

Highways TO leisureways

This year's IWAI conference theme was *Highways to leisureways*, and focused on the development of Ireland's waterways, from their initial role as highways of commerce to today's role providing leisure and enjoyment. Nuala Redmond reports

The day was clear, sharp and blue, and from the conference room in Oxford Discovery Centre, Craigavon,, we could see amazing beauty of Lough Neagh. The conference was kicked off by Councillor George Savage, Mayor of Craigavon Borough. And then, with IWAI President Brian Cassells as our host, we settled down to the multi-media presentations from the day's speakers.

First up was Patricia Gilbert from Ferguson McIlveen, an award winning, multi-disciplinary, design consultancy that has successfully completed a number of Waterways Projects in Northern Ireland. They had recently completed a study of Lough Derg, and she shared her findings with the delegates. They had been asked to produce a masterplan with a list of interventions and facilities, that reflected market needs and improved the interactivity between land and water users. Sometimes this came to something as simple as cutting hedges and trees, allowing visibility of the water from the land.

Waterways Ireland's Regional Manager John McKeown spoke of a decade restoring the Royal Canal. He showed us slides of work to date, told us of the breakthrough at Abbeyshrule, and assured us that work is now near completion. When exactly? Well, he didn't say for sure it would be 2007, but then he didn't say it wouldn't be either!

IWAI's own Colin Becker gave a talk on the Ulster Canal project. He outlined the position which the Ulster Canal could play in our waterways network in the future, linking the Bann and Lough Neagh to the connected Erne, Shannon, Barrow, and the Grand and Royal Canal navigations. The Ulster Canal was



Conference delegates take a trip on Lough Neagh during lunchtime



Conference organiser Greg Whelan, author Ruth Heard, IWAI President Brian Cassells, Councillor George Savage and Craigavon's Ross Miller



Councillor George Savage, Mayor of Craigavon Borough, gives a speech at the conference dinner



Lough Derg's degree of accessibility to land, part of a study undertaken by Ferguson McIlveen



Before and after: work on the Royal



Conference delegates

A vision of the future of the Ulster Canal



Brian Cassells thanks all for coming at the conference dinner

opened in 1841, and up until this, the rough dimension of the locks on the the inland waterways allowed the passage a boat measuring 62 ft by 13 ft 3ins. Unfortunately, but for some unknown reason, a decision was taken to make the Ulster Canal locks over a foot narrower at 12ft wide, and in one case 11ft 8 inches These small locks, together with an inadequate water supply and years of neglect, meant that the canal was finally closed in 1931.

‘The IWAI’s vision for the Ulster Canal is fairly simple’, said Colin. ‘We want a working waterway restoring the missing link in our network of waterways, providing an

Work-party on the Boyne



amenity for locals and visitors alike, and acting as a catalyst for economic activity of one sort or another. A fully-restored navigation linking Lough Neagh to the connected network providing facilities and amenities for waterways enthusiasts and local communities and a catalyst for economic activity in the region. Obviously it has benefits for IWAI members. We want to extend the cruising network for the boating community by linking the two systems.’

We had words from Eileen McKeever, Thames Waterway Manager, on their campaign to regenerate the Thames, and there were many relevant lessons to be learned. We learned how a county or indeed country can benefit from an attractive and used waterway.

IWAI’s Michael Kinahan and Ed Wheeler, An Taisce brought us up to speed on the Boyne Canal, stating that it is their aim to restore as much of the navigation as possible for public use. The future should see a waterbus bringing tourists to ancient monuments and the site of the Battle of the Boyne.

Former Lord Mayor of Dublin City Council Michael Conaghan spoke of Dublin City’s canals and their position in urban re-development,



Greg Whelan introduces the conference



Restoration work on the Royal

drawing a picture of the ’70s and ’80s when the canal banks in Dublin were seedy, dangerous places. Much of that has changed now, with the redevelopment of the docklands and other city places.

A common link with all the speakers though the day seemed to be the effect which a regenerated, working waterway has on the economy of the areas it passes through. A waterway which is fulfilling its potential brings prosperity, aesthetics and leisure possibilities to people’s lives.