

## Inland Waterways News

### Heather Thomas

Heather Thomas died in April 2003. One of five sisters, she had sailed for Ireland as a junior — and rowed in the Veteran Rowing Championships in Adelaide in 1997. She was a keen supporter of Offaly Rowing Club and was active in IBRA, the Heritage Council, Offaly Tourism and the Irish Business & Professional Women's Organisation.

*... there is good news from 24th lock at Cappincur (near Tullamore) where Mike and Heather Thomas have launched Celtic Cruisers Ltd with 4- and 6-berth diesel boats. The moderate prices cover gas, car parking, lock fees and insurance, and all you need bring is towels, food (or they will shop for you) and sleeping bags. Mike and Heather promise personal attention and a friendly welcome, and we can vouch for this. ... (Inland Waterways News, June 1974)*

But it is her contribution to the life and health of the Grand Canal that stands out: without the Celtic fleet, there would have been few boats using the western end of the canal, especially during the summer, and the canal would have suffered accordingly. Here are the thoughts of some of those who appreciated her work.

**Brian J Goggin**

Heather was a lady in the complete sense. My contact with her was mostly through the Dublin Branch. For many years she donated a committee boat from Celtic Canal Cruisers to the Dublin Rally. The time which made most impact was the year the 9th lock was closed for repairs and three of her boats were craned into the canal at Inchicore, making a great splash in the papers.

**Donal O'Siochain, President IWAI**

It is with deep regret that Waterways Ireland learned of the death of Heather Thomas. Her passing will be a sad loss to her friends in the Inland Waterways and in Waterways Ireland and indeed to the many visitors whom she dealt with over the years. Heather's tireless efforts in promoting the inland waterways of Ireland, and in particular the Grand Canal, as a holiday destination are reflected in the numbers of users on the canal today. We offer our sincere condolences to her family.

**John Martin, Chief Executive Officer, Waterways Ireland**

I shall greatly miss Heather as my next-door canal neighbour. Celtic boats are frequent visitors to Lowtown and stories of the iniquities of some hirers and their boat-handling skills were always a lively topic of conversation with Heather when we met up. The fact that Celtic Canal Cruisers have continued on the canals for so long, when other companies have come and gone, was a testament to Heather's determination, professionalism and love of the canals.

**Robert Few, Lowtown Marina**



The west end of the Grand Canal owes a lot to the work of Heather Thomas over long years of operating Celtic Canal Cruisers. She and her late husband Mike must have had a pioneering spirit to see an opportunity on what was a little-used stretch of the Irish waterways, and Heather has been credited with keeping that stretch of the Canal navigable over the intervening years.

Some years ago Heather presented the Offaly Branch with a perpetual trophy — the Mike Thomas Award for Canal Development — which we have presented to various parties in the intervening years. We hope to organise something to honour Heather in her own right, after consultation with her family, to mark her contribution to Offaly and the Grand Canal.

***Catriona Hilliard, IWAI Offaly Branch***

I am also very sorry and very sad about Mrs Thomas. She was a wonderful woman and we remember at the beautiful days and weeks on the hire boats on the Grand and Barrow.

***Rüdiger J Steinacher, Germany***

Many thanks for the opportunity to put in writing about Heather Thomas and the driving force and sheer determination involved in running Celtic Canal Cruisers: she was responsible for keeping the Grand Canal open. My most memorable moment among many great years of friendship with Heather and Barry Thomas was when the Dublin rally was threatened with cancellation because of a lock closure in Clondalkin. Not to be deterred the late Paul Kenny approached Heather and Barry and told them of the slight glitch and then said "Sure that's not a problem: let's get them lifted over the lock." The "You **what!!!**" look on Heather's face was priceless. But it all went ahead and there was a very successful rally thanks to Heather, Paul and Barry. To our dear friend gone before us "Thanks for your friendship."

***Michael Clinton, O'Sullivan's Marine***

For more than 20 years I have had great respect for the Thomas family and for the contribution they made to the canal hire business in Ireland. So when we thought about entering the hire business it was natural that I would talk to Heather. Everything I had ever heard about her came through in that meeting. Although facing what could be seen as new competition, her manner was friendly and courteous and, while she gave away no trade secrets, there were no words of discouragement.

Her passing will be mourned by every user of our waterways for her kindness, her unfailing good humour and the dignity with which she bore the tragedy and sufferings of her all too short life. In remembering her I am drawn to the title of that great waterways classic by Harry Rice:

***Thanks for the Memory. Derek Whelan, IWAI Dublin Branch and Leisureways***

Heather Thomas served on the Standing Committee on Inland Waterways of the Heritage Council during the Council's first term from 1995 to 2000. In addition to her knowledge and expertise, she brought a sense of fun and enjoyment to the Committee while practical help, in the form of barge trips for the waterway corridor project and photography of canal features, was generously given. She will be much missed much by her fellow members and Council staff who worked with her.

***Beatrice Kelly, The Heritage Council***

Sad news of the passing of Heather Thomas. Heather will be missed by all who knew her and her welcome will be missed by all who travelled through Tullamore. Our condolences to her family.

***John Leech, Irish Water Safety***

My most vivid images of the 24th lock include Heather Thomas either chatting and laughing with a regular boater, or greeting a passer-by with one of her warm, generous smiles. A boat hire pioneer, Heather was an integral part of the canal and boating community. She attended many of the rallies up and down the canal, and she also worked tirelessly over the years to compel the authorities to maintain the canal system. Heather will be missed by all and the canal has lost yet another good friend.

***John Thompson, Kildare Branch IWAI and Heritage Boat Association***

Reminiscing while driving home from Heather's funeral service in St Catherine's church, Peter Jenkins (currently Chairman of the Irish Boat Rental Association) remarked that he had first known of Heather when he frequented the social evenings at Kill o' the Grange Parish in Dun Laoghaire. There Heather, young and attractive, the centre of attention, carried it all with grace and elegance. The picture Peter evoked was at one with the Heather I first met in 1977, shortly after Celtic Canal Cruisers joined IBRA.

From the time they joined, though often with fewer boats than other members, Heather and her husband Mike (who served twice as Chairman) were leading activists in promoting the waterways, particularly of course the Grand Canal. Throughout, they contributed constructively and consistently to the deliberations and decisions of the Association. Following the cruel death of her husband Mike, Heather assumed full responsibility for Celtic Canal Cruisers. This involved her in the exacting day-to-day business of welcoming and advising her cruising customers, in marketing, finance and in planning the purchase and sale of cruisers.

All this she did with grace and elegance, with enthusiasm, loyalty, diligence and finally with great courage. Heather lived her life, so sadly cut short on 23 April last, with a confidence and determination that won the admiration of all who knew her. She was quite a lady.

***Derek Dann, IBRA***