



OFFALY HERITAGE

JOURNAL OF THE OFFALY HISTORICAL AND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

TITLE	The Grand Canal as it might have been
AUTHOR (S)	J. P. Dalton
PUBLICATION DATE	1966
ORIGINAL CITATION	J. P. Dalton, 'The Grand Canal as it might have been' in <i>Canaliana</i> (1966), pp 2-7
TYPE	journal article
RIGHTS	© Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society
ITEM DOWNLOADED FROM	www.offalyhistory.com

THE GRAND CANAL AS IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

By J. P. DALTON, A.M.I.C.E.I.

If John Smeaton, F.R.S., Engineer of the Forth and Clyde Canal, and designer of the Eddystone Lighthouse, had been consulted in 1756 instead of 17 years later, it is almost certain that the Grand Canal as we know it today, would have been built on a different line in County Kildare, and Robertstown Village might never have been built, at least in its present location.

In 1756, when the Commissioners of Inland Navigation decided to build a canal from Dublin to Athy, the then engineer, Thomas Omer, laid out a line from Dublin to the river Liffey, west of Sallins, but apparently, had no definite plan as to how to proceed from there. Work commenced at the Dublin end in 1756, due to bad workmanship, errors in levels, and underestimating the cost, very little progress had been made by 1770. At that time there was public agitation that the canal should link the Shannon as well as the Barrow, and with this in view, land had been purchased, west of the Liffey extending through Downings as far as the Bog of Moods. Representations were made to the Government by Dublin Corporation, (who were anxious to have the canal completed to augment the city water supply), the Nobility, Gentry and Merchants of the City, and after long negotiations, an Act was passed on the 2nd June, 1772, establishing the Company Undertakers of the Grand Canal. All the works so far completed and land purchased for the line of the canal were transferred to the new Company, which was given authority to complete the building of a canal linking Dublin with the rivers Barrow, Boyne and Shannon.

On 3rd August, 1773, the new Company, not being satisfied with the progress being made by their engineer, John Trail, who had been employed by the Commissioners in 1768, invited John Smeaton to come to Ireland to examine the works so far completed and in hands, and to advise on the most suitable means of linking the canal with the Barrow; how to cross the Liffey west of Sallins; and how to proceed to the Boyne and Shannon. He was also asked to give his views on the desirability of making a navigable connection between James's Street Harbour, Dublin, and the river Liffey. In this connection he was informed that three alternatives had been proposed as follows:— (a) In the same direction as the new environ road (South Circular Road). (b) To pass the City Basin (near James's Street Harbour) and to cross Thomas Street near Crane Lane and to terminate near Lord Moira's House. (c) To cross James's Street and enter the River Liffey opposite the Barracks.

Mr. Smeaton spent 14 days in Ireland during the Summer of 1773. He furnished an interim report on 3rd August of that year, and a more detailed one on 3rd April, 1775. He recommended that all efforts should be concentrated on completing the canal between Dublin and

Sallins, with warehouses built at each end, so that trade could be commenced on this section with the minimum delay and thus bring in some revenue. He also recommended that the canal should cross the Liffey by means of an aqueduct instead of boats entering and leaving the river by means of locks. Land had, at that time, been purchased for the latter purpose and a cutting to the river west of Sallins had been partially excavated, and is still visible. A cutting or deep sinking had been commenced through the Hills of Downings and were it not for this, having regard to the fact that land had been purchased and a considerable sum of money expended, Mr. Smeaton stated he would have had surveys made with a view to finding an alternative line as he did not favour the building of a canal through the bog west of Downings if it could be avoided by going north towards Blackwood or south towards Caragh. He was quite definite that there were so many objections to the building of a canal across the Bog of Allen from the Togher of Graig to Philipstown that he could by no means recommend a canal to be executed thereon.

In his interim report, Mr. Smeaton suggested that the junction with the river Barrow could be made after the canal was carried as far as the Togher of Graig by following the track of the river Blackwood to its junction with the river Figuile, and thence to the Barrow between Portarlinton and Monasterevan.

Regarding the making of a navigable connection between the canal in Dublin and the river Liffey, Mr. Smeaton had this to say: "I have viewed all the ways proposed for joining the Canal with the Liffey at Dublin, and all are practicable, of which I doubt not, but that by the environ road will be the most expensive; but were it least so, I think it most liable to objection, because the navigation by the other routes being carried by the Liffey through the heart of the city, thereby all the warehouses, upon the very extensive quays on each side of the river, would become so many warehouses for the navigation, so that none would be necessary on the company's account. Of the others, that by crossing James's Street, to enter the Liffey opposite the Barracks seems, at present, the least uncumbered and the most direct course; but as the going down to the Liffey will, at any rate, be attended with a great expense, and as the several avenues to the town will be connected by the environ road, and the present termination of the canal, I am of opinion that the Liffey should be the last thing done, and not till the circumstances of the trade of the Grand Canal shall, from actual experience shew it to be necessary."

In both reports he strongly advocated that the junction with the Barrow should be completed and trading commenced thereon before making any attempt to proceed westwards to the Shannon. This recommendation was accepted, as was the one for building the aqueduct across the Liffey, but, apart from general observations regarding the construction of locks and size of boats, little, if any, notice seems to have been taken of the other observations and proposals.

Shortly afterwards the Directors of the new Company became displeased with the slow progress being made by Mr. Trail, who had assisted Mr. Smeaton on his inspections, and who may have been influenced by his reports. He was dismissed and was replaced by General Tarrant as engineer, under whose direction the present line of the canal was completed to Athy in 1791.

In the meantime, a decision was reached regarding the making of a navigable connection between Dublin and the river Liffey. Dublin Corporation, who had subscribed a considerable sum towards the building of the canal, were anxious to obtain a supply of water from their basin at Portobello and this was one of the principal reasons for building the Circular Line as against a much shorter connection from James's Street Harbour across James's Street to the river Liffey.

On the completion of the link with the Barrow, work was pushed ahead on the Shannon Link. Mr. Smeaton's advice to avoid crossing the Bog of Allen was ignored and Tullamore was reached in 1798. The fare on passenger boats from Dublin to Tullamore was 10/10 1st Cabin, and 5/11 2nd Cabin. The junction with the Shannon was accomplished in 1803. This event was of such importance that the following extract from the Minutes of the Court of Directors held on the 27th September, 1803, will be of interest :—

"Ordered that the Inspector of Passage Boats do serve notice on the different Contractors for drawing the Company's passage boats that they are to prepare eight additional horses at each stage from Dublin to Tullamore, to draw the four extra passage boats intended to leave Dublin on Sunday morning the ninth of October, next at six o'clock to convey the Undertakers to Tullamore that day, and to apprise them that they are to draw these boats in the same time as the Boats now in commission, or be subject to the like fines, and also to inform them to be prepared to draw the same boats back from Tullamore on Tuesday morning to set off at six o'clock, the like time to be kept as in drawing the Passage Boats; the difference of time of setting off from Dublin and Tullamore respectively to be added or deducted from the rated time published (of which he is to give due notice) by which they can ascertain the correct time of arrival at each Stage. The Directors will furnish the first four drivers with the use each of one outside coat, one jacket, one pair of trousers, one gold laced hat for the boat that leads the van, and one silver laced hat to each of the other three. N.B. They are to have good boots or shoes, clean stockings and shirt etc. and drive horsemanlike; all the above outside coats, jackets, trousers and hats, they are to exchange with the Drivers at the Stages they arrive at instantaneously or be deprived of the perquisite to be given by the Board for their activity and sobriety; the same mode to be observed on the return from Shannon Harbour.

The Board also desire that Mr. Spray shall procure two additional Boat Masters for the trip in addition to the two Supernumery Ones (Panel the Commander of the *Suck* Cattle Boat may be one of them)

also four neat boat Mistresses and Maids, four Mates and four Steerers, these boats the masters are to furnish with every accommodation such as Tea equipage, glasses, plates, knives, etc. to provide a breakfast and a cold collation each day, and its appurtenances, to be paid for at the time by the passengers, in the manner and at the same rates as in the Passage Boats. Mr. Spray is to procure from Mr. Ross eight grapple irons with cords attached, two for each boat, and to be coiled and placed in the most convenient place, so as to take up any person falling overboard, and not accustomed to long voyages. Each boat is to be furnished with two mooring chains and two iron pins, lest there should not be posts at proper places for all the boats.

Mr. Spray is immediately to concert with Richard Griffith, Esq., or Mr. Killaly to have the boats drawn from Tullamore to Shannon Harbour and back, and to have two boats and pilots on the River Shannon at Shannon Harbour. Two of the Company's ship carpenters and two house carpenters will be necessary, one in each boat, with tools, oakum, canvas, plank, cordage, etc. in case of accident in navigating unknown waters.

The order of movement. *The Hardwicke* to lead the van, with the Grand Junction Emblematic Standard erected, and the Band of Music on board to play "God Save the King" at every town. 2. *The Lea* with her colours. 3. *The Huband* next. 4. *The Latouche* in the rear. To follow each other immediately through each lock.

The Board deem it absolutely necessary that Mr. Spray should have his horse to attend the Grand Junction Flotilla to convey such orders as may be requisite to be issued from the Flag Ship or for any other purpose. Query? Are the arms necessary to be put aboard the Boats.

Ordered that Captain Evans do use every means in his power to have the levels on the whole line up; and the lock-keepers and their families to be dressed in their best apparel, their places neat and Lock-houses whitewashed, and he is to order each Boat's crew to give three cheers as the Royal Grand Canal Standard passes them; all Boats, passage boats and others to and from Dublin to give the way to the Grand Junction Flotilla."

The final linking of the Barrow and Shannon with each other and with Dublin, via the Grand Canal, which took 43 years to accomplish, proved such a success for the speedy and safe transport of passengers and goods, that there was an immediate demand for the building of branch lines to connect with various towns which were suffering from the lack of proper transport facilities. The first of these branch canals, to Naas and Corbally, was opened in 1811. For some years after this, although several proposals were made, there was a lull in canal building. This inaction annoyed a certain Mr. James Dawson, who resided at George's Place, Dublin.

In a series of letters published in Carrick's Morning Post in January, February, and March, 1819, Mr. Dawson sought to "stimulate the Landed Proprietors of Ireland to exert themselves for obtaining such

Legislative measures as are best calculated to promote Canal Extensions on a systematic plan — and thereby effect cheaply and effectually, the Drainage of Bogs — afford employment to the Labouring Poor — extinguish for ever the Internal Disturbances of Ireland — and provide an inexhaustible Granary for Great Britain.”

At that time surveys had been made for a number of extensions of the Grand Canal, and Mr. Dawson concentrated his efforts for the building of a canal from Monasterevan to Mountmellick with a branch to Maryborough and Castlecomer, the main line from Mountmellick to extend to Roscrea where it would divide into two branches, one leading due south to Templemore, Cashel and Cahir, and from there, west to Tipperary and east to Clonmel and Carrick on Suir. The other branch was to go westwards to Nenagh, and to enter the Shannon near O'Brien's Bridge.

Mr. Dawson pointed out that this extension would pass through the exuberantly fertile districts of the South of Ireland; through the extensive coal and culm districts of Doonane and Castlecomer in Kilkenny; and of Slieve Ardagh, Killenaule and Cashel in Tipperary, and terminate at Limerick, near the immense quarries of slate and mines of silver, lead and copper.

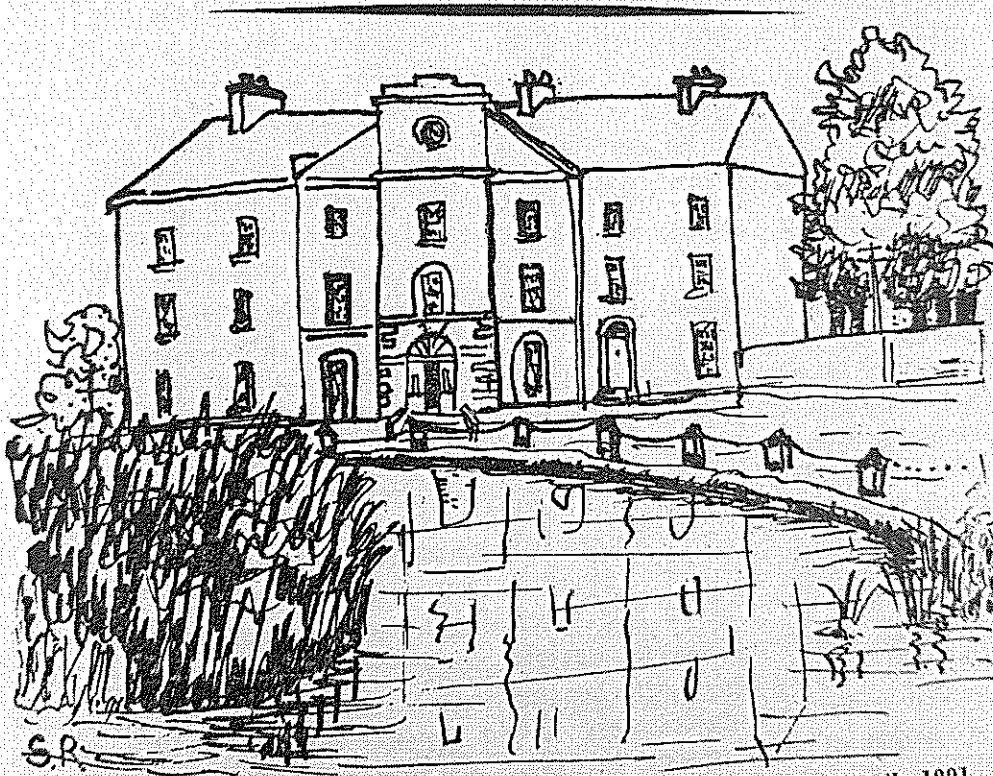
The corn of Limerick and Clonmel, and of the intervening Counties would be transported through Dublin to Liverpool, and the manufacturers and hardware of Scotland and the north and centre of England would be sent in return cargoes to Limerick and the south of Ireland, without the circuitry and uncertainty of a long sea voyage.

Apart from the transport facilities which a canal of this nature would provide, Mr. Dawson had other ideas as to how the building of the canal would benefit the country. He considered the extension as “a remedy for illicit distillation, because it would provide new and distinct markets for the surplus corn of the country, and a remedy for illegal combinations against tithes, rents and the administration of justice, because it would increase and secure a demand for yearly labourers, comfortably housed, clothed and fed, and substitute the peaceful and settled pursuits of agriculturists for the lawless habits of roving, ragged and half employed day labourers.”

The “Landed Proprietors” apparently showed no desire to co-operate with Mr. Dawson as in one of his letters he attacked them as follows : “As to our Landed Proprietors, some of the most extensive and affluent are resident in England or upon the Continent; forgetful of every incident connected with their country but the punctual remittance of the expected rents. The remainder who are resident on their native soil are almost universally tenants for life, or in tail under wills or settlements; their expenses at least equal to their incomes — their younger children provided for by charges on their lands, and their minds, anxious, not for the future aggrandisement of the family estates, which a distant posterity may possess, but to enjoy the gratifications, and revel in the luxuries of the present hour.”

Mr. Dawson's efforts to have the canal extended were not entirely in vain. A branch to Ballinasloe was opened in 1827, and a branch to Mountmellick in 1830. The last branch to be built was to Kilbeggan in 1834. The coming of the railways a few years later put an end to further canal extensions.

Let us now look back and guess what might have happened if the line from Dublin to Athy could have been built as quickly as the line from Lowtown to the Shannon. Both are about the same length. The former took 35 years to complete while the latter took only 12 years. If the line to Athy could have been built as quickly, and it possibly could have been but for the inexperience and bad management of the original builders, the Barrow would have been reached about the year 1768 and the Shannon, 12 years later. It is quite possible, therefore, that the branch from Monasterevan to Mountmellick might have been carried further on and Mr. Dawson's dreams fully realised. On the other hand, if Mr. Smeaton's suggestions had been carried out, would Robertstown, as we know it, have found a place on the map? and would there have been a "Circular Line" to talk about today? Who knows!



The Grand Canal Hotel, Robertstown.

Built 1801

Resolved: that a lamp be erected at Monasterevan where the Passengers land out of the Passenger Boats and that Mr. Bean be requested to provide a Globe or Lantron with six Burners to light the Passengers to and from the Boat to the Inns at Monasterevan in the mornings and evenings.

Standing Orders, Grand Canal Company, 1786.