

Monasterevan

Driving south on the N7, you deserve a reward after making it past Kildare; driving towards Dublin, you need a rest to prepare yourself for the traffic. So turn off at the lights in Monasterevan, drive over the canal drawbridge and park the car at the far end of the little park. Let the kids or dogs have a run — and give yourself a treat by taking a walk around Monasterevan's waterways.



Monasterevan's beautifully kept park



Joe & Dinny

The little park is a credit to the town of Monasterevan: a lovely place to relax after battling with traffic. Note the painted scenes on the walls of the small cottage, including two local characters sitting on the bank.

The river in front of you is the Barrow: what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the "burling Barrow brown". Along this stretch, canal, railway and road cross the river side by side. Upstream, just below the road bridge to Portarlinton, a slipway has recently been built for the Civil Defence, with support from IWAI and advice from Waterways Ireland.

Walk down to the town end of the park and climb the steps to the canal bank. The aqueduct used to be a favourite place for swimming before leptospirosis was invented. The drawbridge is due to have its upper works restored, although they're no longer needed to help in lifting. Travelling by canal, you have to get the lockkeeper to lift the bridge for you; going under it, and over the aqueduct, is a great pleasure.



Under the drawbridge



Bridge over the Mountmellick Branch

Walk down the bank until you come to the lock and bridge. Look right from the bridge and you'll see the N7: going under it by boat is such a contrast to fighting through the traffic. Look left at the small harbour just below the bridge. Now look along the line of the harbour, but further away, and you'll see one side of a traditional canal bridge. Up to the 1820s, boats using the canal locked down into the Barrow and up again; the little harbour shows the line of the old route.

Turn right along the canal bank until you come to a bridge. Look back to see the wheel of the drawbridge outlined against the great window of the church: L T C Rolt admired the view in the 1940s. Cross the bridge: it spans the now-abandoned Mountmellick Line of the canal. Could we ever see it restored? Could Mountmellick's Harbour Bar ever find itself once again with a harbour?



Lock 25



The old line of the canal

Walk back to the drawbridge on the east side of the canal. When you reach the road, there's a field on your right, with the old upper works in it. At the far end is the house in whose garden is the bridge you saw from the lock; the other side of the bridge is in someone else's garden. You can also see that the canal now does a sharp right-hand turn to bring it over the aqueduct.

Just beyond the turn, you'll see the Bell Harbour, an attractive development of flats, very close to the newly-reopened railway station for Dublin-bound commuters. As part of the development, the old bays at the harbour were re-excavated and now provide excellent moorings for boats passing through Monasterevan. The moorings themselves are controlled by Waterways Ireland.



Bell Harbour



Crow Bridge, levelled in 1959, was used when boats served the maltings. The Back Canal is now filled in and the site is occupied by the tennis courts and St Paul's Secondary School. 'The Venice of Ireland' had twenty six bridges. Swans are very much part of the scene. The Mute variety and partially migrant Whooper flying low is an event to be delighted in

Opposite the Bell Harbour you can find traces of the Crow Bridge and the entrance to the Back Canal, now filled in, but you can walk down and see where the harbour was.

Monasterevan is a great place to visit by boat, because you see parts that are hidden when you drive through on the N7. In fact, the N7 is not the town's main street: the life of the town is elsewhere, and the drawbridge is the centre of a fascinating waterways world. Do stop and have a look.



Canalside buildings

With thanks to Liam Hurley for research and information and for finding the illustration of Crow Bridge.