

## Bridgetown Canal History

The interesting Bridgetown Canal was constructed between 1850 & 1853, inspired and necessitated by the damming of the Cull Bank on the south coast of county Wexford bordering the Atlantic Ocean, thus closing access of the rivers of the area. Aspects of the story have been covered in the past by contributors to the *Kilmore Journal* including Richard Roche and John Power, and to the Rathangan records by Richard Lambert and Paddy Redmond. It seemed a subject worthy of full investigation.

In 1844 a report was published entitled *Proposed Drainage of the flooded lands in the district of Ballyteigue*. It is held in the library of the Office of Public Works and is a very comprehensive document. An attached Schedule, to which one of the signatories is Richard Griffith (better known for his Valuations and Chronicles) give precise detail as to “cutting and sinking a navigable Canal from tideway at Blackstone to the Village of Bridgetown”. The description of this waterway differs from the one used the later schedule of 1888 where the description is “a new main channel, cut for a length of about two statute miles from Killag River Bridge to the outlet at level of sea; low water springs at Crossfarnoge, Kilmore.” This article is confined to the earlier “navigable canal”

The Canal served the community of Bridgetown itself and also that of Duncormick. It is five miles in length. While initially part of an extensive drainage and reclamation scheme (it forks and becomes the Ballyteigue branch in one direction, and the Bridgetown Canal in the other) it was subsequently used as a transport system. Traffic was still plentiful in 1913 and the canal remained in use up to the 1940s. In the 1830s, the village of Duncormick had a population of about 250 and a considerable trade was carried on in slate, coal, limestone and culm from South Wales. This detail is included in the *1837 Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* by Lewis. Vessels of 100 tons burden could cross the bar, (the sandbar between open sea and the inner water), and lie securely in the Lough. This was no longer possible once the lake of Ballyteigue, or Lough Tay, was drained (bringing 1630 acres into use as farmland, hence the decision to construct the canal. The Lough area had been known locally as the “Little Say” and the entrance was always referred to as the Bar of Lough, which term is still mentioned in the record of the OPW, which also makes reference to the “Coal Yards at Lough, Lacken and Duncormick”. Richard Lambert, in his book on Rathangan, cites evidence from 1844 given by Mr Joshua Lett, Officer of the Coastguards and Customs at the Bar-O-Lough to the effect that 47 ships had entered the Lough between March and September of that year.

In the Rathangan Journal of 1979 is a recorded conversation with Paddy Redmond, then the oldest man living in the area, and one who lived all his life. He remembered two of the ships, two-masted schooners about 80 ft long, which sailed into the area until 1913, and gave a vivid account of the importance of water transport to the area when he said “the cargoes could be anything; sometimes they took potatoes or grain to Wales and brought “culm” a kind of coal, back with them.... The brick for building the railway bridge at the Mill O’Rags came into Duncormick by lighter after having off-loaded from a larger vessel at Lough”

The canal facilitated the carriage of seaweed and sand towards Bridgetown, improved the falls to two water-mills, provided navigation for small vessels trading principally in coal and acted as an arterial drain for more than a thousand further acres, which had

been subject to flooding. Mr Rowe land owner at Ballycross, was the instigator of the scheme, which in the first instance was conceived as a relief measure for the poor, who were being affected by the famines of the early and mid eighteenth centuries. Possibly due to this among other factors the population of Kilmore actually increase during the famine years.

The report of the commissioners of Public Works refers to the building “Salt Bridge, Liffey Bridge, Redmoor Bridge, Yoletown Bridge.... erecting sluices, cutting a navigable branch canal at Pembrokestown and at Newhouse”. It further describes building a “Quay at the Village of Bridgetown” and “ Making two inclined loading and Landing Slips in canal banks, one at Gibberpatrick and one at Sheephouse.”

John Power has given details from folk memory of the building of the canal. In explaining the background, he states that there were strong objections to the drainage scheme for the area, from fishermen, from landowners and from merchants who used the Lough commercially. Eventually “the job started under the guidance of the Board of Public Works. The drainage plan entailed: (1) the building of a wall with four sluice doors across the Lough at the Cull; (2) The excavation of a canal to Bridgetown to facilitate the merchants and to take land water from the Mayglass-Bridgetown area; (3) a bridge to connect Ballyburn to Killag, known later as the Big Bridge.” Local knowledge confirms details in the Public Works documents that on the canal to Bridgetown four discharge platforms (Quays) were erected at Seafield, Redmoor, Yoletown and Bridgetown, known locally as New Quay. The work finished in 1853, and Paddy Duffin was appointed caretaker at the Cull. His work entailed the opening of the sluice doors on the falling tide and keeping the doors free of seaweed.

Historian Dick Roche in his article in the Kilmore Journal 1976/77 gives some details on the labour force engaged in the scheme. “Thousands of men were employed and got three pence and one pound of maize a day as pay. The maize was distributed at a store where now stands the residence of Mr Michael Walsh. Men walked up to twelve miles to work on the drainage scheme, walking home again after work”

A road tour of the area, criss-crossing the Bridgetown canal over the little bridges, leaves a striking impression of the solidity, the design and the picturesque nature of the stone bridges, one which is a “skew” bridge, and requires a very particular skill in design and construction, the blocks being matched but non-radial. The bridge makes a particularly interesting study when viewed from a boat underneath the arch. During a search for information as to who built these bridges, suggestions came from Michael Curran, model railways enthusiast who confirmed that the art of bridge-building was well established before the advent of railways” and felt that early engineers may have passed on their expertise to builders around the country. A further search, through Ruth Delaney’s book on Irelands inland waterways drew attention to the engineer William Chapman, who had come to Ireland in the late eighteenth century as an agent for Boulton and Watt steam engines, and who stayed in Ireland and make a career in canal engineering. Construction of a typical hump-backed canal bridge to take roads up over the canal, realigning but not raising the approaches, was a straight forward business, but crossing at an angle presented problems. Chapman was the first to build skew hump-backed bridges in these islands. The road bridges over the Bridgetown canal are made from cut limestone, with elegantly shaped domed cap stones as well as sloped rectangular slabs. Specialised books on Ireland’s stone bridges have included photographs of this area. The architect Patrick Shaffrey, in referring to canal bridges

remarked, “The bridges were built mainly in stone - usually the local stone for smaller bridges- and constructed with sensitivity and the sturdiness of a technique which has been refined through generations of use.”

The term “generations of use” could well be applied to the Bridgetown canal itself. After being a busy and valuable waterway for nearly ninety years, it did not quiet fall out of use in 1940. Amongst the information provided by many helpful people about this transport system, is the tale that to this day it is the chosen route of one local farmer who travels by boat to enjoy his pint in a Duncormick pub.

Sources: Office of public Works, Samuel Lewis *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, *Rathangan Journal* 1979, *Rathangan a County Wexford Parish*, Lambert 1995, *Kilmore Parish Journal* 1975/76, 1976/77, *Irelands Inland waterways* Delaney, *Irish stone Bridges* O’Keefe/Simington, *Across Deep Waters – Bridges of Ireland*, Barry, *Irish Countryside Buildings* Shaffrey. Conversations with local historians including the late, great Jack Devereux

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January 1999