



OFFALY HERITAGE

JOURNAL OF THE OFFALY HISTORICAL AND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

TITLE	Early canal employees
AUTHOR (S)	J. P. Dalton
PUBLICATION DATE	1966
ORIGINAL CITATION	J. P. Dalton, 'Early canal employees' in <i>Canaliana</i> (1966), pp 23-26
TYPE	journal article
RIGHTS	© Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society
ITEM DOWNLOADED FROM	www.offalyhistory.com

EARLY CANAL EMPLOYEES

J. P. DALTON

Nowadays, when conditions of employment, annual leave and public holidays with pay are regulated by legislation and when five-day weeks have become the accepted thing in most industries and businesses, it would be well to consider the conditions under which people were employed in the early days of the Grand Canal.

The Company of Undertakers of the Grand Canal was established under an Act of 1772 and was ruled by a Court of fifteen Directors, elected annually. The Directors met on four days each week and Committee Meetings were held on the other two days. The meetings were held in the Company's House at Dawson Street, James's Street Harbour, Portobello Hotel, or Ringsend Docks, as business required. The sum of three guineas (Irish) was divided between the Directors attending each meeting of the Court and one and a half guineas for attendance at Committee Meetings. Breakfast was provided at the latter at a cost of one guinea. Each Director was required to take an Oath of Loyalty to the Company on assuming office, a framed copy of the Oath was hung in the Boardroom.

The Directors had full powers to make and enforce rules and regulations governing their employees and to impose fines for any breach thereof. Even the Directors themselves were subject to such fines, one instance being that if a Director or Directors called a special meeting of the Court, they were liable to a fine of one guinea if they were more than ten minutes later than the appointed time.

The Secretary was the Chief Officer of the Company. He had a salary of £250 per annum, with apartments in the Company's house in Dawson Street, he was allowed fees of 1/1d. per cent on transfer of stock, and had an allowance of £22.15.0 per annum to provide coal and candles for the Boardroom. The Secretary was required to give an undertaking that he would devote the whole of his time to the duties of his office and he had to provide a security of £2,000. He was allowed one clerk at a salary of £90 per annum. If the "Standing Orders" of the Court of Directors were not entered in the book provided within ten days of the passing of such Orders, the Secretary was liable to a fine of one guinea.

The Supervisor of Works had £300 per annum with an allowance of £40 for house rent and 6/- per day travelling expenses. The other salaried officials were Inspector of Trade, Revenue and Passage Boats, at £200 per annum. Paymaster and Land Agent £150 with percentage on receipts amounting to about £200 per annum. The Book-keeper had £136.10.0 while the Accountant had only £85 with an allowance of £10 for coal and candles. There was also a Broker, a Storekeeper and a Treasurer's Clerk, each of whom had about £100 per annum.

An Order made early in the year 1810 stated that :

"It is indispensable to the due accommodation of Trade on the Canal that the offices shall remain open for the general dispatch of business from 6 in the morning until 8 in the evening between the 1st May and 1st September and from sunrise to sunset during the remainder of the year."

Each Officer of the Company was required to take the following Oath :—

"I do voluntarily in the presence of God solemnly promise and swear that I will in all things, faithfully, honestly and impartially and with all reasonable diligence, without favour or affection, prejudice or malice execute the Trusts reposed in me by the Company of Undertakers of the Grand Canal in the office of that I will not in any manner defraud the said Company and that I will not willingly or knowingly permit them to be defrauded by any person whatsoever, that I will in all things to the best of my skill and knowledge obey the lawful orders and directions and promote the interests of the Company and that I will from time to time give notice to the said Company of all things that may come to my knowledge to their prejudice or damage, so Help me God."

This Oath was apparently not enough to satisfy the Court of Directors as a further Order stated that :

"No person is fit to be continued in any office who will not submit to a free and full investigation of his conduct in office."

There was, however, one Order in favour of the staff as follows :

"No permanent officer, whose salary or the profits of whose office shall amount to £50 a year shall be dismissed until he shall have first been heard in his defence."

So much for the "Salaried Officials". Now let us have a look at the Conditions which applied to the "Wages Staff".

In the year 1811, 52 lock-keepers were employed at a weekly wage of 6/6 with a free house and garden on which they were required to pay whatever taxes were imposed. They were expected to be available at all hours of the day and night to deal with the passage of boats through the locks. Any lock-keeper found absent from duty unless by leave of the Directors or Inspector of the Line, was dismissed. In addition to regulating water levels, lock-keepers had innumerable other duties such as keeping records and sending weekly returns to head office of all boats passing through the locks with the owners names and boat numbers; the direction in which they were travelling and the number of passengers travelling in the passage boats each day. They were required to take especial care to prevent the passage of cattle across the canal or "otherwise answer to their peril". A reward

of 5/- was paid to lock-keepers for every pig destroyed when found damaging the banks of the canal. Another duty of the lock-keepers was to prevent beggars from troubling the passengers at their locks.

In the year 1810, six passenger boats were in operation, three senior masters were paid £1.14.1½ (1½ Irish Guineas) per week while three junior masters had £1.2.9 (Irish Guinea). Steerers ranged from 16/- to 14/- and stopmen had 11/4½. Eight Horse Contractors were employed to provide horses and drivers at the different stages between Dublin to Sallins, Robertstown, Monasterevan and Athy and between Robertstown, Ballybrittan, Tullamore, and Shannon Harbour. The total contract for one year amounted to £6,700. Bellringers were employed at the various stages at 6/- per week.

The election of a new Court of Directors in February, 1810, resulted in only three of the previous Directors being re-elected as the shareholders were not satisfied with the operation of the Company. The new Court immediately set about a scheme of retrenchment which involved the dismissal of a number of Officials, and reduced salaries for those retained. Among those dismissed were Lord Dunboyne, Inspector of Passage Boats, whose salary was £340 per annum and whose duties were transferred to the Superintendent of Trade and Revenue. John Killally, who had been Engineer in charge of the building of the Canal to the Shannon, and who was presented with a silver cup and £200 by the Directors on its completion in 1803, also lost his job, his duties being transferred to the Supervisor of Works. The wages staff also suffered, the Scavanger at Portobello Hotel who had £29.11.6 per year was laid off as also was a waiter at the Hotel whose pay was only £4.11.0 per year. (Presumably he existed on tips.) A Carpenter who had £1.4.0 per week was also let go, it being arranged to employ him occasionally. Another Carpenter at Portobello with 19/9 per week was also dismissed, his work to be done by contract. The work of the overseers was either discontinued or transferred to other employees.

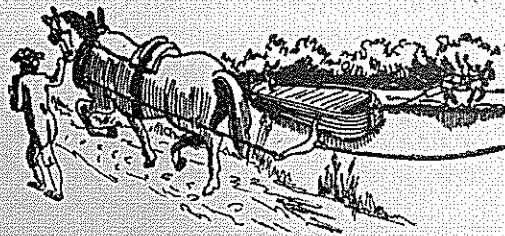
The cost of operating the hotels was also severely reduced. In the case of Robertstown, John Farrell, the hotel-keeper, had his salary reduced from £118.6.0 to £78 per annum and his allowance for coal and candles for the hotel was cut from £222.0.0 to a mere £50. The hearth and window tax for the hotel was reduced from £86.10.8½ to £51, apparently by bricking up a number of windows and fireplaces; there was a further saving of £2.11.0 per year on the allowance for sweeping chimneys. The wages of John Stapleton, bellringer at Robertstown, were reduced from 7/7 to 6/- per week, and James Fitzgerald, porter at the hotel was dismissed, a saving of 7/6 a week. At Shannon Harbour, the hotel-keeper's salary was reduced from £118.6.0 to £40 per annum, and the allowance for turf and candles was cut by £25. There was a further saving of £15 per year by not renewing the licence.

The total savings amounted to over £6,000 per year, but had little effect on the overall financial position of the Company. In the six and

a half years from February 1810 to August 1816, the revenue amounted to £864,534 and expenditure to £862,896, leaving a profit of only £1,638. No dividends were declared for a number of years after August, 1812.

Low rates of pay and long hours continued on the canal for more than a hundred years, and in the early days of Trade Unions, membership of a union was sufficient to warrant dismissal. Eventually Trade Unions were recognised and after a number of strikes certain improvements in pay and conditions were effected and for several years past rates of pay for all employees are subject to Labour Court recommendations.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that a tradesman can now earn more in a half day than his counterpart could earn in a week one hundred and fifty years ago.



THE LUCK OF THE LOWER ORDERS

'An unmarried man of twenty-five, or a woman of twenty, is rarely to be met in the country parts of County Kildare. A situation is pitched on for a mud cabin which is speedily erected with the assistance of the neighbours, who cheerfully contribute to the comforts of the newly married couple. A kitchen and a bedroom bounds all their wishes: a few ridges of potatoes secures a prospect of food. Oatmeal, potatoes, eggs, herrings, with some milk and butter, constitute the food of the lower orders.' (Survey of County Kildare, 1807.)