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# Waterway Travellers in Ireland

N. W. English

The advent of the Passenger Boats on the Grand Canal in August 1780 must have been a momentous occasion for the travelling public in Ireland. Transport in that period was surprisingly under-developed. Coaches from Dublin to Kilkenny went four days a week; Limerick and Athlone had a twice a week service, and there was only a once a week service to Birr and Banagher. To reach Cork, one had to change from coach to post chaise at Kilkenny. A journey from Galway to Dublin occupied three days: the first night was spent at Ballinasloe, the second at Kilbeggan and Dublin was not reached until the evening of the third day.

These difficulties of travel induced the Directors of the Grand Canal to build a boat to carry passengers, when the section to Sallins was completed. An improved version of the boat was built in 1781, having two cabins instead of one. These boats were 52 feet long by 9 feet 10 inches beam, and for a time were fitted with a mast, yard, and sail to increase speed when the wind was favourable.

The Grand Canal having commenced in 1756 reached Robertstown in 1785, Monasterevan in 1786. The main line reached Tullamore in 1798 and finally the Shannon in 1805.

The first recorded account of a traveller on the Canals in Ireland, is to be found in the diaries of the Rev. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.

"Wednesday 22nd June 1785. I went, with twelve or fourteen of our friends, on the Canal to Prosperous. It is a most elegant way of travelling, little inferior to that of Trackskuyts in Holland. We had fifty or sixty persons in the boat, many of whom desired me to give them a sermon. I did so, and they were all attention. After preaching at five in the morning, Thursday 23rd, I took boat with a larger company than before, who about eleven, desired me to preach."

The Canal extension to Robertstown is dated 1785. If John Wesley vacated the passage boat at Robertstown he did so in its first year. His is undoubtedly the first published account of travel on the Grand Canal. This interesting first was apparently unknown to previous writers on the Canal, including Henry Phillips, who had been General Manager of the Grand Canal Company and wrote many articles on the subject, the fact was also unknown to Hayward, Rolt and other writers.

The Dublin University Magazine for 1853, contains an Eighteenth Century Traveller's account, under the heading "A Stage-Coach Story" by Jonathan Freke Slingsby.

"In all the changes that have taken place in this changeable world,

GRAND CANAL  
**Passage Boats,**  
**To MILLTOWN,**  
 (Near the CURRAGH.)

THE Public are hereby informed that a Passage Boat will commence plying, on MONDAY the sixth Day of June, 1808, between Robertstown and Milltown, and continue to ply, during the ENCAMPMENT at the Curragh, for the conveyance of Passengers, their Luggage, and SMALL PARCELS.—The Boat will depart and arrive, as follows, viz:—

**ROBERTSTOWN to MILLTOWN.**

A Boat will depart, from Robertstown Hotel, every Morning, at five o'Clock, and will arrive about seven o'Clock, at Milltown.

A Boat will also depart from Robertstown Hotel, every Day, at twelve o'Clock, (after the arrival of the two Morning Boats from Dublin) and will arrive, at Milltown, about two o'Clock in the Afternoon.

**MILLTOWN to ROBERTSTOWN.**

A Boat will depart from Milltown, every Morning, at nine o'Clock, and will arrive, about eleven o'Clock, at Robertstown Hotel; from which Place, the Passengers may proceed, on the same Day, at twenty Minutes past one o'Clock, for Dublin, so as to arrive there, at thirty-five Minutes past seven o'Clock in the Evening.

A Boat will also depart, from Milltown, every Evening, at seven o'Clock, and will arrive, about nine o'Clock, at Robertstown Hotel; from which place, the Passengers may proceed, next Morning, at four o'Clock, for Dublin, so as to arrive there at a quarter past ten.

**FARES BETWEEN ROBERTSTOWN AND MILLTOWN.**

FIRST CABIN, - 2s. 6d.

SECOND DITTO, 1s. 8d.

Rates of Ordinary, the same as in other of the Company's Passage Boats.

Rates of small Parcels, between Dublin and Milltown,

NOT EXCEEDING		
In Weight	Or in Size, Cubical Feet.	
14lb.	1	2s. 1d.
28lb.	1½	3s. 0d.

*By Order,*  
**DANIEL BAGOT, Sec.**

31st May, 1808.

GARRICKS, PRINTERS, BACHELOR'S-WALK.

since I had the pleasure of making acquaintance with it, the greatest is in travelling. When I was a youngster, I remember my father who was Mayor of Cork in the year 1797, setting out for Dublin with the Address from the Corporation of Cork to the Viceroy of the day. It was thought at that time to be a great journey and the leave taking of friends and relatives was not without tears. They took two days to reach Limerick, on the third day they proceeded to Tullamore where they slept, and on the fourth, taking ship in the Canal boat, they arrived in the Metropolis late at night."

This round-about route from Cork to Dublin, taken by the Lord Mayor in 1797, is ample proof of the inadequate travelling conditions in late eighteenth century Ireland, and of the tremendous advantage that canal travel offered to the public. He apparently travelled to Tullamore to avail of the comfortable facilities of the passage boat. The first recorded account of travel on the Barrow section of the Grand Canal is to be found in Monsieur Latocnaye's, "A Frenchman's Walk through Ireland in 1796".

"I stopped at Carlow, situated on the Barrow, which joins with the Grand Canal of Ireland. Wishing to see something of this waterway I went to Athy, from whence every day there is a service of public boats to Dublin. The Canal boats are very comfortable, being indeed very like those of Holland, but the cost here is nearly double. The one in which I travelled carried a large number of political talkers of the type known in France as Mouchards. Seeing that I was a foreigner, one of them spoke to me several times on delicate and difficult matters affecting the Government. Fearing false interpretations I responded in ambiguous terms, and in the end found it politic to feign sleep — a very good way of getting out of such difficulties. The Canal is a magnificent piece of work, crossing immense tracts of moor, where 10 or 12 feet of peat have been removed before reaching earth in which the waterway could be cut. Several aqueducts have been necessary, one of them of really prodigious length and height."

The Grand Canal to the Barrow reached Monasterevan in 1786, and Athy in 1791, thus opening the link to the sea at Waterford. Latocnaye's account published in 1796, five years after the opening, is in all probability the first recorded description of travel on a completed canal in Ireland, from terminus to source.

Passenger travelling on the River Shannon did not commence until 1825, when Grantham introduced the first steamer "The Marquis Wellesley". This was a failure due to his Limerick financial backers letting him down at the appropriate moment. He was bought out in 1829 by C. W. Williams's "Inland Steam Navigation Company". Previous to 1825, some commercial sailing barges plied on the Shannon, particularly on the Lakes, and on the river sections when the wind was favourable.



Eighteenth century travellers accounts on the River must be confined to occasional short trips by oar or sail. In 1779 the famous artists Gabriel Beranger and Bigari (who sketched almost all the historic places of Ireland between 1760-1780) visited Athlone. They travelled to Clonmacnoise, on 12th August, and Beranger relates their trip by water.

"We set out at five in the morning, in a long narrow boat with Mr. Bigari and our interpreter; this vessel was so narrow that the seats held but one person, so that we were sitting one behind another, with order of the conductor not to lean to right or left, or that if we did we should be upset and drowned, which not choosing, we kept in an erect posture, having got only leave to move our head to admire the Shannon and its pleasing banks. Tedious as this posture was, we continued strictly to observe it; but being tired of it, we landed on an island, spread the cloth upon the grass, and eat a cold fowl washed down with wine and water; went in our vehicle with great care, and arrived at Clonmacnoise, 10 miles from Athlone in 3 hours, though the vessel by its structure, went fast, one man making it go by 2 oars or paddles."

Monsieur De Latocnaye having travelled the Grand Canal, also sampled the river Shannon, probably in 1796.

"I returned to O'Brien's Bridge, and after having taken a plunge into the Shannon in order to put him in a good temper with me, I ascended the river with Mr. Waller in a little boat, for which my umbrella served as sail. The river was charming, beautiful, calm, and it seemed to be deep but soon we came to a waterfall and were obliged to land. They are here digging a little canal of about 100 paces long, to join the two navigable parts of the river. Returning in the boat we travelled 10 miles and were again obliged to land and even to leave the boat. Here they are making a canal which shall be about 1 mile long and which will terminate near the beautiful palace of the Bishop of Killaloe."

Other records of canal travel are those of William Leadbeater in his letters to his wife. Extracts from these appeared already in the 1966 Robertstown Festa Booklet.