

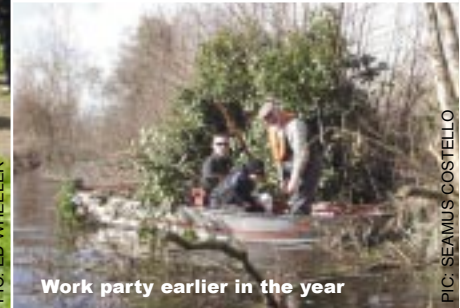
Boyne Boat Rally, 10 April, 2005: boats assemble at Oldbridge Upper for portage



PIC: ED WHEELER



PIC: SEAMUS COSTELLO



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Work party earlier in the year

RESTORING

The Dublin branch of IWAI, along with An Taisce, and many local groups, have working hard restoring sections of the Boyne Navigation Canal (BNC). Ed Wheeler explains some of the history and mechanics involved

The Boyne Navigation Canal runs through an historic and indeed prehistoric landscape, the passage graves of Newgrange, Dowth and Knowth going back around 5,000 years. The canal passes within the Newgrange Interpretative Centre. The lower section includes the Battle of the Boyne site, bringing a distinct north-south flavour. The country through which it flows is very attractive and unspoiled. The BNC has been abandoned since the 1920s.

The BNC connected Navan with the port of Drogheda and the sea. Never a commercial success, it nevertheless played an important part in the history and commercial life of County Meath. In its heyday, it helped expand the local economy by bringing the fertile lands of inland Meath closer to their markets. The main cargos were coal, grain and flour between the mills along the river and Drogheda. The system is divided into the Lower Boyne, from Drogheda to Carrickdexter lock just above Slane, and the Upper Boyne, from there to Navan.

The Boyne navigation was

conceived in the early years of the eighteenth century and work started after the completion of the Newry canal. It commenced in 1748 with the construction of a sea-lock at Oldbridge and the Lower Boyne section was completed in the 1760s, just in time for the opening of the mill at Slane owned by David Jebb, the engineer in charge of the construction of the navigation! The final section, from Slane to Navan, opened in 1800. The distance along the BNC from Drogheda to Navan is almost 19 miles. The river itself formed part of the waterway in between a series of weirs, although most of the navigation was in canal. Most of the canal stretches are on the south side of the river but several short sections were built on the opposite side. This meant a barge and its towing horse had to cross the river four times in a voyage between Drogheda and Navan. This was done by the interesting expedient of persuading the horse to board the barge and then poling it across the river, or, more likely, pulling it across with ropes which would have been left in place for the purpose. Owing to high water levels, the river could not be used in the winter months or during floods.

During the summer, it was sometimes too shallow in places. This would have reduced the commercial viability of the system. There are guard locks located at or near the upstream junctions of the canal with the river to protect against flooding. Another complication was the tidal nature of the river upstream as far as Oldbridge Upper, over three miles above Drogheda. Below the sea-lock at Oldbridge Lower, the navigation is subject to tidal rise and fall as well as river flow. This would have imposed a time window on traffic to and from Drogheda.

After a brief Edwardian revival under the chairmanship of Jamesy McCann MP, when it focused on tourism in coordination with the railways, the navigation eventually succumbed to competition from roads and railways. For the last years of its operation, it was owned by John Spicer & Co, who stopped using it in the early 1920s. An Taisce bought it from Spicers for £1 in 1969. While An Taisce owns much of the towpath and adjacent lands and cottages, some is in private ownership. However, the rights and responsibility for the entirety of the Boyne navigation rest with An Taisce.



Work party removing tree-trunk from canal



Boyne Boat Rally: Padraic Costello leads the fleet up the River to Stalleen Lower



View of Boyne River and Canal looking upstream from Roughgrange pumping station

THE BOYNE

Since then, the accessible stretches of towpath have been used by walkers and some improvements to the path have been carried out. The location of the navigation on alternate banks of the river means that the sections currently accessible are 3km from Drogheda, 1.5km from Slane and nearly 5km from Navan. The towing path is in good condition from Navan down to Broadboyne (Stackallen) Bridge. From there down to Slane, it is either impassable or not currently accessible. Below Slane, the towing path is in good condition as far as Rosnaree Lock, where the navigation then crosses to the north bank. There is no public access on the south bank below Rosnaree Lock until Roughgrange and the path is in poor condition until downstream of Newgrange. Because of the towing path being on alternate sides of the River Boyne, the provision of an unbroken path between Navan and Drogheda will require the construction of footbridges. An Taisce is currently engaged on a project to design and fund these bridges.

RESTORATION PROJECT

Recognising the experience, expertise and enthusiasm of IWAI, An Taisce formed an alliance with the Dublin Branch in 2004 to restore as much of the BNC for use as a waterway as possible, starting from the seaward end and working upstream. A local sub-

committee of the Dublin Branch of IWAI, called the Boyne Canal Action Group (BCAG) has been set up chaired by Frank Godfrey, a well-known local figure who has been twice mayor of Drogheda. A lot of the early impetus and work on this project, both before and since the alliance with IWAI, was provided by the late Robert Law of Rosnaree (see obituary in IWAI Newsletter of January, 2005). The



Mick Kinahan in conference

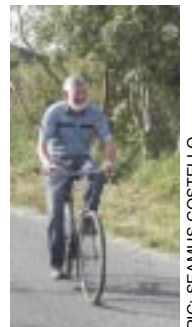
BCAG is a highly motivated enthusiastic group of people and includes Mick Kinahan (Dublin Branch Chairman), Tommy McLaughlin, Stephen Early, Seamus and Padraic Costello, Ray Carr and many more. Between them, the group has built a workbarge (raft), lent machinery, boats and other equipment, cajoled local businesses into providing materials and worked all hours in sometimes atrocious conditions to produce excellent results. Mike Egan and

Sophie Geraghty of the Oldbridge Lock Cottage have hosted meetings, provided storage facilities and Sophie is the hon. secretary of the BCAG. Little could be achieved without dedicated people such as these.

CONDITION AND RESTORATION POSSIBILITIES

From Drogheda up to the sea-lock, a distance of just over two miles, the river bed has not been recently surveyed. It appears to have adequate water from half tide or so, but would require a drag survey to check for hazardous obstructions, especially near the new M1 motorway bridge, where contractors' debris could be present. The channel at the entrance to the sea-lock is dry at LWST, so there would certainly need to be at least two hours of flood to enter the lock. The sea-lock itself is in remarkably good condition but the gates are completely rotted away and the water in the canal is impounded by a concrete dam where the upper gate used to be. There is a sluice in the dam to regulate the water level.

From here as far as Oldbridge Upper and the Horse Bridge, about a mile and a quarter, the canal has been cleared of rubbish, tree trunks and debris by IWAI and An Taisce work parties and is navigable. There is a problem with flooding, as there is no proper spillway. This means that levels



John Corrigan racing to be part of the Boyne restoration group

The SOCC Archive

IWAI member Stephen Early has been very active in the Boyne restoration project. Early is also a woodwork teacher in the local community college, and decided to set his students the task of building a boat, and launching it on the Boyne. Michaela Pentony gives us the inside track

Stephen Early and his second-year woodwork class from St Oliver's Community College in Drogheda have made a flat-bottomed boat as part of a project. A 13 ft long boat with a 5ft beam made from marine plywood, it gets its power from a pair of oars, although it can be powered by up to a 10hp engine. The students also built six paddles.

Stephen Early is no stranger to building boats, having made about ten boats in his lifetime. The students began building the boat around Halloween, 2004. It began when Mr Early became involved in the restoration of the Boyne Canal. He felt it would be nice to get the students involved in the project as many of them didn't even know the canal existed.

And he was right, talking to Mr Early, I was amazed to find out the River Boyne is a world



The blessing of the boat

heritage site, with Newgrange, the Battle of the Boyne site and Slane Castle near its banks. Also the Boyne Canal is meant to be fantastic upstream. He decided that a good way to get them involved would be to build a boat, so that they could start a boat club and set out crews to use the boat at different times.

Mr Early hopes that in setting up a boat club, it would instill a lasting interest in boats among the students, and maybe inspire them to buy or build their own boats. After many months of hard preparation and labour put in



by the second years and their teacher, the boat was built. Looking at the result of their efforts, one could not help but be impressed by the professional result and finish of the boat. Painted (also by students) in the school's colours, the name *SOCC Archive* completes the vessel, to leave something that really does catch the eye.

The boat, which was launched on Thursday 7 April, is also intended to be used by the school's science and geography departments, when they plan to research the vast wildlife on the river such as kingfishers, water hens, cranes and seals. This launch was very significant as it is the first boat officially launched into the canal since the early 1900s.

All in all, the boat cost •450 in materials to build. The worth of the boat is estimated at around •1,600. Speaking to Mr Early, it was clear to see how excited he was about the project, and he praised the students involved endlessly, describing them as 'very enthusiastic about building, launching and using the club.'

Stephen Early has poured hard work, dedication and encouraging spirit into this project, and his students. Not only did he ensure that a top quality craft was produced, he also made sure that his

students thoroughly enjoyed themselves during the project.

The launch of the *SOCC Archive* on the 7 April was described as 'truly special'. It began with the vessel being launched by deputy mayor Tommy Murphy and then being blessed by Fr Martin Carley. The boat began her maiden voyage with four students (complete with life jackets of course!) and Mr Early in tow to give directions.

Also attending the launch were school principal Mr Mahon and vice-principal Ms Donaghy, and they did not miss out on the chance to try out the new boat. The two got to work with the paddles, and the big smile on Ms Donaghy's face said how proud she and



school was of all involved.

Something that obviously gave the students involved great satisfaction while sailing in the craft, was the fact that they had built this boat themselves. This was an excellent exercise for the students – to realise that money is not always the answer to everything, and to see the rewards that hard work can reap. It should motivate students to use their skills and talents in the future. It was really a pleasure finding out about the *SOCC Archive*, and maybe, just maybe, I'll get to take a trip in it sometime! (I've since been promised by Mr Early that I will!)

Michaela Pentony is a student in St Oliver's Community College, Drogheda.

can build up to overtop the banks. This has happened in a couple of places and has caused dangerous erosion. Work parties have shored up the bank with sandbags but a long term solution requires two spillways in this section, plus some long term bank-strengthening.

There is a guard lock at Oldbridge Upper, with another concrete dam in place of the missing lock gates. From there up to the confluence with the main river, the canal is just about navigable but needs further clearance work, which is ongoing. It then enters the river and for two miles the wide and placid (in summer) waters of the River Boyne are a highway, until the lock at Stalleen Lower is reached. This marks the end of the navigable waterway at present (navigable, that is, with a portage). By removing the concrete dams at Oldbridge Lower and Oldbridge, and installing new lock gates at Oldbridge Lower, we would thereby have nearly five miles of fully navigable waterway from Drogheda. (Because Oldbridge Upper is a guard lock, with no rise and fall, we could get away with stop-logs as protection against floods). Clearly, the canal would also have to be protected with proper spillways to have its levels self-regulating and the weak sections of bank made good.

Stalleen Lower lock is in quite good condition as regards the stonework but has no lock gates. The canal is dewatered from here up to above the Newgrange Centre. Whether it would hold water if dammed at Stalleen Lower is not known, but there is no reason to suppose that it would not. Where it runs through the Visitor Centre, it has been backfilled with rubble but the OPW would have to remove that. The OPW is also willing to provide access to their car park at the Visitor Centre. This leads to the intriguing possibility of a franchise operator running a canal-based passenger service between Drogheda, the Oldbridge Battle-of-the-Boyne Visitor Centre and the Newgrange Visitor Centre. It would certainly be a most interesting and rewarding way for tourists to take in the rich history and landscape of the area.

Immediately upstream from Newgrange, the canal has been completely filled in by a local farmer to provide access to his property, the old stone bridge being too narrow and not strong enough to take modern machinery. It then has a short watered section before reaching the Drogheda Council's pumping station at

Sketch plan of
THE BOYNE NAVIGATION
DROGHEDA – NAVAN

County Meath

the construction of a bridge to service the farm.

There is a short stretch of river between Stalleen Upper and Broe Lower. Broe Lower is on the north side of the Boyne, so this is the first point where the old barges had to carry their horses across the river. Lock gates and some other work would be required at

completed to the town of Slane just below Slane Castle, providing just over 11 miles of waterway in total from Drogheda.

Slane seems to be a good target to conclude the first phase of the project. Connecting Slane and Drogheda takes in some very fine country and most of the ancient monuments of the Boyne Valley. It is also the easiest section to restore, with relatively few locks, all of which are in fairly good condition as regards the stonework.

Above Slane, the navigation crosses to the north side of the river at Carrickdexter. This section of canal was bought by the Slane Castle Estate in the 1940s. The condition of the locks and canal between there and Broadboyne (Stackallen) Bridge is very poor. Complete reconstruction of several locks and sections of canal would be required. There would also be a problem with the canal passing through Slane Castle demesne, venue for rock concerts, with issues of security, etc.

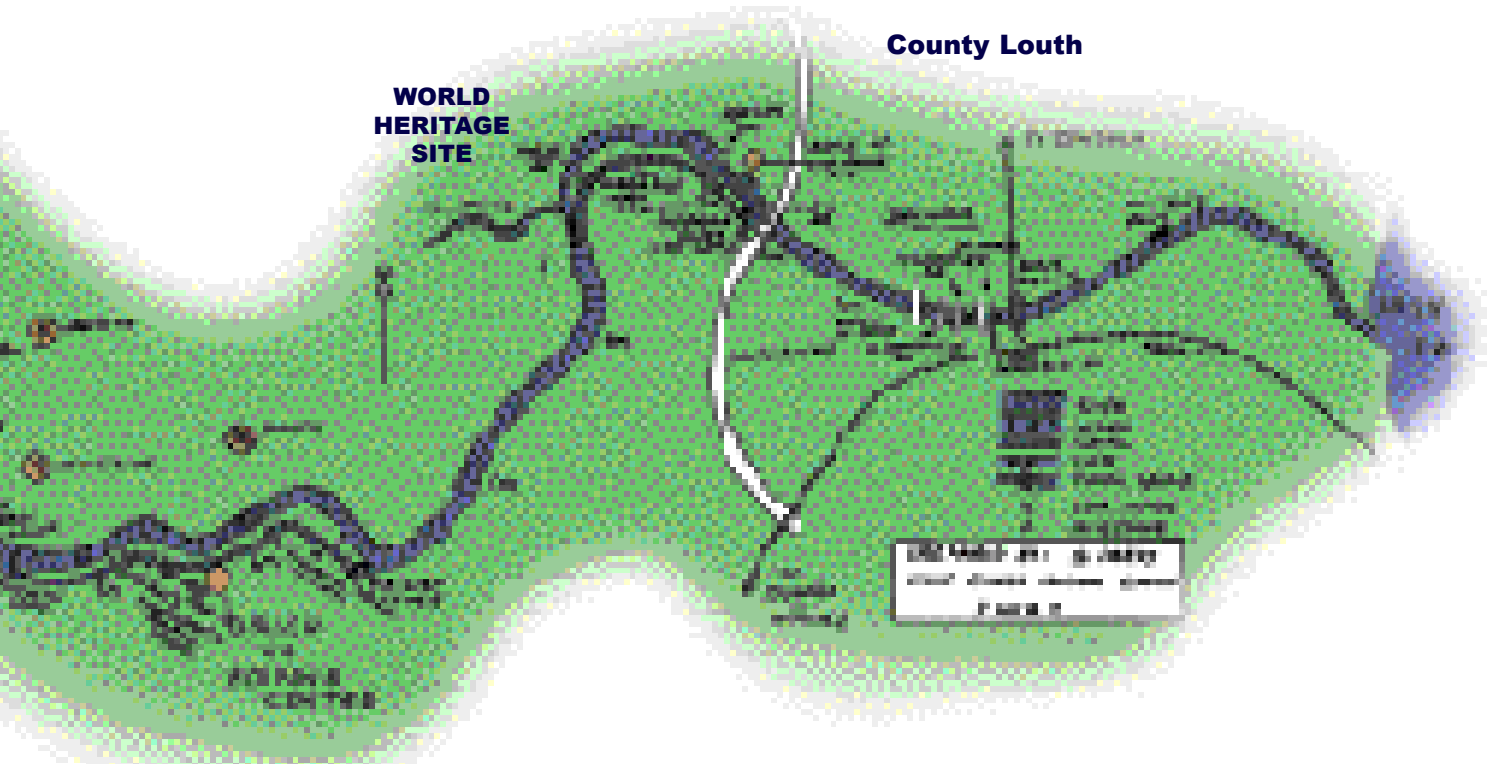
At Stackallen, the canal recommences on the south side, where it extends all the way to Navan with no further river navigation. From Broadboyne to Navan, the stonework of the locks is in fairly good condition. Some parts of the canal hold water, but from Broadboyne to above Taaffe's Lock, the banks have been damaged by machinery being used for some badly planned restoration work in the past and the canal is empty. From Rowley's lock (about 17 miles from Drogheda) as far as Somerville Bridge, the canal is in reasonable condition and holds water. However, at the Navan end, the canal has been filled in, Ruxton's lock and the terminal harbour having disappeared completely. Because of lowering of the weir here during flood



A selection of photographs from the Drogheda St Patrick's Day parade, with the IWAI and the Boyne Canal Action Group

Roughgrange, where it has been filled in again for a short distance and a building erected on top of it. However, the half mile from there up to the river exit at Stalleen Upper has been maintained in good condition by the Council in order to ensure a reliable water supply. It has also got a good spillway at the pumping station. These blockages in the canal not only prevent navigation but also restrict water supply to the section of canal below Newgrange. Hence, even to restore navigation as far as Newgrange would require at least a piped supply from farther up. To restore the canal where it has been filled in would also require

Broe Lower and stop-logs needed for both Broe Upper and Stalleen Upper in winter. The nine mile mark is reached just above Broe Upper, where there is a mile or so of river before the canal is entered again on the south side at Rosnaree (Morgan's Lock). This lock, like the others on the lower BNC, is in good condition and seems only to need new gates to become operational. However, the canal is empty between Rosnaree and Slane Bridge, so a survey would be needed to check out the condition of the banks. Probably the easiest way to find out if it will hold water is simply to block it at Rosnaree. If it does, the Lower Boyne can be



BOYNE CANAL ACTION GROUP: OLDBRIDGE SECTION

As you travel from Drogheda towards the Boyne Canal you come down from Rathmullen, past St Oliver's Community College to where is known as 'Pass'. The river is tidal at this point and spring tides still flood the road, hence the name 'Pass' (if you can). It was at this spot, and not at Oldbridge, that King William at the Battle of the Boyne, later in the day, crossed the river on a black horse which got stuck in the mud and his majesty had to be assisted ashore at Pass, having waded waist deep to the river bank.

On westward towards Oldbridge where you pass under the newly built motorway 'The Boyne Cable Bridge', then Oldbridge Concrete, where the owner helps us from time-to-time in our quest. Next we come to the locks (sea-gate) and the former Tieman's house, 'The Lock House', where very Canal-friendly people live now. Onwards, along the canal to Cardington's Gates, now in OPW ownership, where there is a fine bridge over the Canal, which was enlarged by the army in 1941, and which we call the Engineers Bridge. On then to the Obelisk Bridge which is of lattice iron, built by Grendon's foundry in Drogheda and placed in position in 1869. It superseded a wooden bridge which was built at the ford sometime after the Battle of the Boyne. Just north of the bridge stands the remains of a tall tapering stone monument commemorating King Billy's victory which according to history was a square plinth of 6m and was about 45m high. It was raised in 1736, an Obelisk which gives the place its name. For 187 years the monument was sketched and later photographed and used in tourist brochures until it was blown up in 1923. The site is covered in ivy today.

On west now, travelling the tow-path we head into the deep beauty of the Boyne Valley. Along the Boyne Canal to what we call the Horse Bridge at upper Oldbridge, which is the site of a guard lock and has a concrete wall replacing the Lock Gates which was placed in 1932. We hope to remove this wall shortly – summer 2005. Another few hundred metres the first part of the Canal ends and enters the River Boyne in which you can navigate another 2km reaching the Locks at Staleen Lower.

From the Lock House to Oldbridge Upper has been the site of our work parties since last September 2004, and although a lot more work has to be carried out on the Oldbridge stretch, the Boyne Canal is now navigable in small boats. So on with the work!

Stephen Early



PIC: MICK KINAHAN



PIC: ED WHEELER

Above: Horsebridge on the Boyne Canal, and left: An object d'art removed from the Boyne Canal at Oldbridge

relief works by OPW in the 1980s, there would probably be difficulties with water supply there.

From the foregoing, it will be seen that the project of restoring the Upper Boyne would require very substantial resources. However, such is the enthusiasm for inland waterways now that anything may be possible. There has even been a suggestion from a retired engineer, Jimmy Martin, now 92 years of age, that the navigation could quite easily be extended up past Trim (the intended destination of the original planners back in the eighteenth century) to connect with the Royal Canal at the Boyne Aqueduct by the provision of a relatively small number of weirs and bypass locks.

Both An Taisce and IWAI are enthusiastic and committed to this project. Much can be achieved by voluntary labour but funding or sponsorship is essential for the purchase of lock gates and other items and for civil engineering work. The project has the support of local authorities, elected representatives and the general public and we predict that very soon, canal boats will once again be plying the Boyne Navigation.

There was an IWAI boat rally on the BNC on 10 April, there was a boat visit on 15 May as part of the Dublin Rally, and there will be a public rally there on 15 August. For further information, check out the website www.boynenavigation.com. ■

Ed Wheeler is chairman of the Meath Association of An Taisce, and has been involved with the Boyne navigation for several years. He is also a member of IWAI and of the Boyne Canal Action Group.