

# **Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI)**

## **Carrick on Shannon 70 years**

Recognising the derelict state of the nation's once vibrant inland navigation and the risk of closing and filling in the canal arteries for new roads a far-sighted group of leisure boating enthusiasts formed the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI). It has to be appreciated that in the early 1950's the inward-looking political landscape was changing. Commercial trade on the inland navigation such as the River Shannon, Royal and Grand canals and Barrow link all connecting major seaports had almost ceased and the once popular emigration water transport from the west counties had been replaced by bus and train. These likeminded enthusiasts had a very simple vision, to promote the development, use and maintenance of Ireland's navigable rivers and canals. Leisure boating albeit on Lough Ree and Derg was totally undeveloped and the link to leisure boating and riverside community socio-economic development not yet considered as an economic driver for the midland region. The light had yet to shine on the River Shannon as a national asset.

From its humble beginnings the IWAI has grown to become a formidable voluntary sector driver of waterside development and restoration with very clear and defined aims:

- a) To promote the use, maintenance and development of the inland waterways of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and in particular to advocate and promote the restoration to good order, and maintenance in good order, of every navigable waterway and the re-opening of disused waterways and the fullest use of every navigable waterway by both commercial and pleasure traffic, provided such is not injurious to the environmental health of the waterways and surrounding areas.
- b) To support any proposal which may be calculated to maintain or improve inland waterways and also to improve navigation, lay moorings and carry out other works of improvement on or adjacent to the waterways.
- c) To oppose by appropriate action the abandonment and neglect of Irish canals or river navigations, the pollution of waterways, the obstructions of navigations by fixed bridges aqueducts, overhead cables, or otherwise, the obstruction of towing paths or any other action calculated to injure or destroy the navigation or amenities of the waterways of Ireland.
- d) To prepare, either alone or in collaboration with any other body, guide charts, maps, and other literature suitable for use by persons using the inland waterways for any purpose, and to foster public interest in and knowledge of the Irish Waterways by disseminating information on the subject to members and to the general public.

These laudable objectives of the IWAI have been developed over time with the maturity of a growing organisation that is the IWAI today.

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The IWAI is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity (CHY no 10915). It has a board of fifteen Directors including the Chair who administer the company activities. Matters of policy are debated on and decided by a Council consisting of representatives of the IWAI branch network.

The IWAI is an all-Ireland organisation, represented by 24 branches locally based around the waterways (7 in Northern Ireland, 16 in the Republic and 1 activity-based branch) representing approximately 3000 members.

The IWAI works in partnership with national and local government, statutory agencies and development companies, the community, voluntary and business sectors, lobbying, advising and working together to protect and promote the long-term development of the inland waterways.

The IWAI publishes a quarterly magazine “Inland Waterways News” which is a unique publication covering a wide range of topics of interest to waterways enthusiasts at local, national and international level. It also has a wide and comprehensive published list of waterways related books and guides.

The IWAI activities range from boat rallies, social events, training, education, safety and community events, heritage and conservation projects and work parties for restoration or improvements to navigations e.g. Ulster Canal, Lagan Navigation, Coalisland Canal, Boyne Navigation and the Kilbeggan and Corbally lines of the Grand Canal.

The IWAI website is one of the largest single reference sources for waterways related material in Ireland.

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Of the twenty-four branches in the IWAI nationwide network the Carrick on Shannon branch is the oldest and largest. Founded on the 11th of November 1954 in the Carrick on Shannon Town Hall and to great applause was addressed by the O’ Rahilly who recounted the IWAI activities in Athlone where the potential construction of a low air draft bridge was halted in favour of maintaining the through unencumbered navigation. The O’Rahilly extolled to the assembled gathering that the Carrick community would not receive outside assistance and therefore must help themselves. On his request he asked the Carrick meeting to formally join the IWAI and put the River Shannon on the map. To great applause the fate of the future navigation was sealed, the IWAI gathered strength from its numbers and the plans were laid. The branch quickly lobbied and moved to get navigational beacons and markers established on river channels to determine safe navigation for leisure traffic, constructed a slipway and had running tap water installed on the Carrick quay wall. The founding fathers were drawn from a wide section of the Carrick on Shannon community unanimously recognising the want and potential of a boating leisure and tourist opportunity for the Carrick and wider reaches of the navigation to the north and south.

At a meeting in the Bush Hotel on Monday the 27th of September 1960 the Carrick on Shannon Yacht Club was by a unanimous vote amalgamated into the IWAI Carrick Branch. At the same meeting a discussion took place to produce a branch leaflet "Carrick Welcomes You" and those sentiments prevail today as the IWAI Carrick Branch is known as the "Friendly Branch".

The Carrick branch was instrumental in the creation of the Shannon Boat Rally (SBR), now the largest annual event in the IWAI national calendar. Starting in Carrick in 1963 and sponsored by Esso the SBR has grown well beyond the founding fathers' expectations and now repeatedly and biannually since 1963 brings up to one hundred visiting cruisers and up to four hundred participants to the north Shannon for a ten-day cruise, always finishing with a flourish in Carrick on Shannon. This equates to moving a small village every day along the river with the socio-economic benefits to each riverside community where the rally stops nightly. This event brings spectacle, colour and energetic activity and through its repeat occurrence bears testimony to the commitment of the IWAI Carrick branch to the north Shannon as a base of boating activity since its inception.

While many of the IWAI Carrick branches activities are social, there are also the more serious objectives and values of the wider association applied locally particularly and foremost "safety on the water", "education on the water", and the protection of our fragile environment. The learning and passing of boating skills for juniors and seniors takes many forms from basic, intermediate and advanced boat handling and skills, marine communication to a statutory examination standard and boat maintenance. While the pleasure of the boat is primarily a summer activity, the education and boat maintenance covers the twelve months of the year with Carrick and the meeting rooms being the primary education centres.

Communication and liaison at a local and national level with the Shannon navigation regulator (Waterways Ireland) for the improvements to the already well developed waterway, defining and refining the safe navigation channel, maintenance of the historical navigational markers that still hold a significant place of navigational value to each boat's skipper as they ply the north Shannon waterways. We actively lobby WI for additional jetties at the more remote north Shannon locations. Working closely with WI, this brings added value but more importantly an appreciation of the extraordinary Heritage and Diversity that abounds the Shannon shoreline and near shore areas. The IWAI and its branch network and particularly Carrick engage actively with the government on water related policy issues and contribute to various consultation and policy documents on matters such as water safety, safe navigation, education and future planning.

Additionally, IWAI Carrick has a close relationship with the local authority who itself recognised the value of the county waterfront and promoted it through the development and investment of piers, slips and boardwalks.

Separately to the socio-economic value that the branch's activities bring, the Carrick branch also places a very high value on its activities within the community at a grass roots level. This happens through financial and physical support to the Carrick Cubs

and Leitrim and Roscommon Sea Scots. Annually, the branch holds its Carrick Cares Day. This important annual event centred at the Lough Key Forest Park allows the branch to invite and include otherwise potentially marginalized members of society to participate in festivities, boating, lake excursions, games, music and food in close co-operation and facilitation with the nationwide branch network of the Irish Wheelchair Association of Ireland. The branch participates in the community promotion of waterside activities such as the St Patrick's Day Parade of sail on the water, The Gathering, Summer Solstice/Carrick Music festival and other community initiatives. The IWAI Carrick boating community participates actively in the Rooskey and Jamestown festivals and hold that spectacle of colour to the waterways that flows through.

With seventy years behind to celebrate the IWAI Carrick branch also looks forward to the challenges that prevail. These encompass the changing socio-economic demands on the members, membership retention and growth, external demands and regulation of the waterways such as water abstraction, regulatory governance, impacts on the heritage and biodiversity, pollution and emissions. While the branch looks towards the IWAI central Executive for planning, policy and guidance we also look to take control locally of our own destiny, to continue to mark our place within the north Shannon waterway catchment community and the waterfront communities that continue to grow in diversity. To forge partnerships and strengthen relationships with other established water and near shore users such as the rowing, fishing communities, water safety. While very much in its infancy there appears to be a growing thread and connection between boating and mobile cambers in that the harbours and piers attract both and the facility demands are common to both, but early days. Community and growth of a community spirit share the common goal of the appreciation of the waterway and its pleasurable offerings to all.