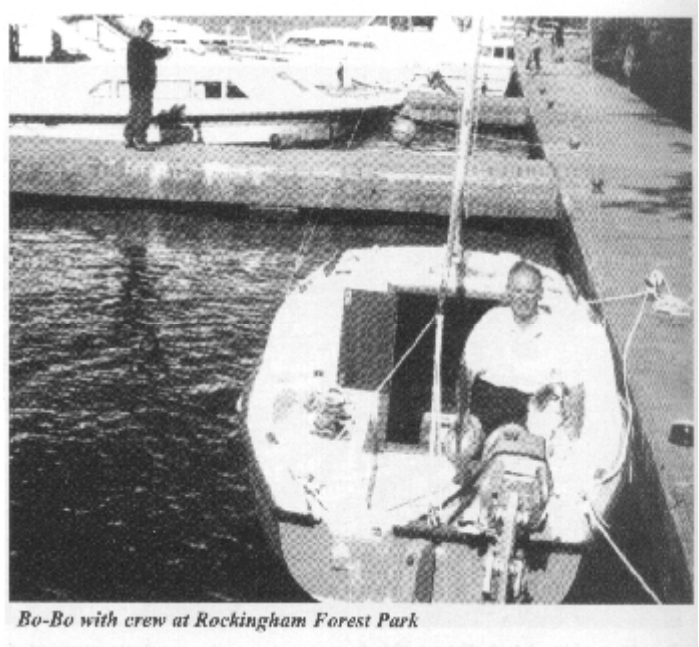


Inland Waterways News

Sailing the Shannon

Nick Theato

A casual glance to port, whilst on a starboard tack, told me that I was in immediate danger of being blown on to a rocky shoreline no more than twelve feet away. I immediately tacked, only to find that **Bo-Bo** wouldn't go through the wind. The wind caught the genoa again and pushed us closer to the rocks. Quickly I lowered the outboard, pumped furiously on the petrol bulb and tugged the pull cord. Nothing! Again I tugged the cord. Nothing! By now the tiller was occasionally being grounded on the rocky bottom. A third pull and the outboard started. Quickly I turned both outboard and tiller to lead us off the shore and we rapidly swept clear. This was the fifteenth and final day of a cruise up the River Shannon and I was only one hour from Dromineer, my home harbour. I was in waters I knew well. I had been guilty of daydreaming in a Force 4 wind. Not that we were in any physical danger, but the boat itself could have been damaged in a swell of around two to three feet.



Bo-Bo with crew at Rockingham Forest Park

The boat

I had purchased **Bo-Bo**, a 17 ft Pedro Class 2-berth bilge-keel trailer-sailor, the previous year for €4,000.00 which included a Honda 4-stroke 5hp outboard. Most of the original equipment was in situ. I purchased a new set of sails and built lockers in the rear of the cockpit for fenders, petrol cans and gas. I also added an outboard extension to prevent fouling of the rudder.

After a year of sailing on Lough Derg I planned to sail/motor up to Lough Key and back. I had devised a system of lowering and raising the mast single-handed to get under the low bridges and had cleared my diary for the end of May and first two weeks of June. It was normally a good weather period, but May 2002 saw Ireland's highest rainfall for over 100 years, and the River Shannon was flooded: in places more than four feet higher than normal.

North to Athlone

At 1530 on Day 1 I left Lough Derg Yacht Club in Dromineer, using the outboard to take me clear of the bay. Then I hoisted the mainsail only, and on a broad reach was in Terryglass at 1735: 13 miles in two hours. My crewmember was a Tibetan spaniel, Muffin, and she was very happy when I had found a little berth among the crowd of hired cruisers who were sheltering in the harbour. I went to the Derg Inn and enjoyed an evening meal, a pint of lager and a coffee.

On Day 2 the wind was stronger if anything, and the swell on Lough Derg had increased to around three feet. I decided to travel the two miles to Portumna Bridge. Upstream the fields

were flooded so it was important to follow well-marked channels. I replenished my spare 10-litre petrol can in Banagher which has a Martello Tower, a five-sided fort with moat and drawbridge and a revolving gun platform, a Cromwellian castle and, in St. Paul's Church of Ireland Church (built 1829), there is a stained glass window of the Resurrection, which was originally made for Westminster Abbey in London.



On Day 3 after a sunshine breakfast in the cockpit I departed at 1030 with the mast lowered for bridges ahead. The wind was cold and NW. Athlone's church of SS Peter and Paul with its twin towers is visible from afar: reached the town in the afternoon and decided to stay two days in the town marina. Athlone is situated on the principal fording point of the middle Shannon. In 1129 King Turlough built a wooden castle here. In 1210 King John of England ordered the building of a stone castle and bridge and within 40 years Athlone was a walled town. It was twice under siege (1690 and 1691): it took 25,000 men of the Williamites to defeat the Jacobites.

Athlone to Lough Key

On Day 5 I left Athlone, lowering my mast to go under two bridges then raising it at a small jetty north of the last bridge. Despite the S to SW wind, I needed to tack to clear the river, and sailed past Lough Ree Yacht Club before the first of their boats had been launched. It was very overcast and cold. The wind built from Force 2 to Force 4 and changed from SW to West as the day progressed. By 1630 I had arrived at the northern end of Lough Ree, having averaged over 4.5 knots. After lowering the sails and mast I motored the final half mile to get under the bridge at Lanesborough where the current is very strong. By evening rain had set in and the forecast wasn't much better.

Day 6: some sunshine but mostly heavy showers, with a strengthening wind and squally conditions. I motored through Tarmonbarry and Roosky to Lough Bofin where I found a strong wind and building swell from the NW, so headed for Dromod Harbour. At 1535 I tucked myself into a small spot near the slipway, well away from the swell. Dromod is a beautiful village, Co Leitrim's tidiest. A many-spouted fountain made from bog oak, with three herons to one side near the top, honours the late J J O'Connor, a prime mover on the Development Committee. I stayed an extra day; some English hirers from Darlington provided me with a plate of hotpot for supper. That's the beauty of sailing and cruising: people are good to each other and friends are easily made.

Day 8: I left Dromod in bright sunshine at 0830 and sailed up Lough Bofin. But as I entered the Derrycarne Narrows the sky darkened and I hove to and changed into my waterproofs; within minutes the heavens opened. A little later I lowered the sails and mast and motored into Lough Tap and through the Albert Lock and Lough Corry to Carrick-on-Shannon, berthing around midday. I purchased an extra 5-litre can and filled it with petrol, then passed into the River Boyle and arrived at Rockingham Forest Park on Lough Key at 1630. A beautiful sunny evening with a moderate breeze: I moved across to Drummon Island to shelter from the swell. Muffin and myself walked all round the Island, which is a nature trail of the forest park.

Cold water

Day 9: the morning was full of sunshine but my gas bottle was empty, so cold wash and shave; no tea or coffee, but plenty of fresh water and soft drinks onboard. The northerly Force 3–4 was ideal for sailing so at 0900 we set off to explore the southern part of Lough Key. By 1230 my crew member was telling me that she would prefer the forest walks, so we returned to Drummon Island. A quick lunch (thank goodness for sardines), then we walked across the bridge from the Island and explored the Forest's bog garden, green trail, nature trail, deer enclosures and other interesting places. The weather clouded up during the late afternoon and became colder.

After a night of heavy rain Day 10 started with drizzle and poor visibility. I motored to Clarendon Lock and by 1115 was back in Carrick-on-Shannon. After searching the town I heard of a filling station on the Dublin Road who sold butane gas cylinders and it was worth the mile walk to get one. We departed Carrick at 1315 and motored all the way to Dromod, where my friends the hotpot providers gave me a welcome wave. They hadn't moved at all. Once berthed I made myself a nice hot cup of tea (ah nectar!).

Day 11 was drizzle as forecast, but we set off for Lanesborough at 0915 and had the river mostly to ourselves, as this was a Saturday when hire cruisers mostly change hands. On arrival I put up the mast ready to sail on Lough Ree the next day.

Lanesborough to Lough Derg

Day 12: after heavy rain and high winds during the night, by 0700 it had quietened with a sunny start. I took Muffin for a walk and tested the wind, which was about Force 4 SW. We set off at 0900, motoring into the Lough. I hoisted mainsail and jib but after an hour of sailing, with increasing squally wind and waves rising to three feet, we had made little headway. I headed for the shelter of an island and took down the sails, then motored south in worsening conditions. Several hire cruisers coming north were filming the antics of **Bo-Bo** as she wrestled with the waves. We arrived at LRYC around 1400 where I took down the mast and secured it before motoring to the town marina for the night.

Day 13: below Athlone the water was a little turbulent and then a mile on we hit a heavy swell that at times was four feet high, lifting **Bo-Bo** up and crashing her down. By increasing speed I avoided being turned sideways into the swell. Later, the mast lashing became loose, committing me to holding the mast with one hand. Luckily Shannonbridge was only twenty minutes away, and we berthed and secured the mast. When we left the water was calmer and we tied up in Banagher at 1530. I made a quick visit to the chandlery to get a few brass screws to re-secure the fixing point that had come adrift.

Day 14: a lovely sunny morning and a fresh SW breeze. After a lazy breakfast and a long walk, we motored downriver to Portumna Bridge. We took the 1500 opening and crossed Lough Derg to Terryglass. The harbour was full of hire cruisers sheltering from the swell, but we managed to double up alongside a private motorboat. I put up the mast, tensioned the stays and prepared for the next day's sailing.



Day 15 started with sunshine and I was up at 0645 to make the most of that. We left Terryglass at 0845. **Bo-Bo** was under sail within five minutes in a freshening SW to W wind, forcing us to tack across the Lough to make progress. We passed Kilgarvan about 1145 where the swell was running up the Lough at 2–3 feet with plenty of white horses. An hour later I made the error which started this narrative. That certainly woke me up, and I kept well away from the rocky shore for the remainder of the passage to LDYC in Dromineer. We arrived at 1400. During my whole 280-mile trip I hadn't seen another sailing craft on the river, except at LRYC. I didn't envy the cruisers with standing room, heating etc. **Bo-Bo** had served me well.



Photos courtesy Nick Theato