon for the high season, then you should be at least north of Athy by the beginning of June. Otherwise, unless it is a wet or a dull summer, you may encounter low water levels or high weed growth in the river. While these may not prevent you from making progress, they will slow you down and cause you to have to work harder to overcome them. My personal preference is to go at Easter, spend several weeks in or around St Mullins, exploring the estuary, the Nore and the Suir, returning upstream in May and being back in Killinure at the end of May. This is of course purely a personal preference. Some people go and never come back!

Finally, if you think that your boat won't fit, hire one. The narrowboats, in particular, are very suitable, mostly having aircooled engines (no filters to clear), all having weed hatches and shallow draught. But please, go there: you won't be disappointed, and even if, like me, you heave a sigh of relief when you break out of the Brosna into the broad and lazy waters of the Shannon on your return, open her up a little and start to make progress, it will be to that flash of a kingfisher, sighted in the canal cut at Upper Tinnahinch, that your mind will return as you sip your whiskey in front of the fire the following winter.