

Inland Waterways News

Death of a dock

Brian J Goggin

I've always been fascinated by the Grand Canal Dock in Ringsend. As children, returning from Sunday expeditions to Dollymount, we tried to persuade Dad to drive home down the south quays and around by the Dock. We'd stop to look through the gaps at whatever boats were in the basin: for some reason, I have a picture of an old MTB in my mind. Then around by the Gas Company, inhaling the tarry smell from the heaps of coal or coke spilling out on to the road, and over the cobbles by the Dogs' and Cats' Home, before heading out along the Grand Canal.



The south-east corner

Later, exploring the city by bike, the homeward route often went the same way, adding miles to the journey. There was always something of interest in or around the Dock, although it was a bit frightening too: people moving about on mysterious errands, lock gates and a forbidden wonderland beyond, a sense of men at work. Later still, as a student, a favourite Sunday walk was from Trinity down to the Dock, then out through Ringsend to walk the South Wall past the Half Moon to the Poolbeg lighthouse, then back for a couple of pints in Irishtown, an area I later lived in for about six months.

I didn't know anything about inland waterways in those days. I didn't know the names of Hanover, Charlotte and Grand Canal Quays, or Camden, Buckingham and Westmoreland Locks. I didn't know that M-boats had been built there. But I've always loved visiting the Dock and, even though I rarely saw a boat moving, there were always interesting boats to look at.

There are still a few left (some perhaps contrary to the bye-laws), but they're being driven out. The Dublin Docklands Development Authority (DDDA) controls most of the quays, where it intends to replace old buildings with new. Some of the old buildings have gates blocking access to the quay wall in front of them and some boats are tied to those walls, gaining thereby a measure of security. As the old buildings are demolished, that security vanishes and boats become exposed to the possible attentions of vandals or thieves. On the north side of the dock, there are currently two secure areas with boats tied thereto, and a few vessels elsewhere. There are no boats on the west side, apart from one sailing vessel at anchor. There are some boats near the flats at Charlotte Quay, on the south side, and others near the **Naomh Éanna**.

It seems that the number of boats in the basin will decrease as security is withdrawn. And I understand that, since early summer, the dockmaster has not admitted boats to the Dock from the Liffey unless he could be assured that they intended to continue westward.

For some years, the concentration of boating activity has been in the south-east corner of the basin. There, under the aegis of the Irish Nautical Trust, a number of small businesses have been operating. In front of the gate is the slipway used by the Viking Splash DUKWs. To the left, in the **Naomh Éanna**, Surfdock, a diving school and a sailmaker run their businesses. And to

the right, Shipwatch provides hard standing and security for boats (afloat and ashore) and two other small businesses, one making metal trailers and cradles and the other doing fibreglass moulding, have their bases.

The patch occupied by Shipwatch and the two others is part of a triangular site between the eastern end of the Dock and the Dodder. This site is owned by Waterways Ireland (WI). The dockmaster's house is at the northern end; then there is a walled off patch that is leased by DDDA and that contains two old graving docks, recently re-excavated; then there's the area used by Shipwatch.

Two years ago, the Irish Nautical Trust and the Rinn Development Initiative (an umbrella body for a number of Ringsend development groups) commissioned a study that proposed that the triangular site be developed to cater for the development groups, various community activities and the little businesses. The proposal is still on the table for discussion between the community groups, WI and the DDDA.

In the meantime, though, things have been moving. WI has given Shipwatch and the other two businesses notice to quit: it wants vacant possession of its land (as it is legally entitled to do). It intends to excavate the third graving dock (behind the slipway), which was filled with contaminated soil, and then to fill it in again. Of the other two docks, one will be available for small, non-noisy boat jobs; the other will become a "water feature". WI then intends to develop the site, with a depot for itself (a good idea) and perhaps some community provision — but there will be no facility for hard standing. The boats will be gone from the dock.

The little businesses are not the only ones to be affected. Down on the Liffey, the Poolbeg Yacht & Boat Club members have boats on swinging moorings: you see them as you drive over the East Link tollbridge. Each winter, about thirty of them moved in to the basin. Some stayed afloat but most were hauled out; their owners could work on them over the winter. But they won't be allowed in at all this winter while work is going on and, even if they are allowed into the Dock in future winters, there will be no hard standing for them.

And so, two hundred and six years after it was opened, the Dock will cease to be used for working on boats. No doubt there will be high-quality houseboats, an annual IWA visit and a modern marina, and very decorative it will all look: a nice backdrop when seen from the flats and offices. But cargo-carrying went years ago and now boat repair is going too, and a working dock becomes a duck-pond.

I don't think I'll be going out of my way to visit it any more.