

THE JAMESTOWN CANAL

In the 1840s, during work to rebuild the Jamestown Cut, an unknown workman left an iron tool embedded in the stone of the canal wall. On Saturday 25 June, Carrick on Shannon branch, in conjunction with the Jamestown Community Council, will unveil a plaque beside the tool to commemorate the men who built the canal.

In this piece, Mary Butler gives an overview of the history of the canal.

Albert Lock
Photo: David Murphy



The river Shannon has been important for the transport of goods and people from the earliest times. While the river would always have been navigable for smaller craft, during the 1600s a scheme was put forward by Lord Stafford to develop the Shannon waterway for larger vessels. After 1664 the Duke of Ormond 'intended to make the river Shannon navigable' and by 1697 the House of Commons proposed to develop the Shannon navigation from Limerick to Jamestown. An act was passed to prepare a bill for the improvement of the Shannon navigation to accommodate boats of up to 20 ton at a cost of £14,000. It was not till the 1715 that a more serious attempt was made to carry out a proper survey, but due to lack of finance it was never completed or implemented.

In 1754 a decision was taken by the Commissioners of Inland Navigation to undertake navigation works on the river. They appointed Thomas Omer as engineer to begin the work of improving the navigation and commence the work from Killaloe to Carrick-on-Shannon. It was apparent from the survey that canals and locks were needed at Rooskey and Jamestown to facilitate boats up as far as Carrick-on-Shannon.

Approaching Albert Lock
Photo: Richard Ellis



Part of Omer's work was to bypass the great loop of the river Shannon and its shallows at Jamestown. By 1769 a canal was constructed with a lock and two bridges cutting across the loop. It stretched from Ardnafron on the Jamestown side to Lough Nanogue south of Drumsna. The engineers encountered hard rock in the construction of the canal at Ardnafron and curved westward around it. On the southern end the land was marshy and boggy opposite the Black Lake so another curve was formed, creating two bends on the canal. By this time it was coming to the final stage of the total navigation and the money was running short and the locks on the upper Shannon were getting smaller. The Jamestown lock which was located just down stream from the bridge at Corlara measured 66ft 6inches (20.2m) by 14ft 3inches (4.3m) to overcome a fall of 5ft 3inches (1.6m). This section was known as the Jamestown Cut. The canal is about 2 miles long. The entire navigation was finally open 1799.

The Jamestown Canal was much narrower than the present canal which limited the size of boat and as a result the canal was underused. Omer's works deteriorated and the canals and locks including those at Jamestown fell into disrepair.

In 1785 the surveyor Richard Evans reported 'that the canal at Jamestown was open for the passage of boats but needed some repair'. John Bronwigg's inspection of the canal in 1794 for the Commissioners of Inland Navigation stated that the lock was in need of repair and there was concern that the canal banks would burst causing much flooding in the winter months.

In 1800 the Irish Parliament passed an act setting up the Directors General of Inland Navigation and for the next thirty years this was the body that controlled inland waterways development. A report in 1805 stated that there were breeches in the Jamestown Canal and the lock and lock house were in need of repair. In 1824 the Directors had the Jamestown lock gates replaced, the lock was raised nine inches and the canal walls straightened which made the canal better for navigation.

1830 the Directors General of Inland navigation were disbanded and the Office of Public Works assumed control. With the completion of the Royal Canal 1817 there was a need to improve the navigation above Lough Ree. The Jamestown Canal was repaired and harbours were built. The use of the river by passenger and goods boats put pressure on the navigation. With the passing of the Shannon navigation Act 1834, the Shannon Commissioners were appointed for the improvement of the river Shannon and to carry out extensive works.



Lockhouse at Albert Lock
Photo: Richard Ellis

Thomas Rhodes was engaged and given the task of surveying the entire navigation. His survey showed that the upper Shannon works were in a very bad state and in the report it stated that the Jamestown lock sills were the wrong height and leaking. The canal was too narrow and less than 4ft deep (1.2m). The bridges were small and too low and the sharp bends in the canal were not suitable for bigger steamers.

Rhodes proposed plan of 1838 for the Jamestown Canal shows that it was to be widened and straightened, the old bridges were to be replaced and fitted with opening spans to a design by Rhodes himself. The direction of the road was to be redirected in order to accommodate the new bridge at Corlara. The old lock was to be removed and a new lock was proposed for the end of the canal as it entered Lough Nanogue

In 1839 Rhodes was appointed as principle Directing Engineer of the Shannon navigation to carry out the improvement works. By 1844 seven tenders were received for the Jamestown works and the company of Jeffs and Sons were successful. Work commenced at once and was carried out all during that winter albeit with some alterations to the 1837 plans. The Commissioners had decided that the bridge would be fixed rather than opening to cut down on costs. The stretch of the river from Tarmonbarry to Leitrim village was a much less busy stretch of the waterway and as such did not receive much attention from the Commissioners.

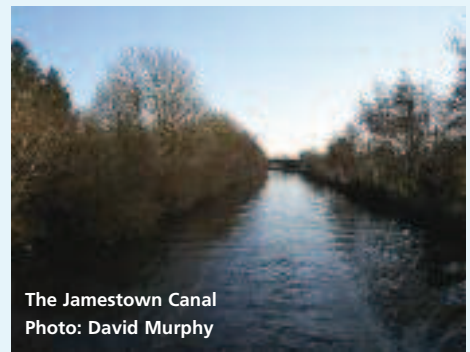
As this was the height of the famine years the Poor Relief Committees demanded that immediate labour schemes to be set up to alleviate the distress. The Jamestown works used many of these labourers. The rates of pay varied from five shillings a week for a plumber to two shillings for carpenters, stone cutters, masons, and painters. Labourers were paid eight pence and agricultural labourers six pence a day exclusive of his diet of potatoes and milk. The average number of men employed on the Jamestown Canal scheme was 313. Many walked miles to work for a few pence a day, some slept in improvised tents, unable to make the long journey home. It was reported that one man was killed during the canal's construction.

To straighten and widen the canal down from Ardnafron Bridge, it had to be cut through sheer rock; this was considered a major engineering achievement for the time and the rock was removed by blasting with gunpowder. The iron tool now lodged on the upper reach of the wall of the canal is from those works. In late June 2011 a plaque commissioned by the Inland Waterway Association of Ireland will be placed alongside the tool to commemorate these canal works. While half the canal is through rock the remainder is through peat and soft clay. There was a constant problem with canal banks subsiding particularly near the Black Lough so they had to be re formed, widened and the bend removed.

The route of the canal was enlarged, widened and deepened. The two old bridges over the canal were taken down and new single arched spans were constructed, with rock

faced stone walls. The high relief masonry gave the bridges a sense of weight and solidarity, typical of mid century design. Work continued though 1845 to complete the bridges and continue the excavation, which was sufficiently complete to commence work on the lock by 1846. The old lock was demolished and the new lock constructed below the Black Lough, just before the entry to Lough Nanogue measuring 30 feet wide by 105 feet long. The timber for the lock gates was imported from South America. The lock was called Albert Lock named after Queen Victoria's husband. The name is carved on the north side of the lock wall. The fall at the lock is 6ft (1.83m) and that is the lock in use today. The estimated cost of these works was £29,227. The lock walls are comprised of massive tooled limestone and are complimented by the stone exterior of the lockkeeper's house. For four generations to the present the Bourke family have been the lock keepers at Albert Lock.

There is a story told that when the canal was being constructed, a number of bronze objects of archaeological interest were found and a special reward was paid to the workers who dug them up. With such encouragement it is no wonder that the diligent workers kept a sharp eye out and as a result there was a great hoard of valuable objects brought to light. The museum authorities were very excited by these finds and they came down on a special mission hoping to find perhaps a



The Jamestown Canal
Photo: David Murphy

hidden city. On closer examination it turned out that a local blacksmith was working hammer and tongs manufacturing them and sharing the proceeds with the navies. It is said the experts were unable to distinguish the real from the false so no prosecutions was initiated. (Taken from "The Magic of the Shannon" by John M Feehan)

Originally every known cargo was carried on the Shannon navigation and the Jamestown Canal from Limerick to Carrick-on-Shannon. The building of the railways saw the decline in the use of the waterways. The last barge from Limerick carrying a cargo of flour to Carrick-on-Shannon was in June 1959.

Today the river and canals are used by cruisers, holiday makers and fishermen from all over the world where they can enjoy the peace and tranquility of the waterway.



The Stake/Chisel
Photo: Martin Donnelly

KENNEDY

Kennedy Boat Haulage
Truck Mounted Cranes For Lifting Your Boat
All Types And Sizes
Ireland, UK, Europe
Contact Jonathan on 087 2674024
Email: kennedyhaulage@gmail.com
Web: www.kennedyhaulage.com

MARINE PARTS DIRECT

We Have Recently Moved Into Our New
6000sq.ft Premises
Unit 7 N1 Business Park
Swords Co. Dublin
(Only 1km North From Dublin Airport)

Come Visit Our New Super Store
For The Best Deals in Ireland
PH.01 8075144
WWW.MARINEPARTS.IE