

## Inland Waterways News

### Rainwater with history

*Jim Allen, Bannsider*

Could the Lower River Bann be on the cusp of a recreational and cultural renaissance as Tourism Developers currently seek to oxygenate a locally burgeoning market in waterway tourism? Within focus is the river's 10km tidal stretch at Coleraine, and in particular the enigmatic and historically significant Mountsandel area south of town. If successful, their efforts could change how Bannsidiers and visitors alike relate to this culturally noteworthy, yet eerily under-used river. Some fear however that this may herald further inappropriate bankside development, and contribute to the ongoing diminishment of the river's natural fabric. Despite the recently declared intentions of the Lower Bann Advisory Committee to formulate a sustainable rescue plan for the river, few deny that the Bann is a lamentable shadow of its former natural glory.



*Aerial looking east, featuring Fort, woods and private housing development. Also featuring patch of undeveloped grassland in middle ground of pic which is the site of the Mesolithic (middle stone age) encampment.*

Spawned by glacial meltdown, this once noble, silvery tear in the Ulster landscape is more likely to be on the cusp of becoming a brownish, urbanised tube of lifeless drainage water for day-tripping playboys and their powerboats. Given that we only care for what we value, can a re-awakening of the river's historic worth (a la Mountsandel) and a hastily fashioned Sustainable Management Plan return the Lower Bann to some semblance of a healthy semi-natural river system and instil some level of (not-for-profit) community value?

### Relationships with the river

Everything hinges on our relationship with this river, which means different things to different people. To the average Bannsider it's just part of the fixture and fittings of the local landscape — which may or may not enhance shoreline property value, depending on whether you live upwind or downwind of the local sewage treatment plant. To the angler it's always going to be the one that got away and no longer worth the licence fee. To the Bann Valley farmer and Government hydrologist it's a free drainage conduit. To the hospitality entrepreneur, it's an untapped investment opportunity and to the tourism promoter a wasted visitor resource. Somewhat profanely, both industry and promoter refer to the river as a **product**.

Further evidence of a troubled or broken relationship between man and river can be seen in how modern Bann Man builds with his back to the river, as if snubbing a redundant friend. Such an apparent declaration of independence is another portentous symbol of how eco-phobic man is severing links with the natural world. Similarly we divorce ourselves from our rich cultural heritage and so no wonder we appear to place little value on passing rainwater.

In his eloquent account of Coleraine's rich past, T H Mullin refers to the Lower Bann as "liquid history" and, like others, elaborates on the significant role the river has played in the human

development not only of this region but of Ireland as a whole. Even a cursory glance back upstream along the corridor of time reveals how our hunting, warring, worshipping and industrious ancestors needed the river for survival. Along its 40-mile length are plotted numerous raths and souterrains, including the rubble footprints of ravaged monasteries, all bearing testimony to the worth that man once placed on such fordable fresh water, whether for food, protection, transport or sheer real estate value.

## Mountsandel

Rivers like this provided cultural gateways into a fledgling Ireland for both coloniser and wanderer alike, but more significantly the Bann also enabled the earliest post-glacial human frontier settlers of the middle stone age period (9,000 years ago) to colonise the last inhabited landmass of an increasingly clement Europe. The indisputable jewel in the cultural crown of the river's history is Mountsandel, where evidence of these prehistoric pioneers was unearthed in the 1970s, making it the earliest known settlement site for man in Ireland. Deserving of its place on Ireland's heritage map, the full story of Mountsandel's amazing past has been buried in both the archaeological jargon of scientific journals and in the files of its statutory Keepers (Environment & Heritage Service).

It's only when this great **cam uisce** (winding water) reaches the southern limits of Coleraine town at Mountsandel, squeezing under the large metal sluice gate at the Cutts weir on one half of the river and rushing between the ageing stone piers of a former salmon fishery on the other, that it suddenly takes on a different personality. Here the freshwater of Lough Neagh's catchment (flavoured with phosphates and farm run-offs) meets and mixes with the brackish tidal water of the Lower Bann in the lively rapids of the Salmon Leap. Eight miles from the river's Atlantic home, under the wooded shadow of Mountsandel's earthen fort, where distant echoes of past great salmon migrations can be heard in the rushing water as they would leap from salt to fresh, is where the story of man in Ireland really begins.

I often muse as to why Coleraine inhabits this particular location on the Northern Irish map. The answer, of course, lies with our Mesolithic ancestors who picked this spot in the wildlife-rich and densely wooded landscape beside a large, fordable, fish-filled, navigable artery into the inhospitable interior of ice-free Ireland. In other words, Coleraine owes its existence to the 4 Fs of Fish, Fords, Forests and Flint (Stone Age man's gold) which he extracted from the now famous Whiterocks at Portrush.

*Aerial looking west featuring Mountsandel Fort surrounded by Commercial (Forest Service) Plantation (Mountsandel Woods). In foreground (short grassed area) is the site of the earliest known settlement site for man in Ireland*



Dare we now hope to see a long overdue professional interpretation of this site and sensitive, sustainable development of the river's fragile corridor (including protection measures)? Regardless of in-situ interpretative material, a visit to Mountsandel will always enhance the value of the river in the eyes of the beholder. Let's not turn our back on this ever-flowing symbol of how time and our earliest ancestors brought us to this place. Whatever the Lower Bann means to you, whether a product, a playground or just passing rainwater, it deserves much more than just a creative history lesson.