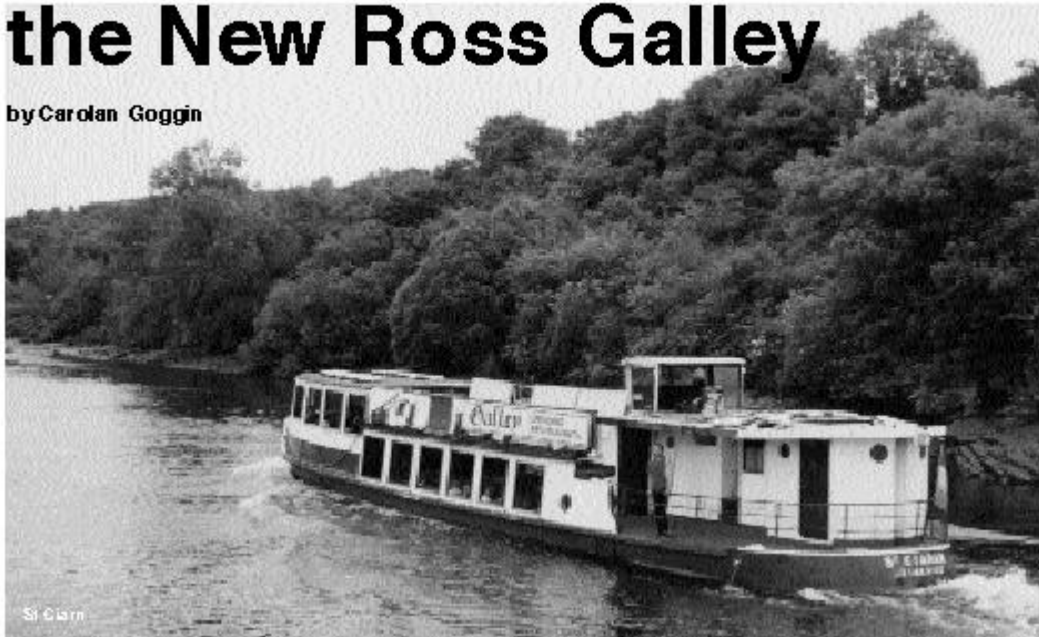


the boats:

the New Ross Galley

by Carolan Goggin



Dick Fletcher and his family ran the Galley Cruising Restaurant in New Ross for 29 years. In doing so, they extended the useful life of the **St Ciaran** and **St Brendan**, which had played such an important role in keeping the Shannon open to navigation.

In 1971, Dick Fletcher went to England and bought a barge called the **Waterways Princess** for a restaurant he was starting up. He brought her down the Trent, up the Aire and Calder to Leeds, along the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, crossing Ilkley Moor, and out the Ribble to the Irish Sea. She was then towed across the Irish Sea and down the east coast by a fishing boat on a fine day. Finally he brought her in Waterford Estuary and up the Barrow as far as New Ross. He renamed her the **Ross**, and offered dining cruises on her up the Suir, the Nore and the Barrow (depending on the day). This was the start of the Galley Restaurant.

The **Ross** was a great success, so much so that Dick decided to buy the **St Ciaran** from CIE in 1974, when it was put up for tender. Its sister ship the **St Brendan** went to another owner, but in 1977 Dick bought it too.

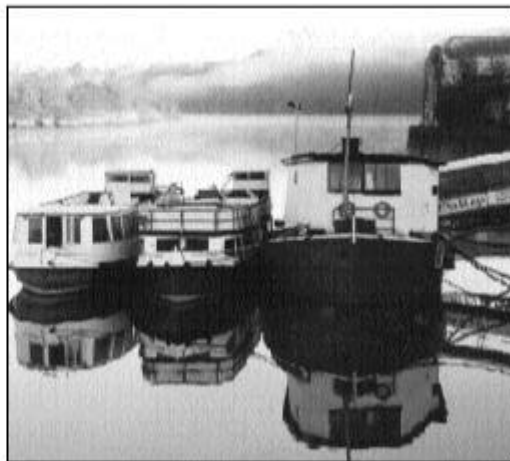
Dick got the idea of giving trips on the Suir, Nore and Barrow from a school trip. The headmaster at Newtown School, Waterford, organised an annual school outing. One of these outings was a trip on a barge down the Suir and up the Barrow to St Mullins for a picnic, followed by a walk up Brandon Mountain. Then they went back to New Ross, where they took a train back to Waterford in time for supper and bed. "This was so popular that I thought that it would be a wonderful thing to put on a service," said Dick. The Barrow is very attractive, with beautiful hills and wooded areas on either side, and he felt that it should be developed so that more people got an opportunity to see it. "I had the idea of having meals because weather isn't always fine, and it's a reason for people to come. If they've booked a meal with us they'll come even if the weather is a little bit off colour."

Dick had a lot of experience with boats before he started the Galley. He first went on the waterways around 1956. At that time there was practically nobody using the Shannon, and no hire companies at all (difficult to imagine now). If you were very lucky you could rent a boat from

a private owner, which is what Dick did. He rented the **St Mary** [later renamed **Iron Lung**] and also rented **Sirius III** from a man who worked for the ESB. This gave him invaluable experience for running the Galley. One Easter Dick rented the **Sirius III** and brought it down the Abbey River when the tide wasn't quite right (he was misinformed as to the time of high tide). Although he and the boat survived, he learnt how important it was to get the tide right when navigating tidal waters. When he bought the **St Ciaran** in Limerick, he had a much better grasp of tidal navigation, which he used daily in running the Galley on the tidal waters of the south-east.



St Brendan off Ballyhack in the Suir Estuary



Galley base at New Ross

The estuary of the Suir, the Nore and the Barrow is a very beautiful place. Dick hopes that it will begin to be developed for boaters in the next few years. It has never been as popular as the Shannon for hire companies, because it lacks the Shannon's reeds and soft banks to run into, but lately a few hire companies have been set up on the Barrow, such as Arnie Poole's company at Graiguenamanagh. Dick hopes to see more marinas put in place soon, like the new ones in Waterford. There are proposals for marinas at Cheekpoint, Passage East and Dunmore East, which should make the sister rivers more popular. Dick feels that the popularity of the area could be increased with the publication of a guide to the area, something that is greatly needed.

People are often put off visiting the estuary by stories of tricky navigation, but it's not as difficult as people think, according to Dick. Bear in mind that it is tidal, so don't go into a place where you're not sure of the depth when the tide is falling. Some of the bridges are very low, but there are plans for new bridges, so hopefully this will improve. In the shipping area, just follow the buoyed channel, taking a nice curve as the river does and travel as much as possible on a rising tide. The only tricky parts are the very upper reaches where it stops being tidal, like at St. Mullins, where there's a scar which you have to cross at high tide. The weather conditions become important when you get to the estuary, for example getting a strong wind against a tide is not very nice, but there's a lot of local advice available. There are Admiralty charts available for the shipping areas, and the boat club at New Ross is very friendly.

Dick highly recommends visiting the estuary, well known for its beautiful scenery, and a trip on the Galley is a good introduction. [*And do try to take a trip from New Ross to Inistiogue: wonderful scenery. Ed.*] The Galley is now running under the ownership of the Minihan family, with occasional help from Dick. There are lunch, afternoon tea and dinner cruises from both Waterford and New Ross. Contact Mrs Kitty Minihan, 051-421723 (10.00am to 7.00pm), fax 051-421950, email minihanc@gofree.indigo.ie.

Ciaran and Brendan: Plenty Still

The **St Ciaran** was originally named **Wroxham Belle**. She was built at Rowhedge near Colchester in 1936 by Rowhedge Ironworks. She was the first motor-driven passenger boat on the Norfolk Broads. At the outbreak of the war she was commandeered for patrol work on the Broads (RN), then shipped out to Sierra Leone as deck cargo and brought back to work on the Thames at Teddington.

The **St Brendan** was originally named **Cardinal Wolsley**. She came to the Shannon under her own power in 1957. Little is known of her history before being bought by Dick Fletcher.

In 1956 CIE bought both boats, charged by the government to develop boating on the Shannon. That was after a 1954 trip on the Shannon in the **St Clair** had convinced a group of VIPs of the river's potential. The boats required a minimum headroom of 14' — and that was enough to ensure that no low fixed bridges would be built across the Shannon. The **St Ciaran** was mostly stationed at the old railway terminus at Ballina (Killaloe), doing short cruises in that area. She occasionally ran from other points along the Shannon such as Portumna and Banagher. The **St Brendan** was mostly stationed at Athlone, cruising around Lough Ree as far as Lanesborough. CIE installed new Thornycroft RNR 6MV engines in each boat, along with maple decks and canopies for dancing, public address systems and coloured lights run off a generator. The boats gave many people their first trip on the river; CIE ran day tours from Dublin, transporting people to the cruises and back again.

Dick made substantial changes to both boats, putting the helm aft, adding extra seating, raising decks and enabling easier access to saloons, galley accommodation and toilets. The windows have been enlarged on both boats. He put a Gardiner in the **Ciaran** and a Perkins in the **Brendan**: six cylinders meant low noise and little vibration, running at 1500 rather than say 2400 revs.

The pontoon to which the **Brendan** and **Ciaran** are berthed in the photo is the **Rocksand**, previously **Corsand**, formerly a coaster owned by Dowleys of Carrick-on-Suir and used to carry corn and fertiliser. She was used in dismantling the old New Ross bridge in 1968. Dick removed her old Plenty-Still single-cylinder engine; she now holds the kitchens and offices of the Galley operation.



Dinner on the Galley

Dick Fletcher

We had a lot of very very pleasant cruises and beautiful memories of lovely weather, beautiful evening cruises in sunshine. The evening cruise and dinner was the principal highlight of the day for us as well as the customers. Where you got a nice evening we'd leave at about 7.00pm and have a three-hour cruise. Most of the time we'd come back in the twilight. After an hour on deck, when people gave their orders and had a drink, we'd serve the meal and we'd be back about twenty minutes after the meal was finished. That gave people a chance to come on deck and get a breath of fresh air and have a cigarette or whatever.

We had of course lots of times when things were a little difficult but no hazards or mishaps or crashes, which is really what interests people. We did have one or two groundings, but nothing very serious, and never actually failed to sail due to weather. We could sail in all weathers. The only thing that would stop us really is fog and you get used to making sure that you don't get caught out in an evening fog, getting home early on a night when there's a sign of fog. The engines always kept going: we had to drop anchor once or twice due to heating or cooling problems, but nothing that wasn't able to be fixed within ten or fifteen minutes. When we were starting one of my friends offered to fall in as the boat was passing so he could be rescued to make for a bit of excitement. I didn't take him up on it as he wasn't a very good swimmer and it might not have been all fun.

