

An Epic Solo Voyage: Stage 2

By Chevalier Joe Tiernan KCHS

The South Shannon – from Rooskey, County Roscommon, to Parteen, near Limerick City, and return, June 2012

When I was growing up, our family farm adjoined the Kilglass lakes, a tributary lake system accessible from the River Shannon. Consequently, all my young life, I observed boats and always intended to own a cruiser.

My first experience was hiring a cruiser from Breffni Cruisers based in Rooskey in August 1971, the year Mary and I were married. We cruised the Northern part of the River Shannon on that memorable first trip.

Later, I had a new 26ft cruiser built in Malahide in 1974 and used it on the River Shannon until 1982. That year, I took delivery of a new Princess 30DS cruiser which I had built by Marine Projects in Plymouth, England, and which I still have and continue to use. In August 1983, our family cruised from Rooskey to Ardnacrusha and back, over a 15 day period meeting many great characters like Eamon Bodkin now RIP, Philip Sharkey RIP, Shields RIP, the Kavanaghs & Brendan Lyons in Dromineer but from Dublin; Brendan now keeps his boat “Lotto” near me in Rooskey. We spent many weeks of eventful cruising through the years, especially around the Boyle River and Lough Key.

In July 2010, I had single-handedly navigated the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell canals, Upper and Lower Lough Erin, including going into Lough Allan. That journey involved going through a total of 40 locks single-handedly. It was an epic trip.

Day 1: Monday, 25th June 2012 - my voyage south begins

It had always been my intention to cruise south again and on Monday, 25th June 2012 I set out to cruise the length of the Shannon from my house at least as far as Parteen, near Limerick City. This is my recollection of my journey. I set out alone, casting off at 10:19 a.m.

12:15 p.m. Emer, the lockkeeper at the time in Rooskey, instead of Tom McGarry who is the permanent lockkeeper, passed me through the lock.

Afterwards, I had lunch lying at anchor in Lough Forbes. From here I called Martin Farrell, he stating that he was walking his dog (Bubbles) in Rosslare. I made a number of other phone calls and then cruised on to Termonbarry where Liam Cox is the lockkeeper.

Termonbarry is home to just over 500 people. Navigation through this lock is tricky due to the presence of a weir to the left of the lock. The weir is the second highest on the Shannon, next to Parteen. At Termonbarry lock there is a narrow channel to the eastern side of the river, which leads to Richmond Harbour, the terminus of the Royal Canal via the Cloondara

Canal. The picturesque stone lining of the Cloondara Canal is a remnant of the original works to improve the navigation by Engineer Thomas Omer in 1760 and his lock house still stands by the bridge. The construction of the Royal Canal, which began in 1790, took 27 years to complete. It was officially closed to navigation in 1961. People campaigned for over 30 years for the re-opening of the canal and with the aid of the Inland Waterways, local authorities and the Heritage Boat Association, works on the Royal Canal finished in September 2010, making it possible to navigate from the Shannon to Dublin again.

At Termonbarry, I was pleased to observe the “Maggie Pepper” barge which I had last seen in Enniskillen in July 2010. I also spoke to two FAS workers, one of them being a brother of Counsellor Tom Crosbie. This man told me that the Annual General Meeting of Roscommon County Council was taking place that very afternoon and that his brother Tom was a candidate for Mayor of Roscommon i.e. Chairman of the Council. I advised him that seventy years ago to the week, my father-in-law, the late John J. Meighan, was elected Chairman of Roscommon County Council on his first day attending. Afterwards I learned that Tom Crosbie’s name was pulled out of a hat and he was declared Mayor.

I cruised on to Lanesborough intending on overnighting there. In the distance to the west, I could see the slopes of Slieve Bawn, which is 262 metres at the highest peak. I passed under the Bord na Mona railway bridge approaching Lanesborough and under the road bridge which links Lanesborough in Co. Longford with Ballyleague, its twin, in Co. Roscommon on the west bank of the river.

There is an ESB power station, here on the Co. Longford side of the river, which is considered an ‘eyesore’, but fisherman might not agree. It produces a hot water stretch that fish love and so fisherman travel here from all over Europe to fish these warm waters. There are great facilities for them, such as over 60 fishing stands including some that are special needs friendly.

The Anglo Normans recognized how important Lanesborough was as a fording point, and occupied it in the thirteenth century with families such as the Delacies, Demariscos and the Derduns. The name “Lanesborough” comes from Sir George Lane, to whom the land was granted during the restoration under Charles the Second. Sir George was responsible for a lot of the development of these twin towns, including the building of the original bridge that connected them in 1667. The current bridge was erected by the Shannon Commissioners in 1840. I overnighted on the new jetties south of the bridge on the Roscommon side, and met Paul Mason from Mullingar, a friend of Michael Lenehan, my first cousin, who had previously kept his boat at the Albert Lock. On a Carrick Craft Cruiser, I met Paddy McMahon from Raheny and his wife, Urike, who is German. My family and I attended Mass in Lanesborough on Sunday, July 31st, 1983, and afterwards cruised into Hodson Bay.

Day 2: Tuesday, 26th June - our 41st Wedding Anniversary

06:00 a.m. Awake, and it was raining.

08:00 a.m. I did an engine check. I then discovered that I had no cups on board for tea, and had to use a glass instead! I got the Irish Independent newspaper, and checked the price of a cylinder of gas. This cost €33.50, as against €24.50 in Carrick on Shannon.

11:15 a.m. Cast off, rain had stopped. As the river flows south from Lanesborough the channel widens into an almost circular bay before narrowing again. Lough Ree is the third largest lake in the Republic of Ireland and the second largest of the Shannon lakes. It is 26 km long and varies from 1.5 km to 10 km in width. The lake lies where the Counties of Longford, Westmeath and Roscommon meet and is shown on Ptolemy's second century map of Ireland. "Lough Rea" possibly means 'Lake of the Kings', but who these kings were is not known. Harry Rice notes in his book, "Thanks for the Memory", that the kings could be one of seven kings called 'John who ruled at Carlan' on the Connaught shore.

Most of the lake is less than 10 metres deep, but there is a series of deep trenches running from North to South, where the depth is up to 36 metres. Before long, I passed the first of Lough Rea's fifty-two islands,

1:30 p.m. Tied up at Lecarrow Harbour and had lunch. I met Matthew Parks of the Natural History Museum who lives in Cabra, Dublin and Brian Meehan, a Consultant, living in Navan, both doing a survey of National Monuments in Co. Roscommon. I had a long very interesting chat with both and explained to them that I had received a letter from Dr. Pat Wallace, the Director of the Natural Museum, dating the Giant Irish Deer antlers which now take pride of place in our hallway on the wall at Annavale Manor as being over 12,000 years old! I had found these when we were excavating the Manor harbour in 1985.

Along the River Shannon are many wild Mink, non-native to Ireland. Mink were brought to Ireland in the 1950s for breeding in fur farms, and the current population along the waterway are descendants of escapees from these farms. They are normally found near water where they prey on water birds and fish. They pose a serious threat to ground nesting birds and other native Irish species.

Lecarrow is a small village with a newly refurbished public harbour. It is accessible via the 1.5 km Lecarrow Canal which was built in 1840 to transport stone from the local quarry to Athlone. There the stone was used to construct the bridge, weir, lock, and quay. After falling into disrepair, the canal was eventually dredged in the 1960s. The current watermill at Lecarrow is one of 12 watermills located around the lake. This stands just across the road from the Harbour. The millwheel is long gone, but it is possible to get close enough to see where it would have hung. The busy waters of the millrace pass under the road and flow down a tree-lined channel to join the Lecarrow canal at the top of the Harbour.

It is a short journey around the shore to St. John's Wood, a safe harbour on the Rinndoon peninsula, where boaters must drop anchor and row ashore. At 330 acres, St. John's Wood is the largest and most natural woodland in the midlands. Rinndoon was once an Anglo Norman town with a defensive wall; the town was home to up to 1,000 people, and was protected by a wall at the neck of the peninsula. There is a cemetery which has one of the oldest dated graves (1539) in Ireland.

3:15 p.m. Cast off for the River Inny, tying up, at 6:30 p.m. for the night to the bank, with one Emerald Star Boat and six people tied up on the other side. There, I cooked dinner and retired at 10:00 p.m. The Inny joins Lough Ree at Inny Bay on the eastern shore of Lough Ree. It is easy to find and well marked.

Inch Bofin and (the island of the white cow) was the site of the earliest Christian settlement on Lough Ree. St. Rioch, the son of St. Patrick's sister, Darerca, founded a monastery on the island in A.D. 450. On the southern tip of Saints Island; this is joined to the mainland by a causeway. The Island is home to the remains of a medieval hall house, some ecclesiastical remains, a 13th century Augustinian Priory, a church and a graveyard. Nearby, is a little townland with the famous name of Bethlehem, an area inhabited by only a few families and it owes its name to the nuns of the Order of the Poor Clares.

In the seventeenth century the Roman Catholic majority in Ireland were suppressed by a set of Penal Laws, enacted by the Irish Parliament after that Parliament dishonoured the Treaty of Limerick. These Penal Laws were designed to disenfranchise the Catholic majority. During a brief lull in the enforcement of the laws, a small group of Catholic girls decided to set up the first house of religion for women in the Irish Nation. This enclosed convent of the Poor Clares was founded on Merchants Quay in Dublin, but the presence of the convent was soon discovered and the nuns' were banished. The Mother Abbess, Cecily Dillon, took the nuns west to her family lands on the remote eastern shores of Lough Ree, calling their new sanctuary 'Bethlehem'. Life in Bethlehem was simple, yet harsh; the nuns did not wear shoes, and kept a strict prayer regime and vow of silence. At its peak, the convent was home to 60 women taking on the life of poverty voluntarily. The nuns finally had to flee their sanctuary in Bethlehem after the siege of Athlone in June 1691, when marauding English troops were at large in the surrounding countryside. The nuns fled across the lake to safety and the soldiers destroyed the convent.

There are many dangerous rock shoals on Lough Ree which add to the hazards of navigating such a large body of water and indeed pose a great threat to the unobservant boater, Napper Rocks being among them. However, not all are named or marked! The Iskeraulin shoal in the centre of the lake between St. John's Wood and Efleet Bay is possibly the most treacherous. The weather is another danger to the water-based traveller on Lough Ree, as it can be highly changeable with very strong winds. It is advisable for boats to travel in pairs, and to pay close heed to the markers and warnings on the charts. On the eastern shore of the mainland is Inchmore.

Portlick Castle sits on the Whinny Peninsula, now owned by the Hade family, who are electrical contractors in Dublin, and who originating from Carlow. [Indeed Brendan Hade wired the first houses I built in 1968 and the many thousands of homes I built thereafter, all of them wired by Hade and his family, his son, Cormac Hade continues to look after all our work and alarms and is a great friend.] Portlick Castle was built by the Dillon family under a charter of King John in 1185. The castle is supposedly the only one in Ireland to be in continuous use as a residence. The Dillons were supporters of King James II, and when he was defeated by William of Orange, the Castle was confiscated and granted to one of William's supporters, Thomas Keightly. Within seven years the castle had been sold to the Smyth family in whose hands it remained until the 1950's. Portlick translates to 'the bank of the flagstone', which is thought to refer to a flagstone on the bank that local women used for washing clothes. On the River Inny, there is only bank mooring with care. I cruised up as far as possible to the Red Bridge which is the limit of the navigation on the Inny. The Inny River is an average of four metres deep. It rained most of the day and night.

Day 3: Wednesday, 27th June

07:00 a.m. Awake

9:30 a.m. Rain stopped.

10:30 a.m. Cast off, later passing Hare island where the largest Viking gold hoard in Europe was discovered around 1802. Hare Island is only a short distance from the harbour area at Coosan. Coosan is a lovely spot with the new and impressive children's playground, a swimming area, plenty of mooring and a pub. It is also the gateway to the "Inner Lakes", which are accessed between Killinure and Coosan Point. The Inner Lakes are Coosan, Killinure and Ballykeeran. Almost directly across from Coosan Point, on the western side of Lough Ree, sits Hodson Bay.

1:00 p.m. I tie up in Quigley's Marina and met a Swiss couple, an Austrian couple and Dave Mongey from Naas who is in the communications business. He gave me the Irish Times paper. I met Pdraig O'Boyle who is 15 years working at Quigley's Marina and Michael, a German working there 12 years.

6:00 p.m. Cooked dinner

7:00 p.m. Walked out the road past the Killinure chalets where a large Barbeque was underway. I went in and discovered that 30 lady Teachers from Athlone town were having a big night. Spoke to many of them where they were eating the largest beef steaks I have ever seen, together with many other types of meat and vegetables and with no shortage of Wine. They invited me to join them. However, having had dinner already I had no further appetite for food I thanked them and left. Walking back I met a German, Norbert, who looks after a lovely newly built thatched house, originally owned by Mr. Quigley, who owns the adjoining Marina. Norbert is living 20 years in the Athlone area and uses a steel Boat, moored nearby. Soon afterwards, the owner of the house, Peter, walked down the road pulling a little trolley after him as he is on Oxygen, aged 64. Had a long chat with him; nice man. Stayed the night tied up in Quigley's. I requested Pdraig to get me the Irish Times the following morning, Thursday, as I needed it for the Property Supplement, which he did. Fifty millimetres of rain fell that night causing flooding in many parts of Ireland.

Day 4: Thursday, 28th June

07:00 a.m. Awake

08:00 a.m. I showered in Quigleys.

12:00 noon I cast off and passed by Lake Shore Marina and Portaneena Marina. I then tied up at Glasson Golf Course. Tom and Jean Kennedy moored their boat immediately afterwards beside me. The golf course was closed as a result of rain the night before, intending to be open that afternoon. I had no problem playing the following day between 11am and 1pm. Met a young man from Dundalk and his girl, from the adjoining local parish of Tank, who were getting married there the next day [Friday, the 29th] at 1.30pm, before 160 guests. They were going to spend their honeymoon in Las Vegas and Mexico. They kindly invited me to the wedding reception the following day, which I declined.

4:00 p.m. I cast off for Wine Port; 10 minutes away met Terry Benson, a musician, and boat trip operator. He told me all the history of Sean Fitzsimmons of the Barge, "Iron Lung", and who, aged 84, died recently. Sean lived in Athlone and had a very famous pub on the Quay, known as 'Sean's'. 'Sean's Bar' holds the Guinness Book of Records title as the oldest pub in the British Isles and maybe in the world! The pub pre-dates the castle in the town as the original building dates to the year 900 AD and some of the original clay and wattle structure of this building still survives in the pub today. Sean's barge belonged to Sean Fitzsimmons

for 30 years after he bought it in 1970. Although the pub is named after a previous owner, also called Sean, to the boating community, it is mostly associated with Sean Fitzsimmons and the 'Iron Lung', which was built in 1928 as a Grand Canal Barge. The barge was bought by Sean and his friend John Connon in 1961 after they hired it for a trip to the Shannon Boat Rally.

6:30 p.m. I had a cocktail in Wine Port, which cost €9.50, followed by dinner at 7:15 p.m., where I met Michael O'Kane and his wife. Michael was an Irish Press political reporter in Leinster House for many, many years and a brother of Frank O'Kane, RIP, of Mercury Engineering. As I was walking back to the boat on the jetty, I met a young American man, Peter Rizzo and his girl friend Lisa, who were over here for two weeks to attend a wedding at Trim Castle. I retired at 11pm.

Day 5: Friday, 29th June – my 67th birthday

05:30 a.m. Awake; very wild and raining.

8:15 a.m. Breakfast

8:25 a.m. Engine check. Wineport Hotel had no papers.

8:40 a.m. Heavy rain and wind, decided not to golf that day as it was a disaster.

8:45 a.m. Cast off for Athlone and Clonmacnoise.

10:00 a.m. I passed Lough Ree Yacht Club; wind force 6, visibility 400 metres. I passed under the new Shannon Way Bridge, built in 1991 to bring the motorway over the river and bypass the town of Athlone in an attempt to ease congestion. It is made from concrete with a high central arch and two side arches. The next bridge I pass under was built in 1850 to carry the railway over the Shannon. It is a beautiful piece of engineering with high white arches, massive circular piers supporting it. It is over 164 metres long and used to have an opening span in the centre. The ironwork for the bridge was shipped to Limerick and then brought to Athlone by barge. The final bridge to come into view is Athlone Bridge, together with the domes of St. Peter and Paul's church and, on the far side of the bridge, the castle. This is the oldest of the three bridges. There are modern floating jetties and facilities at the marina beside the Radisson Hotel on the east river.

There is evidence of human habitation very close to Athlone, between 3000 and 2000 BC, consisting of a portal tomb at Mihanboy, Co. Roscommon, which is just 4.5km west of Athlone. Recognizing the strategic significance of Athlone, Turlough O'Connor, King of Connaught, built the first bridge 1120AD, when work started on a castle on the western bank and a new stone bridge, 50 years before the Norman Invasion!. By 1230AD the town of Athlone set on both sides of the Shannon and within a few years a town wall was constructed.

The construction of an Elizabethan stone bridge in 1566 renewed Athlone as the focal point for east/west traffic and greatly increased the importance of the town. The bridge was 360 feet long and 14 feet wide. It had nine arches and was constructed under the direction of the Lord Deputy, Sir Henry Sidney. Corn mills were added to the bridge at a later date, utilizing the fast flow of water underneath. This bridge was not replaced until 1846 under the works of the Shannon Commissioners. The current weir and lock were also constructed around this time, to replace the old canal that was needed to bypass the shallow rapids of Athlone.

One of Athlone's most famous sons, John McCormack, was born in the town in 1884, the fourth of eleven children. His singing career began in 1903 when he won gold at the Feis Ceoil in Dublin, and went on to become a world famous tenor. In 1928 he was ennobled by

the Pope, receiving the title of 'Count' from Pope Pius XI, to honour his work for Catholic charities. He like me was a knight of the Holy Sepulchre. He is also remembered for many sentimental items and is famous for being the first singer to record 'It's a long way to Tipperary' in 1914.

However, the song most appropriate to us here is 'where the river Shannon flows'. The song was written by James Russell for his sketch, 'Irish Servant Girls', which was written for the theatre in New York in 1904.

Saints Peter and Paul's Church is the most recognizable landmark in Athlone, at 61 metres long being the largest Church in Athlone and dating from 1937. From the water the most striking feature is the set of two bell towers, which rise impressively to 38 metres high flanking the huge central dome. There are stained glass windows from the Harry Clarke studios. Harry Clarke is Ireland's best known stained glass artist and book illustrator. Harry died from tuberculosis in 1931 at the young age of 41, but during his short career he designed over 172 stained glass pieces. Some of his best known work includes the windows of the Honan Chapel in University College, Cork considered by many to be his best work, and a piece that now resides in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, illustrating, the eve of St. Agnes, by John Keats, and also Bewleys café on Grafton street, Dublin.

Behind Saints Peter and Paul's Church there is the oldest military barracks in Europe, the 'Custume Barracks'. The barracks is unique in its name also, in that it is the only barracks in Europe named after a non-commissioned officer.

11:00 a.m. Tied up in Athlone and did some shopping in Dunnes Stores costing €36.00. It proved very difficult to tie up due to a combination of the heavy rain, the wind and the huge current.

12:15 p.m. Cast off.

12:25 p.m. I was through the lock, let out by Tim, lock keeper.

1:00 p.m. I lost my dinghy, south of Long Island. I could not attempt retrieving it due to the wind and rain and strong current, the width of the river being in flood, and at one meter over the summer level. It was even possibly I was cruising over fields, barbed wire fences, etc. The conditions were truly atrocious!

These low-lying lands form part of the "Shannon Callows". These riverine meadows are subject to flooding, especially during the Winter, although they can flood during any particularly wet season, due to the fact that the river only falls about 12 metres in the 185 km between Battlebridge and Parteen. This annual flooding, while it may render the land unusable for part of the year, enriches the flooded lands, which thus provides excellent seasonal grazing, as well as a valuable wild-life habitat. The callows have been the subject of much controversy as many local farmers wish to see them "drained" in order to reduce flooding. Indeed, flood control formed an important element of the original Eighteenth Century navigation works.

Prior to the 18th Century, the Shannon was not truly navigable from end to end, due to the presence of rapids at various points. Of these the most important were the Falls of Doonass, below Lough Derg. Others existed at Jamestown, Roosky, Athlone, Meelick, and at the exit from Lough Allen. In effect, the river was a series of disconnected navigations. All this changed when the then Irish Parliament began a system of improvements, most frequently by inserting weirs to raise water levels. Locks were provided to allow passage between the

levels. These developments, over more than 250 years, have drastically altered the character of the river, not least by the construction of 6 locks which raised the river level by 4 ft, so that the original normal winter flood level now became the new summer level! A new winter level then came into being, which caused excessive flooding along most of the river.

Numerous studies and reports have been commissioned to address this problem, right up to the present day. All have foundered on the fact that, at certain times of the year, the flow exceeds the capacity of the river, which then overflows onto its flood plain. As the 1940 Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Land Drainage made clear "In seasons of excessive rainfall, flooding must be expected." Given the conflicting demands of agriculture, fishing, boating tourism, hydro-power and, recent claims that the Shannon should be a source of water for the Dublin area, the future use of the Shannon is likely to become more contentious.

2:00 p.m. I tied up at Clonmacnoise with difficulty, again due to the wind at force 6. Walked up to visitors centre and met Tom Moore, who started working there in 1973 and, of the many people I met there, were a USA couple with a two year old daughter whose birthday it was that day also, same day as mine. The man was attending an Evolution conference in Dublin which 1500 people were present at.

My walk up from the river towards the monastery brought me close to a precarious looking ruin of a Normandy castle on the right. Large blocks seemed to hang by a thread over the edge of the mounts supporting the castle remains. The castle was built in the 1200's by the Bishop of Norwich, John D. Gray. The cause of the castle's current state is not known, although some suggest that it was blown up; that would explain its condition.

There has been a monastery in Clonmacnoise for more than 1,000 years. St. Ciaran, a Roscommon man, established the first around 544AD. The monastic city of Clonmacnoise, which developed around the monastery, was renowned throughout the Christian world, and for a long time was an important centre of religion, learning, craft and trade. Clonmacnoise today is probably only a fraction of its original size. Recent research has uncovered evidence of the thriving secular community, surrounding the monastery. Today, Archaeologists believe that Clonmacnoise was actually Ireland's first planned urban settlement, with streets, houses and a thriving crafts industry, based on the skills of its inhabitants. The riverbank was probably thronged with shipbuilders and traders. The ruins visible at Clonmacnoise today are not those of the original monastery founded by Saint Ciaran.

The first construction here was likely to have consisted of small circular wooden structures. It was not until the ninth century that stone was used for construction, and the ruins seen today date from the ninth to the twelfth century. When Ciaran arrived here with his small group of followers, he was given the land for this monastery. Seven months after his arrival at just 33 years of age, Saint Ciaran passed away. Although he never got to see his monastery completed, one of his followers, Oenna, took over from him as Abbot, and together with the rest of the followers he carried out the work Saint Ciaran had begun.

By the middle of the twelfth century the monastery at Clonmacnoise had been plundered and burnt over thirty times, with the first Viking attacks in the eighth century. This meant that very few valuable items have been recovered during excavations at Clonmacnoise. However, one extremely important object was discovered in the ruins of St. Ciaran's church - the

Crosier of the Abbots of Clonmacnoise. This is one of the finest to survive. It dates to the eleventh century and is now on display in the National Museum on Kildare Street, Dublin. Other items discovered include a gold crown and collar, a gold torque and several bronze pins from the nuns' church. Despite repeated invasions the monastery continued to flourish and the twelfth century saw the production of the Book of Dun Cow, which is named after a sacred sixth century relic of Clonmacnoise, the hide of the dun cow that belonged to St. Ciaran. This book is the earliest surviving manuscript of literature written in Irish and it contains the oldest versions of religious, mythical and historical material. The book is now housed in the Royal Irish Academy on Dawson Street in Dublin.

Today there are ruins of seven churches within the walls of Clonmacnoise and also the Nun's Church which lies to the east outside the boundaries. The tower, "McCarthy's Tower", which I could see from a long distance away, is one of two round towers on the site. It is attached to St. Finan's Church. The other is the free standing "O'Rourke's Tower". Round towers served as refuges for monks from attacking invaders, Scandinavians in particular. The towers were so strong that any invader found it impossible to demolish quickly, so the monks and their treasures were given short-term protection. The only access to the tower was from a doorway several feet up from the ground. The monks would climb up by ladder and then pull the ladder up behind them, where they hoped to be safe until help arrived! The towers also provided good views of the surroundings and served as bell and watch towers, with a window on every level all facing in different directions. McCarthy's Tower is physically attached to St. Finan's Church and has an intact roof, whereas O'Rourke's Tower lacks a roof. This tenth century tower was built by Fergal O'Rourke, King of Connaught. There is a legend connected to its construction; supposedly, a dispute erupted over cost between the stonemason and the monks. In protest, the stonemason began to remove stones from the tower and throw them to the ground. Despite the monks agreeing to pay what he wanted if he returned to work, the stonemason refused to proceed and the tower remained incomplete!

Three high crosses and the largest collection of early Christian grave slabs in Western Europe are also found at Clonmacnoise. Three high crosses remain from probably seven originally erected. The Cross of the Scriptures, also known as King Flans Cross is one of the most impressive in the country. The cross originally stood outside the Cathedral. In the early 1990's it was moved into the Visitors Centre and a replica was put in its place.

In 1994 underwater archaeologists, Donal Boland and Mattie Grehan discovered the remains of a wooden bridge spanning the river at Clonmacnoise, which was dated A.D. 804. The date was established by tree ring analysis in Queens University, Belfast, by the researcher Mike Bailie. This means that the bridge was made before the Normans arrived in Ireland, probably by the monks from Clonmacnoise. The 120 metre long bridge may be the longest wooden structure dating from the early medieval period in Ireland, and possibly the largest known from early medieval Europe. Although the river is fairly shallow here it was could not have been used as a holding point, because of the soft nature of the river bed, which is made of alluvial clay. The bridge was constructed by driving two parallel lines of pairs of vertical wooden posts 3.5 metre down into the clay. Boland and Grehan found seventeen such pairs of oak posts, spanning the width of the Shannon here. They estimated that there would have originally been twenty-five pair of posts.

The monastery at Clonmacnoise began to decline in importance from the thirteenth century on, but its significance as a place of pilgrimage has continued to this day. The depredations of the English garrison from Athlone in 1552, was probably the final nail in the coffin for Clonmacnoise. The Annals of the Four Masters record that after this invasion, there was not left moreover, a bell, small or large, an image, or an altar, or a book, or a gem, or even a glass in a window from the wall of the church out of which was not carried off.

The monastic city of Clonmacnoise and its cultural landscape have been included on a list of proposed world heritage sites submitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], by the Irish government. In a way, the decline of Clonmacnoise may be thought a good thing, because the site now is one of great peace and tranquillity, far removed from the bustling centre of learning it must have been in its heyday. Even on a busy day when the tourist coaches are lined up outside, there is a still peacefulness about the place, which for me emanates from the quiet calm of the river as it flows slowly by. Perhaps this is how St. Ciaran felt when he came across the site, and that played some part in his decision to settle here in Clonmacnoise.

There is some speculation about the reasons why St. Ciaran chose this site, but an important factor must have been location. At that time, Clonmacnoise was sited where the Shannon was crossed by the Slí Mór, or Great Road one of seven major roads through pre- Norman Ireland. The Shannon provided a natural route for travellers from north to south and the Slí Mór from east to west, across the midland bogs. The Slí Mór ran along a series of esker ridges that are remnants of the last ice age in Ireland which ended 12,000 years ago. Eskers are ridges of sand, gravel and boulders deposited by melt water streams that flowed beneath the thick sheet of ice that covered the midlands, so that many of the low lying hills visible at Clonmacnoise are actually esker ridges. When the ice finally disappeared, these ridges were exposed. These ridges are known collectively as the 'Esker Riada'. Ninety thousand people visit Clonmacnoise each year.

A short distance away is Mongan bog that has been growing for over 3,500 years; it is one of the few remaining intact raised bogs in Ireland. Between Athlone and Shannon Bridge the countryside was the natural home to the corncrake, an abundant summer visitor to Ireland. Fifty years ago, the late night call of the corncrake was a common sound. Now the corncrake is on the brink of extinction worldwide. The corncrake spends the winter in southern and eastern Africa, before returning north in April to breed where it remains until late August or early September. A survey found in 1994 that the number of corncrakes in Ireland has fallen to 129. The dramatic drop in corncrake numbers has been attributed to changes in traditional agricultural practices on the birds' breeding grounds. The birds build their nests in meadows of long diverse grass, and lay their first bunch of eggs in late May. The eggs hatch after three weeks, and the peak hatching season is in June. The females feed their chicks for the first few days and stay with them for about ten days. The chicks cannot fly yet and often they find food, running very quickly under the cover of the tall grasses. In fact they are reluctant to run across open ground, which is why delayed mowing of grass is so important. The chicks can fly five weeks after hatching, freeing their mothers to mate again and lay a second brood that will hatch in late July.

Attempts to save the corncrakes from extinction include the establishment of a grant scheme for farmers, to encourage corncrake-friendly farming practices. Farmers are encouraged to mow from the middle of the field out to the edges so that the young birds can run into the

hedges rather than to the middle of the field and thereby avoid being macerated by the machinery. Of course farmers do not always follow this good practice of starting mowing in the middle of the field.

4:00 p.m. Cast off

5:00 p.m. I tied up at Shannonbridge

6:00 p.m. Had dinner

10:30 p.m. Retired with it raining

Day 6: Sunday, June 30th

05:30 a.m. Awake. Raining, Did engine check. I purchased my paper and six lines of quick pick Lotto. Two young boys picked up a fender for me from the reeds to replace one I had lost in Lanesborough.

On approaching Shannonbridge I could see sixteen arches of the stone bridge spanning the river from Co. Offaly to Co. Roscommon. The bridge was constructed in 1759 by order of the Commissioners of Inland Navigation, who delegated their engineer, Thomas Omer to make the Shannon more navigable. In 1835 the Shannon Commissioners took over the job of upgrading the Shannon Navigation, and began works to make the river more navigable for steam boats. This involved the removal of many Shannon bridges and dredging of the river. The bridge at Shannonbridge is one of the few to survive this work relatively intact. Thomas Rhodes, the principal engineer for the Shannon Commissioners, removed the canal and lock put there by Thomas Omer. The lockhouse, which was also designed by Omer, remains in place today as the tourist office. In 1845 Rhodes added a cast iron swivel span to the bridge which remained in place until 1962, when the increased rate of vehicles made the old bridge unsafe.

A bailey bridge was put in place above the swivel bridge, which was eventually removed in 1983 when the bridge was reinforced and a concrete span was added. The swivel span was placed on the quay where it still sits today and if you look at it closely you can see the name 'Thomas Rhodes' along the side of it.

Shannonbridge is a small town with approximately two hundred inhabitants and with many modern floating jetties upstream of the bridge. The "Old Fort" restaurant stands majestically on the opposite [Western] side facing the river, and its name gives a clue to the origins of the building. It was part of the Shannon fortifications that were built in the early 1800s to protect against a possible Napoleonic invasion. Shannonbridge ESB Power Station lies to the south of the town and, although it had a damaging visual impact on the surrounding landscape, it also creates advantages like in Lanesborough for some users of the river; the power stations coolant produces a stretch of hot water that is very good for coarse fishing.

12:00 noon Arrived in Shannon Harbour; raining.

Shannon Harbour was built in 1830. At that time many people made use of passenger barges for transport. At Shannon Harbour's peak it was home to over 1000 people. There was the Grand Hotel, Harbour Master's House, Bonded Warehouse, Dockyard, Dry Docks, R I C Barracks, Custom & Excise Post, livery, blacksmith, school & many taverns. In the dry dock,

I saw the barge that Dick Warner used for many of his TV Programmes. Subsequently, I met Dick in the “Cottage Restaurant” in Jamestown where we had a long discussion.

12:30 p.m. Cast off

12:55 p.m. Arrived at Banagher public harbour.

1:55 p.m. Raining. Cast off

2:45 p.m. Meleek Lock; the lockkeeper was Stephen McGarry.

4:30 p.m. Arrived at Portumna Bridge, which was scheduled to open at 5:30 p.m. Bridge operated by Christy Houlihan

6:00 p.m. I pulled into Portumna Harbour. There I met a friend of Brian Hurley’s and a Willie Deegan, a Church of Ireland bachelor farmer from Wexford. He told me that he had 30 acres in one, single field, was in his fifties, and had never got married, although he had a daughter with a local girl, who he maintains!

Day 7: Sunday, 1st July

06:30 a.m. Awake

08:00 a.m. Rise. I noted that July has five Sundays which repeat every four hundred

11:00 a.m. Mass in St. Brigid’s, celebrated by Fr. Lawless. There was a big congregation. I got the Sunday Independent and the Sunday Business Post. Interestingly, I noted that there are four churches in the town of Portumna.

12:30 p.m. I walked around Portumna Castle with Emmet, Dave and Mike from the USA Air Force and Navy. They were very interesting and talkative.

12:30 p.m. Started raining

I met a local man who turned out to be a friend of a man who had shared the digs with me in Blackrock, County Dublin, in 1964. That was Rinzie Conroy and the local man gave me his address as Moorfield, Aircourt, in Ballinasloe. I intend to contact him soon.

3:00 p.m. I met Ray Fletcher and Audrey, friends of Brian Hurley, who then cast off.

7:00 p.m. Rain stopped, had dinner. It was cold; I had to light cooker for heat. Listened to Spain and Italy football match; Spain won 4/1.

10:30 p.m. Bed

I noted that there were no refuse bins in or around Portumna harbour. I found it a depressing day weather-wise with low visibility, maximum 400 metres, so that it was not possible to cruise stayed there all day. It rained non-stop!

Day 8: Monday, 2nd July

I noted that the engine had accumulated 28 hours cruising time since I cast off from Annvale Manor on the 28th June. I did an engine check.

10:00 a.m. There was sunshine, it was warm, and I cast off. I headed into Lough Derg and on to Terryglass.

10:30 a.m. I arrived at Terryglass and walked up to the Post Office, where I often ate when we would be shooting on Illonmore Island in November. Another customer in the post office turned out to be a Bridie Tiernan, whose parents were residents on Illonmore many years ago. I had very long chat with her. She told me that she had been engaged to a man from Donegal, Bonner was his name, who went to America and came back and told her that he did not wish

to proceed. She got married to a local man, instead, and lived very happily thereafter. I told her I would post on my DVD to her, which I did.

12:00 noon I cast off for Kilgarvan. Where I met several very interesting people and where I walked around the countryside.

2:30 p.m. Cast off, heading down lake.

2:45 p.m. I Cruised into Coolbawn harbour. This is a private harbour. I saw only large boats there.

3:30 p.m. Reached Rossmore Quay, where a small boat is moored by the name of "Jack Daniels"!

4:00 p.m. I cruised up the Woodford River from Rossmore Bay to the "Conor Hogan" jetty and the small seat with the suitably inscribed granite stone. I telephoned Mary from there to tell her where I was. The Woodford River is a fast flowing, with very clean water.

5:40 p.m. I arrived in Dromineer, having cruised across the lake in sunshine. On the way I lost my tricolour. Dromineer has no shops, but has two pubs. It also had the Lakeshore Hotel where Mary, Michelle, Marika & Sharon and I ate on Friday August 5th in 1983, but which is now closed. There are good mooring facilities, and many new houses. I strolled in and around Lough Derg Sailing Club, which is very well maintained, the area being clean and the grass trimmed. I met Robbie McGrath, mechanic in marina. I got report on Shay Hogan's boat, which was damaged recently it on rocks.

Day 9: Tuesday, 3rd July Dromineer

6:45 a.m. Awake. There was lots of rain last night.

8:00 a.m. Engine check

9:00 a.m. Breakfast

9:30 a.m. Cast off. Many new houses and wind farms in view from the boat.

10:15 a.m. I arrived at Garrykennedy and I met Paddy Kennedy who is now working three days a week with FAS. He had worked for Tom Hayes, Builder for 36 years. He drove me to the shop in his jeep. He is a very decent, friendly man, and a great golfer. He gave me a golf ball with PKK on it. He told me that the following day he intended driving to Galway to see the Volvo Ocean Racing Boats. I also met Eddie Brennan who won eight All Ireland Hurling medals with Kilkenny.

1:00 p.m. It started raining. There are no shops or refuse bins in the village, but it has two pubs.

1:30 p.m. Cast off

2:30 p.m. Passing by Crowe Island. Water here is 32metres deep

4:00 p.m. I tied up in Killaloe and I met Eamonn O'Connor, a teacher and a very friendly knowledgeable man. He gave me the name of Lawless in Ardnacrusha.

5:15 p.m. Called Mary and Donal Conlon

6:00 p.m. Heavy rain

Killaloe has lots of mooring facilities. Allen Ffrench's sixty-sixth birthday is today. I sent a text to Myles Tierney. I met Pat O'Shea on a boat from Limerick, who was a wall tiller and purchased two postcards. I sent one card to Donal Conlon and the other to Mary, posting them in the Post Office letterbox in the building on the Killaloe side, up the hill. Both of them failed to receive the cards since!

Killaloe is in Co. Clare and the other part of the town is called Ballina, which is in Co. Tipperary on the opposite banks of the river Shannon. The twin towns mark the southerly end

of Lough Derg. They are connected by a nineteenth bridge that used to have thirteen arches but four were removed to insert the navigation section. The bridge was built between 1825 and 1840. There is a plaque attached to it commemorating four Clare men who lost their lives during the War of Independence, McMahon, Egan, Gildea and Rodgers. However, the most famous resident of Killaloe was Brian Boru, High King of Ireland from 1002 to 1014 AD. His palace of Kincora, of which no trace remains today, stood on the hill in Killaloe where the Roman Catholic Church now stands. His reign came to an end on Good Friday, in 1014, when he was slain during the Battle of Clontarf in Dublin. The battle was probably fought nearer to Phibsboro than Clontarf.

Killaloe once had a big eel fishery, exploiting the European eel which is the only species of fresh water eel in Europe, and one of only 15 native fish species found in Ireland's fresh waters. The European eel is a mysterious and fascinating creature with a unique life cycle. Towards the end of their lives, the adults journey from Ireland and Europe to breed in the Sargasso Sea, 4000 km across the Atlantic, making their migration the longest undertaken by any eel species. The young eels then return across the Atlantic to Ireland as leaf shaped transparent leptocephalus. There are four more phases to their life cycle, glass eel, elver, yellow/brown eel and the adult silver eel. The silver eels in the Shannon range between 11 and 15 years old, but eels as old as 25 or more have been recorded too.

The numbers of European eel have declined dramatically since 1980, but the exact reasons for this decline are not known. Theories include over exploitation, loss of habitat, barriers to migration i.e. hydro-electric stations, water quality, parasites and climate change. As of the 1st January 2010, eel fishing in Ireland is no longer permitted. Although this was devastating news to Ireland's eel fisherman, the government saw the ban as necessary to save the European eel in Ireland. However, eel fishing has not been banned on Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland, the largest wild eel fishery in Europe, which continues to operate.

There are many fine houses with jetties that sit on both banks of the river in Killaloe. St. Flannan's Cathedral lies on the banks of the Killaloe canal at the bottom of the hill that is Killaloe's main street. The Cathedral was built in the thirteenth century from purple and yellow sandstone. On entering the churchyard I saw St. Flannan's Oratory. It is a well preserved stone- roofed church built in the early twelfth century. The oratory is unusual as it has an intact stone roof. There is a memorial in the church to John Grantham who was responsible for the introduction of steamers to the river Shannon.

Grantham suggested the use of steam boats for transportation to the Directors General of Inland Navigation in 1820. His proposal was accepted in 1824 and he was given a plot of land in Limerick to build a store. This store was to house his steamboat company and the first of his boats, the "Marquis Wellsley". Killaloe became the headquarters of the Inland Steam Navigation Company, and in 1833 it introduced the largest of the Shannon steamers, the "Lady Landsdowne". The steamboat era reached its peak in the 1840's, but fell into decline following the famine and the coming of the railways. At the end of the nineteenth century the newly founded Shannon Development Company introduced passenger services to the river and built the Lakeside Hotel at Ballina to accommodate those travelling on the river.

Day 10: Monday, 4th July

05:00 a.m. Awake. Dry morning

07:00 a.m. Got up. No refuse bins.

I telephoned Pat Lysaght who is a historian in his spare time in Ardnacrusa and Jed Reid. Both of them advised me that the four turbines in Ardnacrusa were open and working and that it would not be possible to get back if I went down. They also advised me that it would be very dangerous getting under the bridge at Killaloe, because of the flow of water. However, I was determined to go down as far as Parteen.

11:00 a.m. Engine check. I again noted the very good mooring and jetty facilities on the Killaloe side of the river.

11:20 a.m. Cast off

12:20 p.m. Down near Parteen my engine cut out at least four times. It was now time to start my return journey back North. I turned my cruiser upstream and commenced my journey home.

2:20 p.m. I am back in Killaloe. I called into Derg Marine and spoke with Mick in Derg Marine. This Marina is a shadow of what it was!

3:50 p.m. I passed by Derry Rock; water 33 m deep.

5:00 p.m. I passed by Tower House; water 6 m deep, and with the Irish flag flying!

5:30 p.m. Tied up at Reddens quay wall near Scariff. There are no services available here. There are no refuse bins, either. Four boats were tied up, all unoccupied, and none with registration numbers on them.

6:00 p.m. I had dinner. Called Mary - all ok. As I was the only one on a boat and there were many young people coming down playing loud music, I decided to moor my boat down the river for security purposes and peace and tied it to a tree for the night. It is a fast flowing river and very quiet, which I enjoyed.

10:30 p.m. Retired to bed with the boat tied to a tree. No rain.

Day 11: Tuesday, 5th July

05:30 a.m. Awake. Dry morning

07:00 a.m. Got up, sent many emails and text, 18 in total

08:00 a.m. Breakfast

08:30 a.m. Engine check

08:45 a.m. Cast off from a tree, and recorded the temperature at 20°.

09:00 a.m. I tied up at Redden's Quay again. Walked up to the village, met Richard Keeling a builder now working with FAS, three days a week. He gave me a bit of history of the village. Visited the Heritage Centre in an old Anglican Church and got lots of information, also the O'Grady Tower House which was owned by the O'Gradys, the leading ecclesiastical family in Ireland in the fourteenth century. John O'Grady was the Archbishop of Cashel in 1368 and his son John was the archbishop of Tuam in 1388 and his son John was the Bishop of Elphin in 1414, which all surprised me. On a recent visit to Sligo I checked in the Cathedral there and there was the name of John O'Grady, 1414 with all the other bishops since 1300. I also visited the grave of Edward McLysaght, who was the leading authority on surnames in Ireland and wrote many books. Average river depth here is 4 metres of fast flowing, clean, crystal clear water.

12:45 p.m. Arrived in Mountshannon. Best day so far, the temperature was 25° and there was plenty of mooring available.

4:00 p.m. I visited Holy Island where I observed a headstone to James Tiernan dated 24th June 1944. I reached the island by the ferry boat run by Gerard Madden, who has published many books on Holy Island. After the disastrous Battle of Kinsale in 1601, many of the Irish chieftains who were in revolt fled go to Rome. The Flight of the Earls, as it is called, is still

regarded as one of the pivotal episodes in Irish history. By local request, in 1608, Iniscealtra or Holy Island was named one of twelve notable shrines in Ireland to which Pope Paul V attached a plenary indulgence on certain specified days of the year. The day set aside for Holy Island was March 24th. The other pilgrimage sites were Ard Magha, Armagh, Monanciacha in Tipperary, Fore in Westmeath, Skellig Michael in Kerry, Aran of the Saints in Galway, Croke Patrick in Mayo, Modreeny in Tipperary, Clonmacnoise in Offaly, Clane in Kildare, Clonmel in Tipperary and Our Ladies Island in Wexford. The island monastery was a centre of pilgrimage for hundreds of years before this event and the presence of two shoes, not feet, inscribed on a tenth century grave marker seems to indicate the resting place of a pilgrim. After the Popes intervention, the island's reputation as a centre of pilgrimage was immediately enhanced. Within two years the Lord Deputy, Chichester, recorded 15,000 pilgrims there. For the following two hundred and fifty years it was one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in Ireland. Holy Island has been a centre of pilgrimage for over one thousand years.

6:30 p.m. I had a lasagne dinner.

10:00 p.m. Bed

Day 12: Friday, 6th July

05:30 a.m. Awake. I walked all around the village. There I saw a house being built on the water edge which has been under construction for 20 years! I went in and spoke to the electrician there. He told me that it was being built by a family who had reared and harboured Brendan O'Donnell, the man who murdered a priest in Clare about 10 years before. He also told me many other interesting historical bits and pieces about the area.

10:00 a.m. Engine check

10:15 a.m. Cast off

12:00 noon Reached and moored in Drummah Harbour, near Williamstown Harbour. This is a new harbour. I met Robbie McGrath, the mechanic from Dromineer again with his boat "Cormorant". He is a very friendly man, originally from the Achill Islands. It had started to rain at this stage. About 100 young children out for the weekend on canoes from Terryglass and Garrykennedy arrived creating a hive of activity. Drummah is a good, small, sheltered harbour with lots of moorings.

3:10 p.m. I cast off for Williamstown harbour where I got €50 worth of fuel from Angus, who owns Williamstown harbour. He told me that there had been 160 hire boats on Lough Derg in 1966, but now there are only 23. When passing the Benjamin Rocks I noticed a marker with a carving of a man's head on it which I photographed and have kept. Later on I telephoned Angus in Williamstown to inquire about its history. He told me that it was robbed out of a house by intoxicated people one night and erected there.

5:00 p.m. When I stepped off the quay wall onto dry land at Terryglass, a small picturesque village with a population of 450 people, the first thing I see is the bronze bust of a man. This is of John Weaving, a legend of the river who passed away in 1987. His friends and admirers erected this bust in his memory, and also a white cairn at the top of the lake, just before the entrance to the river leading to Portumna. Weaving was a familiar site on the Shannon for over 20 years. John Lefroy of Killaloe, a close friend, described him as a scrupulously honest person. John Weaving's father, T. H. Weaving was the organist in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin in the 1920's and was also the conductor of the famous Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society. John had small parts in some of the society's productions in his youth. John Weaving was involved in dinghy racing from a young age, and was National Dinghy Racing Champion. He worked as an agent for the Bank of Ireland, but found the work too

restrictive and soon became disenchanted. He moved on to selling commercial stands for exhibitions and shows. His partner in that enterprise had an interest in boat hire, long before it became a popular pursuit. In the late 1950's, the pair had a small fleet of three or four boats for hire on the Shannon. John would spend his weekends on the river arranging the turnaround from one hirer to the next. In the 1960's Bord Fáilte commissioned a survey of the Shannon to determine the works required to make the river more user friendly. George O'Brien Kennedy from Jamestown, hired John as a sub-contractor for this work, and obtained a barge for him which John would go on to buy. John was now living on the river fulltime, on board his 125ft barge that he called the "Tailsman". Many people familiar with John would also know this boat as the "Peter Farrell". Peter was the previous owner and had put his personal name on the side of the boat. The living conditions on board were fairly basic. John lived in a 2.4metre by 3 metre cabin that he built onto the back of the boat. He shared a foam mattress with his dogs, warmed himself by a stove, and stored his collection of maps and documents in an old bathtub. These conditions would probably seem like squalor to most, but to him it was paradise.

There are two historic wells to be found in Terryglass. St. Augh's, well known locally as the eye-cure headache well and that of St. Columcille, also supposedly having curative properties. St. Augh's well is located behind the quay area and is named after a ninth century saint. This is a natural spring well which is paved and enclosed by modern concrete. Terryglass won the National Tidy towns Competition in 1983 & 1997

7:00 p.m. I had dinner on boat; heavy rain.

8:00 p.m. I attended the blessing of the graves beside the church. This is a very well kept graveyard with all the headstones placed at the same height, all low. I then visited Paddy's Derg Inn again and had one drink.

9:30 p.m. Retired to bed

Day 13: Saturday, 7th July

05:00 a.m. Awake. Heavy mist

07:00 a.m. Up

07:30 a.m. Engine check

08:00 a.m. I had breakfast; raining

08:40 a.m. Cast off. I made for Portumna Bridge, which was opening at 9.15am. By the time I reached the bridge, the rain stopped. I met Kenny Murtagh from Carrick on Shannon, returning from the Volvo Boat Race with his boat, and John Dunne, of Carrick, and I had a long chat with them. I also spoke to Robert Bailey who had a barge there. Christie showed and explained to me the opening workings of the bridge, including all the electrics and hydraulics associated with it. The bridge is 210 tons weight, 30 metres long, and was erected three years ago. There are six openings each day. I spoke to Timmie Walsh, the manager of Emerald Star Line in Portumna and Kevin Flynn the company's mechanic.

10:45 a.m. Cast off from the fifty-boat, Emerald Star marina.

12:45 p.m. Exited Meelick Lock. Damien McGarry was operating it today as his cousin, the Lock keeper, Steven, was attending a local wedding. Lots of machinery all dated

1843 with engineer Thomas Rhodes' name on it, is still working at the locks.

2:00 p.m. Tied up to a barge at Meelick Quay where the wedding was taking place in a marquee, with approximately 100 people there, all looked very good in the sunshine. I walked up to the Franciscan church – a twenty minute walk. This church has been in

constant use since 1414, which date is inscribed on it. Here I found one of the most unusual names I ever saw in a graveyard - Nuncio Burns, 1985, aged 32 years, RIP.

3:30 p.m. Cast off from Meelick Quay

4:30 p.m. I reached and tied up at Banagher for the night. Banagher has a seven-arched limestone bridge which links Co. Offaly and Galway and was constructed in 1841 and completed on the 12th August 1843. This is not the original bridge. In fact, there is evidence of an eighteen arch bridge having been built here in A.D 1049 by King of Connaught, Roderick O'Connor. Medieval records show that a twenty-seven arch bridge was present in 1685. When Thomas Rhodes began his work here for the Shannon Commission in the 1830's; he recorded a seventeen arch bridge in poor condition. This was subsequently blown up to make way for the new bridge, opened on 21st May 1843. However, an abutment of the destroyed seventeen arches bridge is still visible next to Cromwell's castle on the Galway side of the river.

Banagher is a much larger town than Shannonbridge, having a population of 1600 approximately. Very close to the harbour on the left side of the road, is one of two protected eighteenth century bow-fronted Georgian houses. This building, now called the 'Royal Shannon', had functioned as a hotel since the nineteenth century. Sadly it is in some disrepair now and apparently closed to business. The hotel was known previously as 'The Shannon Hotel' and was home to the famous novelist Anthony Trollop. Trollop came to Banagher in 1841 to work as Deputy Postal Surveyor. Trollop also lived in Dromsna, Co. Leitrim and in Killaloe for a short while and it was there that he began his first novel, 'The McDermotts of Ballycloran'. This novel was not a great success initially, but it was the first of 47 novels he would go on to write.

Trollop is not the only literary figure with ties to Banagher. Charlotte Bronte came on honeymoon here in 1845 with her husband, Rev. Arthur Bell McNicholas, who was native of Banagher, having been raised by his uncle in nearby Cuba Court. Sadly the house is no longer standing. The second bow-fronted house is 'Crank House' which is further up the hill on the right side of the road. Crank House dates to 1750 and at one stage it was used by William Wallers to store grain. Now painted bright yellow, Crank House embraces a variety of functions including a hostel, a tourist office, some local business units and an exhibition hall.

In preparation for a Napoleonic invasion in the nineteenth century, the old seventeenth century MacCoughlan Castle now called 'Cromwell's Castle' was reinforced and turned into a powder magazine, with a gun mounted on the roof. The castle is visible today on the west end of the bridge, where it sits in the Shannon side park adjacent to the swimming area on the river. On the opposite side of the road, slightly further along are the remains of a Martello Tower built in 1812 to house a 24 pounder canon, again intended to fight off any invading French army, which never actually invaded this area. Another relic of this era is Forth Eliza, located on the east bank of the river.

Day 14: Sunday, July 8th

05:00 a.m. Awake Dry. Overcast

07:00 a.m. Engine check. I discovered that I was out of gas for the fridge; witched bottle!

07:30 a.m. A man from the local Tidy Towns Committee was already walking around gathering up papers and litter. I walked all around the town, including Cromwell's Castle, the Martello Tower and the 1841 bridge.

08:30 a.m. I attended Mass and then walked around the Church of Ireland church, which was 300 meters up the hill. I purchased the Sunday Independent and Sunday Business Post. I viewed a monument to Burns and McCormack who were executed by the British in 1940. The monument was erected in 1963 and the writing on it is barely legible now. Near the bridge carved out of a tree is a life sized bust of popular musician Jonnie McEvoy with his guitar; he is from the town.

10:45 a.m. Cast off

11:30 a.m. I tied up at Shannon Harbour. I counted 46 boats lying between Grand Canal locks 35 and 36. A troop of 20 sea scouts from Ballyfermot, Dublin, were by the canal camping there for the week. They were accompanied by a cruiser.

1:00 p.m. Cast off. Unfortunately, the engine cut out five times which concerned me greatly.

2:45 p.m. Tied up at Shannon Bridge

6:00 p.m. I had dinner; raining heavily. I noticed a lone white goose swimming around like a swan. The temperature was a very cold 12 Celsius. Met Jackie and Dave Murphy on the "Kerkoriel", a steel boat which he moors at the Albert lock, and have owned for two years. Cormac Hade called, saying he was at the bridge. He had Eslanda with him. I replied that I would be up in ten minutes. I called him back many times, but there was no reply and I could not find him. I discovered from him the following day that he did not have his own telephone & car with him and that was why he did not reply.

9:00 p.m. Bed

Day 15: Monday, 9th July

05:00 a.m. Awake. Raining

07:30 a.m. Up

09:30 a.m. Cormac called. He explained his situation that he did not have his own phone with him.

12:00 noon I cast off; raining; 14°; then rain stopped

1:00 p.m. I spotted my dinghy, which I had lost ten days earlier, but I would need another dinghy to retrieve it. I tied up to red marker, had lunch and waited for any boat with a dinghy to come along. Many boats passed by none with dinghies! One private boat did pass with a dinghy. When I called for help, the lady on board shouting to me, 'dinghy not working'! This could not be a possibility, nevertheless they did not stop.

3:00 p.m. Finally an Emerald Star boat came along, crewed by a South African man living in Ireland for the past eighteen years, with two young boys. He gave me the loan of his dinghy to retrieve mine. Now able to reach my dinghy and having bailed it out I pulled it back to my boat and thanked him. I gave him a bottle of wine which he did not want to accept, but I insisted.

4:15 p.m. Enter Athlone Lock. A private boat came into it, the same boat that refused to give me the loan of their dinghy! The lady said that she saw that I had recovered my dinghy. I told her that it was no thanks to her and during all of my 41 years boating on the Shannon I never experienced such ignorance. I saw her telling her husband what I said and I could see both of them were angry. I continued upstream to enter Lough Ree.

5:30 p.m. I tied up for the night at the Hodson Bay Hotel.

6:00 p.m. Dinner, and called Mary ... all okay

7:00 p.m. Rain stopped

9:50 p.m. Bed

Day 16: Tuesday, July 10th

05:00 a.m. Awake. Dry morning

06:30 a.m. Engine check

06:45 a.m. I cast off and continued upstream; 12° Celsius.

07:30 a.m. Passed Kings Island

07:45 a.m. Marker No. 4; 15° Celsius

08:00 a.m. Marker No. 5

08:30 a.m. Marker No. 7; water here 33 metres deep.

09:30 a.m. Marker No. 9; Raining; 16° Celsius

09:45 a.m. I arrived at Lanesborough. Rain stopped, Martin Farrell called.

11:30 a.m. Camlyn River Lock cleared.

12:00 noon I tied up in Clondra for lunch. John Dunne from Carrick, who I had met in Portumna, came along in his jeep and we had a long chat.

1:30 p.m. Cast off.

5:30 p.m. I finally tied up in Annavale. All okay, my only loss being my tricolour flag. The tractor would not start when I went to use it to remove my belongings from the boat. As an alternative, I used a wheelbarrow, and then proceeded to fill six wheelbarrows with the items. I learned that it had been a dry day at Annavale Manor, with no rain since 09:30 a.m. As my voyage demonstrated, there have been many improvements carried out since my 1983 trip down the Shannon. There are better moorings and much improved services. The numbering of the markers similar to on the Erne waterway is very worthwhile and commendable. However, it is disappointing to see so many cruisers hogging premier moorings with, often times, no registration displayed. This will have to be stopped; there is no point in establishing a system of boat registration, unless it is enforced. Registration is an important element in pollution control of the river waters as well as other abuses of the river.

In conclusion, I was glad to be back at home. It had been an exhausting and sometimes, irritating voyage, but I was pleased that I had now completed the whole of the freshwater navigation of the Shannon-Erne system, from Belleek, on the Fermanagh / Donegal border, as far South as the hydro-electric scheme at Parteen, between Clare and Tipperary. It was, I concluded, a memorable and informative cruise.

The end of an Epic Voyage

Chevalier Joe Tiernan KCHS