

GOLDEN

The IWAI celebrates its golden anniversary this year. Nuala Redmond reports on the conference held to mark the occasion

It is unusual, and impressive, for any voluntary group to be able to fill a whole day with interesting accounts of their activities. The IWAI was able to do just that, and keep everyone fascinated, at their 50th anniversary conference in the Hodson Bay Hotel last July.

The event was well attended, with over 100 people present, including county councillors, journalists, and waterways enthusiasts.

The success of the conference is a testament to IWAI president Donal O'Siocháin, who had planned and organised meticulously for months preceding the event. The sudden and tragic death of his infant grand-daughter Katie on the eve of the conference,



Conference delegates at the Hodson Bay Hotel

PHOTO: MICK KINAHAN

meant that he was not with us on the day for which he worked so hard. But we were with him, and his family, in our hearts, our thoughts, and our prayers.

The conference commenced with a minute's silence for little Katie, led by vice-president Brian Cassells. After which, Minister for Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs Eamon Ó Quiv TD officially opened the conference. He too expressed his condolences to Donal and the O'Siocháin family.

Ó Quiv paid tribute to the founders of the IWAI. 'What this organisation has achieved in 50 years is just amazing', he said, calling our waterways 'a magnificent resource'.

He stressed his commitment to the development of Irish waterways, adding that five years' capital allocation of money will ensure continued development.

'Waterways play a vital role in rural development, the waterways connects urban and rural communities in a unique way', he continued. He also stressed the importance of the cross-border project.

'I have met with Angela Smith, parliamentary under secretary of state in Northern Ireland, and she has assured me that she is committed to the continued development of waterways, both sides of the border.'

WHAT IF?

WHAT IF IT HADN'T HAPPENED?

Ruth Delany's 10 turning points in the history of Ireland's inland waterways

1. 1750s: Major works commenced on the building of the Grand Canal
2. 1840s: The introduction of public works as famine relief, meaning plenty of workers were available for waterways building and maintenance
3. January 1954: Formation of IWAI
4. June 1955: Inauguration of passenger service by CIE. This assured a clearance of 18ft at all bridges
5. November 1969: Dublin Corporation decided not to fill in the Circular Line of the Grand Canal, announcing a decision to re-position the needed sewer, meaning the canal would remain open.
6. April 1974: Ian Bath organised the first meeting of the Royal Canal Amenity Group (RCAG)
7. 1974: Pressure from IWAI produced a ministerial order directing proper headroom at Mullingar's McNeed's Bridge reconstruction.
8. 1990: Start of work on the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell Canal
9. 1993: Waterways moved to new department of heritage
10. April 1999: Waterways named as one of the north/south implementation bodies under the Good Friday agreement. Creation of Waterways Ireland.

THE FUTURE



This bridge in the middle of a field near Smithborough gives some indication of where the Ulster Canal is hiding! The IWAI has made an application under the Interreg programme for funding to begin restoration work on the canal. The ultimate dream of all waterway enthusiasts is to be able to sail from Coleraine to Limerick. The missing link is the now derelict Ulster Canal. Built in 1841 to link the Erne system and the Shannon with Lough Neagh, its success was short lived. A poor water supply, inappropriately sized locks and the imminent arrival of quicker rail and road transport sounded its death knell. Now the economic prize is a different one - tourism - to bring much needed inward investment to a forgotten corner of our land

DAYS

Smith was unable to attend, but sent a lengthy apology outlining her admiration and support for the IWAI's goals, especially the association's submission of an Interreg application to re-ropen a south-western section of the Ulster Canal.

Interreg is an EU community initiative which aims to stimulate interregional co-operation.

The group was then treated to a wonderful short 65-year-old film *Where the River Shannon flows down to the sea*, produced by Richard Hayward to compliment his book of the same name. The film was shown to us by Clifford Harkness of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and was a beautifully captured piece of history narrated by Hayward himself. We saw

a chemical portable loo, says Goggin. Flushing into a harbour or canal is just not acceptable.

Brian Cassells then took the stand and called Goggin back to present him with the Endeavour Cup (see page 5), for his outstanding contribution to the IWAI through the *Inland Waterways News* and other work.

Chief executive of Waterways Ireland John Martin gave a visual presentation, while explaining some of the work the body has carried out since its formation. He also spoke of the future, and gave his support to the Ulster Canal plans. One of the main features of his presentation was the re-opening of the Royal Canal.

'It is my intention to reopen this waterway by the end of the current



PHOTO: MICK KINAHAN

Minister Ó Quiv settles down to watch the unique archive film *Where the River Shannon flows down to the Sea*

quite the welcoming helpful people we were 20 years ago.

Also, because of the size and power of some private cruisers, wakes of up to four feet can be created, and this, says Levie, is anti-social and dangerous.

Our next treat was supplied by Dr Roger Lorenz and his wife Stephanie from the Inland Waterways Association in England. Lorenz is an old-hand with commercial barges in England, and he spoke of the benefits of water-born freight.

Lorenz showed us some figures, proving that energy-use per ton of cargo shifted by barges, or barges towing freight, is extremely low when compared to lorries or trains. He lamented the fact that with the exception of Lough Neagh, Ireland has had no water-born freight since CIE stopped it in 1960.

The day was rounded off by ex-president of the association Colin Becker, who spoke on behalf of the private boater.

Becker explained what type of person goes boating, what they do when they go boating, where they go, and the kinds of facilities they need. He also gave an estimate of the size of the private boating market, and its worth to commerce in waterways towns and villages.

Becker claims that most of the private boating sector results in a transfer of money from the large urban centres to the more rural areas of the country. With approximately 6,500 private boats on Irish inland waterways, this sector could be worth more than €40 million to the local economy of waterways communities.

On this note, vice-president Brian Cassells brought the conference to an end, and invited the delegates to a cruise on Lough Ree. ■

'Waterways play a vital role in rural development, the waterways connects urban and rural communities in a unique way'

– MINISTER FOR RURAL AND GAELTACHT AFFAIRS EAMON Ó QUIV TD

PHOTO: COURTESY OF RUTH DELANY



A previous Shannon Rally visit to Hodson Bay in 1962

the complete Jamestown arch, fishermen and farmers living on the Black Islands, and the flying boat at Foynes.

IWAI founder member Ruth Delany had an interesting take on the last 50 years. She pin-pointed 10 turning points in the history of Irish waterways, and asked 'What if they hadn't happened?' (See panel, opposite page).

Outgoing IWN editor Brian Goggin then entertained us with his narrative, a myriad of photographs, and a piece of music called Shannon Suite, in three movements – Allen, Ree and Derg! Goggin touched on some of the work carried out by the various branches of the association, and praised the members of the many voluntary work parties which have accomplished so much. However, he criticised boat owners who flush their loos into the waterways. We should either be pumping out at pump stations, or using

National Development Plan, subject to receiving the necessary planning approvals', said Martin.

'At present navigation is possible to Abbeyshrule, but the next impediment is a wall at Abbeyshrule running across the original line of the canal. Following discussions with Longford County Council, we are now going to remove this obstruction, and route the traffic back over the old bridge'.

Martin says he is looking forward to welcoming boats on the other side of the bridge, and the community is already preparing the festivities.

When Shannon Castle Line managing director Angus Levie took the stand, he spoke from the hire-boat companies point of view. He said that they do their best to train hirers to handle their boats responsibly, but there were problems with the behaviour of some private boat owners. It seems many of us are not