

# ROUTE *canal*

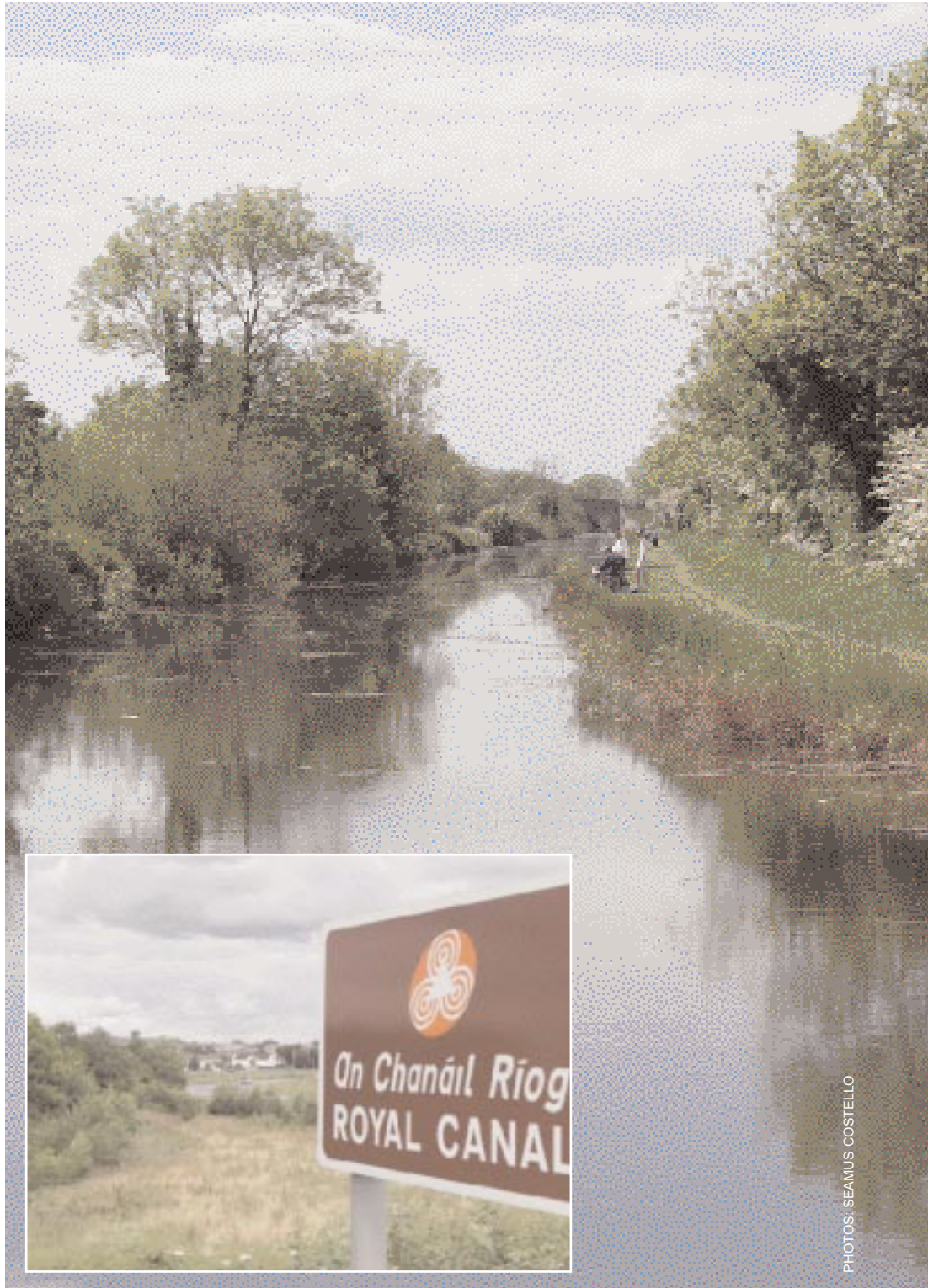
**As an autumn project, Jim Murray decided to walk all 90 miles of the Royal Canal in stages. He publishes extracts from his walking diary here in tribute to Allen O'Leary RIP**

**W**hile a start on this walk was made in late September, it wasn't early February, that I was sitting in front of a well-deserved pint in Des McPartland's hospitable establishment in Clondra. Five weeks in Australia, an elongated Christmas and suchlike can come in the way of the best-laid plans. Various people helped with the ferrying along the way – my wife Rose, Derek Whelan, Watson Mills and Pat Kilduff of the Royal Canal Amenity Group as well as Iarnrod Eireann and Bus Eireann. Thanks folks.

As the currently navigable part from Dublin to Abbeyshrule has been pretty well documented over the years, I'm concentrating on the Shannon end in this piece.

Starting with a tentative four miles daily early on, I gradually got more ambitious, with between 11 and 15 mile a day from Moyvalley onwards. Following are highlights from the Liffey to Moyvalley (Six days worth of walking):

- From Liffey to Newcomen Bridge isn't walkable: travelled it aboard *Anna Livia* on 2004 Dublin Rally. The Spencer Dock section looks like a moonscape it is so deserted; very sexy plans for it.
- The re-watered section behind Croke Park has been well done, except for barbed wire barrier sticking out into the water, to prevent high-jinks on match days.
- Loved the Brendan Behan statue, close to his old home in Russell Street.
- Stretch from Ashtown to M50 is remarkably rural, although the surrounding road traffic makes a constant hum behind the greenery.
- The new 12th Lock Hotel, at Castleknock, makes full use of its canal-side location, with a secure mooring decorated by Leisureways and private boats.
- Explored the 100 ft. path to the



PHOTOS: SEAMUS COSTELLO

# ROYAL CANAL WALK



spooky tunnel below the Ryewater Aqueduct; must have been a huge undertaking in those pick-and-shovel days.

- Beyond Kilcock and the 17th lock, as I took the wrong side towpath than recommended in the Royal Canal Guide, had to scale about eight six-bar gates.

## **DAY 7: MOYVALLEY TO THOMASTOWN (14 MILES)**

Dropped the car down to Derek and Una Whelan's Leisureways base at Thomastown, which is at the foot of Killucan flight. Rose drove me back to Moyvalley to start my walk. At the Boyne Aqueduct, there is a quite substantial harbour, known of old as Boyne Dock, which must have supported some activity in its time. The sprawling Drogheda river is quite shallow and innocuous at this stage. Break for sandwiches and pints at pub at Hill of Down. Most hospitable hostess supplied Saturday paper, full of hyperbole on Cian O'Connor in the Olympics. This section is described in guide as bleak but I found it exhilarating. Reaching Thomastown, was treated to tea and sangers by the Whelans and drove home.

## **DAY 8: THOMASTOWN TO MULLINGAR (11 MILES)**

Derek brought me from Dublin to his base, and I set off up the eight locks of the Killucan flight; a joy to travel – all the locks in great black and white nick, jetty below each lock. Had a welcome break at Mary Lynch's at McNeads Bridge; a new bridge on N4 road development has full navigable head-room. From here the canal climbs high over surrounding land,

with the three forms of transport - road, canal and rail - marching across the country about 100 yards apart.

After the downs, the canal goes through a couple of miles of rock cutting which must have been a huge task all those years ago. Not the same depth as the Deep Sinking at Clonsilla but impressive all the same. Met first backpacker (French) of trip. Heard eerie jingling of Chinese bells in wind – some steps up to a little shrine 'in memory of Derek'. The culvert at Moran's Bridge, Mullingar was a stumbling block until last couple of years – now welcoming. Mullingar Harbour is the biggest so far, including Lough Owel feeder, which I had previously explored. Bus back to Dublin.

***'Next time, I want to do it by boat!'***

## **DAY 9: MULLINGAR TO BALLYNACARGY (11 MILES)**

Leaving car at Mullingar Harbour, and starting off against wind and some rain, I walked 3.75 miles in first hour along a good towpath to Ballinea Bridge. Immediately after the bridge, the path suddenly turned into a cow-track with no reasonable passage through; worst section of trip by far. Next landmark was Shandonagh Bridge – a most impressive modern structure. Coolnahay was a picturesque harbour, with three cruisers. Towpath showed vast improvement as I reached the first of the down locks. At the 29th lock, there's a picturesque garden and extended lock-house – Mrs Hornidge, who greeted us warmly at 1999 Wilderness Rally. Although the house seemed deserted, I learned later the lady is still in residence, possibly away in England.

The canal became serpentine to match valley of Inny. As a result, the wind turned, if not in favour, at least sideways. Before long the roofs of Ballynacargy hove into view. Made my way to Watson Mill's house, where he had a fine bacon and cabbage repast ready. Much canal memorabilia around, as well as a map of the district in the 1600s, when canal wasn't even thought of.

Discussed the best way to attack the remaining 26 miles. He said he'd get a lift for me from Ballymahon, leaving a 15 mile trek for the final leg. As I arose to take my lift back to Mullingar, felt stiffness like I hadn't had for years. Torrential rain outside - lucky I had completed the day's walk in more benign conditions.

## **DAY 10: BALLYNACARGY TO BALLYMAHON (11 MILES)**

Having left the car at Watson's in Ballynacargy, I headed off in little or no wind, with towpath in good condition. Still canal reflected the small wood at 36th lock, with a well-developed lock house. A modern touch, a farmer in a four-wheel-drive moving sheep into an adjoining field, blowing his horn. At Ballymaglavy Bog, a plane from Abbeyshrule Airfield circled, making four landings and take-offs. In the middle of the bog, a most ornate stone bridge stood incongruously; no road or even path led to it – why? As I crossed the aqueduct over the wide and deep Inny, thought of Paul Kenny RIP. Inny is so adjacent for next five miles – why didn't they avail of the waterway?

As I passed the airfield and Scally's Bridge, the sun came out brightly for the walk along the neat



towpath into Abbeyshrule – the limit of navigation for some years. Called to Rustic Inn for pints and sandwiches – chat with gaffer Teddy McGoey and wife, who asked about Sean Fitz. He was pleased to confirm work had commenced on the notorious culvert the day before. I noticed a vesting order posted up on bridge, signed by Waterways Ireland's John Martin, quoting CPOs and the British Irish Agreement, dated November '04. IT REALLY IS HAPPENING! Abbeyshrule looks thriving, with ten new houses being built.

Just after Fowlands Bridge, there's a half-dam but a 10-foot gap in the middle would let a lot of boats through – 15 minutes with a shovel and the barges could proceed. Oodles of uisce still! As I approached Ballybrannigan harbour, Ballymahon, the canal widened – you could turn Moon River in it. There's a neat building and enclosure, notice says 'Erected by FCAG, FAS and OPW in 1995'. Also a 3-storey ruin, known locally as The Ticket House, waiting room for passengers. I met Pat Kilduff of RCAG and was driven back to the car at Ballynacargy.

#### **DAY 11: BALLYMAHON TO CLONDRA (15 MILES)**

Left the car and set out on final 15 miles from Longford Road Bridge. It bore a planning notice dated December 2004 for what will be probably the biggest remaining undertaking in the restoration, of the same scale as McNead's Bridge. Around Archie's Bridge, there was the reassuring sight of diggers and men at work, sculpting the banks and canal bed. In its waterless state, the Vee shape seems to

be far more pronounced, with the floor still around ten feet wide. From the 40th Lock there was more water. Pake Bridge has beautifully-proportioned new bridge beside the old, complete with most inviting mooring. All that's missing is an adjacent pub!

At Foigha Harbour, the stones looked in great condition. Just beyond the bridge, I encountered Bernie Matthews, a Royal Canal enthusiast who showed me his trailer boat 'just



waiting to sail to the Shannon'. At Mosstown Harbour, beside Keenagh, there's another culvert and a utilitarian 50s bridge, to be replaced. I noticed an RCAG container nearby – their work reflected in the pristine 41st lock, complete with stop planks. I decided time wouldn't allow a stop at Keenagh, so settled for chocolate/water break at 43rd lock.

Turning with some pleasure to the last page of the guide (hooray!), I came to the well-watered junction with the Longford Branch, reminiscent of Soldier's Island turn into Naas branch, without the island. Passed a barge hulk but couldn't make out the number to

report to Gerry Burke and the Heritage Boat mob. Due to what is described in the guide as a Swallow Hole, the bed is completely dry. According to a plaque on the lock house at the 44th, it was built in 1840 and restored by a Frances Kelly of New York in 1990, who had since passed away. Although unoccupied, it seemed in good order, with fresh curtains. Killashee village is very adjacent here.

Came across recent work on clearing what looked like a milestone. Felt around it but couldn't decipher any figures on the lime-scaled stone. The last stretch from Begnagh Bridge crosses a bog, with two substantial Bord na Mona culverts. There's a WI planning notice to reconstruct 4km of bank (July 2004 for two years). The work looks to have been completed. The final 45th lock is in probably worst condition of the whole line.

At last a bit stiff and sore, but suitably elated, I arrived at the far more familiar surroundings of Richmond Harbour, with a couple of pints and a sandwich served in the Richmond Inn by the personable Niamh, daughter of Des McPartland. Finally, I walked to Tarmonbarry and dropped into Keenans, where I was sad to hear that Joe, long-time proprietor, had recently passed away. Taxi back to Ballymahon for my car home.

Mission accomplished – 90 miles, and the guts of 160,000 steps. Next time I want to do it by boat! ■

*Jim Murray is a member IWAI, a serial rallier, reveller, guitarist, ballad singer, walker, and all-round good guy.*