

the INTEGRAT

Brian Cassells took up the office of president of the IWAI at the AGM last March. Nuala Redmond caught up with him recently to ask him a bit about himself, his boating, and his ideas for the future

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN BOATS OR THE WATERWAYS?

I was born on the shores of Lough Neagh, the youngest of a family of three, my parents did not have a boat, indeed my mother was petrified of her children going anywhere near water! I was fascinated by the local fishermen who fished for eels and pollen in their traditional Lough Neagh fishing boats. Another traditional boat was the cot, a small 12-foot flat-bottomed wooden boat. I also remember the sand barges operating from a sand quay close to my home. The sand boats used were most likely M boats brought from the Grand Canal, and barges originally constructed for the Newry and Lagan Canals.

TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY, DO THEY SHARE YOUR LOVE OF THE WATERWAYS?

I am married to Maree who was born in Belfast with no interest in boats at all, other than the little pleasure ones hired from Pickie Pool in Bangor, Co Down! I have two daughters who live and work in London, but who love to get home, and really enjoy boating on the Erne, especially when it involves sailing to one of the lakeside restaurants. My first boat was a Lough Neagh fishing boat, then there was a period when boating had to take a back seat, and eventually we bought a Seamaster 27 and kept it for many years at Castle Archdale Country Park on Lower Lough Erne.

WHEN WAS YOUR FIRST WATERY VENTURE SOUTH OF THE BORDER?

My first boating trip south was the year the Shannon-Erne Waterway opened, when we sailed to Carrick-on-Shannon. This is an area I always enjoy visiting, the vibrant atmosphere, the way the town draws its inspiration from the waterway, and was my introduction to boating on 'the mighty Shannon'.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN ON THE IWAI COUNCIL?

I first represented the Northern Ireland branch (now the Erne branch) on council about 12 years ago. I remember travelling down with the Belturbet contingent and have many happy memories of great friends and great craic! I will never forget the warm welcome I received, especially at the AGM.

WHAT PROJECTS HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED WITH IN THAT TIME, AND WHAT MIGHT YOU CALL YOUR OWN PET PROJECTS?

I have always had a love for local history, and spent many years as secretary of the local historical society, hence my interest in the historical aspect of the waterways. The history of canals has always held a particular fascination. When I joined the association nearly 20 years ago, the big project was the re-opening of the Shannon-Erne Waterway, and when success was achieved, the next major project was to complete 'the missing link', and re-open the Ulster Canal.

From the outset, this was a project I really felt passionate about. Early meetings were held in Dungannon, Armagh and Benburb, and eventually the IWAI took on a more pro-active role in leading the project. I have met many politicians, north and south, all are supportive, yet we see little progress on the ground. This is the ideal cross-border project, after all a piece of water that could stimulate the local border tourist economy threatens no-one.

YOU ARE A RETIRED TEACHER, WHAT QUALITIES DO YOU BRING FROM THAT PROFESSION TO THIS PRESIDENCY?

The main reason I enjoyed teaching was children. I could relate to them, and it was a humbling experience to be trusted with looking after them, and trying to instill and

impart knowledge to them. Ambition caused me to be in a leadership role and I spent 22 years as headmaster. I hope I can bring some-thing of that experience of leadership, and being part of a team, to IWAI.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO WHEN YOU'RE NOT INVOLVED IN BOATING OR IWAI ACTIVITIES?

I confess I have little free time, as IWAI takes up most evenings, and the odd day as well. I like to read, I collect books and I enjoy listening to music.

DO YOU USE THE WATERWAYS EMAIL-BASED CHATLINE?

I am one of the silent majority on this one, I rarely contribute, though I thoroughly enjoy it and I learn so much from it.

WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF IT?

I personally feel it is an excellent forum, and one which the association should use to disseminate information. At the last executive meeting, we decided to make much more use to the internet to get information to the membership more quickly, hopefully you will see the fruits of this in the not too distant future.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS BEING YOUR PRIMARY OBJECTIVES FOR THE ASSOCIATION OVER THE TIME OF YOUR PRESIDENCY?

I feel the association has been in good hands for many, many years. We have begun to modernise the association to create an organisation to better serve the membership in this new millennium. Often we have made decisions, but failed to tell the membership of those decisions, and also failed to explain why a change was being made.

We must improve communication as a priority. All the membership has

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realised the value of Inland Waterways News (IWN) as one of the strengths of the association. I'm delighted to see this continually improve, and know how it is looked forward to and enjoyed by all.

I do feel we need to move on as an association, that is why I am supportive of the decision to appoint a project officer. This is not someone to take over the way the association is run – that must continue on a voluntary basis, this person should be actively involved with branches, seeking grant aid for projects. There is funding available from a variety of sources that we could tap into, this is an area where I feel we lack expertise.

I am a great believer in self-help – in work parties, and I know of what has, and is, being achieved on the restoration of the four pots, and the sterling work on the Boyne navigation. I realise there is much more going on, and more progress is needed, especially in projects which are just too daunting for the association.

THERE ARE OVER 5,000 REGISTERED BOATS ON OUR WATERWAYS, THE OWNERS OF WHICH ARE ALL IDEAL IWAI MEMBERS, AND YET ONLY ABOUT 30% OF THEM ARE. WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

To be honest, I feel it is only recently that those in authority have realised we are the voice of the inland waterway user, for far too long the hirers were seen as the major revenue earner, something that is not actually the case. As a result, we are now being recognised for the contribution we make and for the knowledge and experience we have, hence the willingness of state bodies or local community groups to consult more and more with the association. We must grow the membership dramatically, it needs to double to raise our profile, and we need to do it now.

WHAT DO YOU INTEND TO DO ABOUT IT?

I have endeavoured to get a membership recruitment drive going, asking every member to get at least one new member this year. All



too soon we will be confronted with changes to the bye-laws and the introduction of charging, how can we claim to be the negotiator if we don't represent the majority of users? This is the challenge for each member, please do something about it!

THERE ARE NOW 17 BRANCHES ACROSS THE ISLAND, DO YOU EVER SEE A DAY WHEN THERE WILL BE A CAP ON THE NUMBER OF BRANCHES THE ASSOCIATION WILL ALLOW?

I do not see any immediate need to cap the number of branches. We are now approaching the ideal where we have a presence on each waterway, that is the ideal scenario. Local branches should be encouraged to liaise to ensure dates don't clash. For years Northern Ireland was under-represented, but with the new branches coming on stream, I look forward to each playing their part in the association.

JUMP FORWARD TO THE YEAR 2050, WHAT IS YOUR VISION OF OUR WATERWAYS?

Firstly I look forward to a joined up, integrated and environmentally-friendly network, where it is possible to sail in unpolluted waters from Coleraine to Belfast, Newry, Enniskillen, and onwards to the Shannon, Grand

Canal, Royal Canal and Barrow. I'd like to see the various small communities that were once linked to the network form part of the system again, and to see towns and villages turn their faces to the waterways and take pride in our wonderful natural resource.

WHAT KIND OF FACILITIES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE IN 2050?

Obviously we'd all like more jetty space, some in quiet, out-of-the-way places, and some mooring buoys in sheltered bays on the lakes. Towns too have their appeal for some boaters so adequate serviced moorings are essential. By then we will all be using wireless networks for our laptops, so I reckon we need adequate telecommunications coverage to satisfy the computer buffs! Being selfish, I'd like some nice waterside restaurants serving delicious food, though by 2050, I'll not be around to enjoy them!

HAVE YOU ANY NEW 'PIPE-DREAM' IDEAS?

Yes, space for all to pursue and enjoy whatever boat the individual wishes to choose, but with a proviso, that those in fast cruisers and power boats have respect and tolerance for all who just want to potter about. It's not a pipe dream, it's just that I do wish folk would slow down and take their time. Watch your wash! ■

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