

Editorial The Importance of Folklife and Folklore Studies

Welcome to another issue of Galway Heritage/ Oidhreacht na Gaillimhe. In this edition we start a new series of Folklife and Folklore articles and hope to brief our readers through interesting and important group of articles. Some of the pieces will be based

on interview with the editor and others on interviews with Heritage experts including Eira Parry and Eleanor Penkert. We hope our readers enjoy this new series.

Galway City Folklife and Folklore Survey No.1: Frank Kavanagh – Boatmaker and Craftsman

By Eira Parry

The Heritage Office, Galway City Council is currently recording folklore and reminiscences from Galwegians and in the first of a series of articles on the subject Eira Parry has written on the topic of a well known Galwegian craftsman. This article is based on taped interviews with Frank Kavanagh of Woodquay.

You could say that Frank Kavanagh married into boats as he married his boss's daughter! His late father-in-law, Con Hickey, who was also a boatmaker, had a company in Renmore called 'Hickey Boats' and this is where Frank served as his apprentice from 1947. The apprenticeship was for seven years and for his first week's wage he received ten shillings, working five and a half days from 9 – 6 (working half a day on a Saturday).

Once Frank Kavanagh set up on his own in 1960 in the shed built behind his house, he found that there was no need to advertise his business. Born and brought up on the Corrib, he was well known in the area and business came to him by word of mouth. He would put the odd advert in the paper if a particular event took place and if there was a boat show locally, he would take his boat there, but otherwise he was able to rely on his reputation. Frank was a boatmaker and repairer from 1947 until he retired in 2003.

The traditional boats on the Corrib were lakeboats made of native larch and although all boatmakers did not make the same kind of boat they would have been something similar being basically standard 18ft long 4ft beam boats. Frank Kavanagh only made lakeboats and used to design his own. Although all lakeboats were similar, to the trained eye the difference in the design of the boats was evident. It may only have been the height of the stem, the width of the transom or the beam of the boat but while the untrained eye would be unable to distinguish one lake boat from the other, boatmakers could, even by only looking at the boat, tell who had made it if they knew the builder!

Larch, the timber used for the boats, came from the Ashford Estate in County Mayo, where there was a sawmill at Ashford Castle. Frank knew a chap there and he would get a few trees sawn and planks from him. Since the timber would not have already been seasoned the boatmakers would place the planks on the gable end of the shed with lattes between them for between four and six months before using them. If it were a very

dry summer there would be a slight shrinkage so a coat of paint would be applied to the joints to seal them. In winter the planks would be outside and sufficiently covered to protect them from the weather but also to allow air to pass through them. The boatmen did not dry the timber in a kiln.

Different types of timber would be used for different parts of the boat. Oak would be used for the frames and larch or spruce would be used for the planking. However if the boatmakers were doing a classy job mahogany would be used. This would be bought from an importer and it would be already kiln-dried. The oars on the boats were made of spruce.



Fig.1 Wooden lake boats in the Corrib from a 19th century postcard. Reproduced courtesy of Tom Delaney.

Three men usually worked on building a boat and it took them approximately three weeks. They would initially set up the keel – the backbone of the boat, fit the bow end and then the stern end to that. The transom – where the outboard would be – would be set up on stocks to keep the keel straight with a slight curve in it. The hog would then be inserted over the keel and this would hold the planks in place. The mould would then be put in to take the shape for the centre of the boat and then they would start planking the boat. A template would then be taken of the actual mould on the centre and work would start on dividing the planks for each side, depending on the width. The bow end would be narrower because the height was less. Moulds were used as markings and cut-outs for the templates. They would then use these templates for future boats. In this way boatmen could prepare the planking before making the boat so as to speed up the process.

Any kind of timber would have been used for the moulds – scraps

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from the shed or sometimes plywood. No pegs were used but rather nails. Galvanised pegs would be used for the stem and transom and copper nails for the rest. The boatmen also painted the boats. When Frank Kavanagh started out they used red lead but later down the years they switched to wood preservatives such as Cuprinol. The boat would be coated inside and out after it was built, dried, two primer coats would then be applied and, lastly, the finishing coat. Many of the boats would also be varnished from the water line up – inside and out.



Fig.2 Lakeboats in the River Corrib in the 1890s. Photograph courtesy of Marguerite Slattery.

Some boats would also be caulked, depending on the type of boat being built. Carvel boats, where the planks would have been edge to edge would have been caulked but there would have been no need for this process with clinker boats, where the planks would have overlapped each other. Caulking cotton would then have been put into the joints where it would swell when wet making the boat watertight. If any tar had been used to seal the joints, the boatmen would have had to use aluminium paint on the boat to kill the tar but it would keep coming out through the paint. So over aluminium paint you had to paint boats gray but this would have been purely for cosmetic rather than functional reasons.

It was very difficult to work on your own. You could do some jobs on your own but not everything. You couldn't put in the frames and bend them into the boat – it was a two-person operation. You could only do small jobs on your own e.g. assemble the keel and stem and transom and prepare the planks.

They were long, hard days working manually with big, wooden planes until later on, the advent of electricity and electric tools replaced manual work. All tools were hand-driven and all holes in boats had to be hand-bored otherwise the timber would split. When you bored holes in larger boats you had an auger – a long wooden piece, but today everything is electric whereas then it was manual.



Fig.3 An illustration commissioned by James Hardiman of Galway 1820. Reproduced courtesy of Patria McWalter, County Archivist. A variety of traditional wooden boats are shown in the illustration.

Frank never made any of his own tools, he always bought them. He started with wooden planes then progressed to metal ones. According to him, setting the irons in the wooden ones was an art in itself. In the modern ones you can adjust them quite easily. On the other hand, his father-in-law used to make his own bit for drills. He would use a bicycle spoke, flatten the end of the spoke according to the size of the head of the nail and put it into the

hand drill and it would last for ages. When it broke he threw it away and made a new one!

Tools could be purchased in any of the hardware shops in Galway. If you couldn't get any particular thing, e.g. boat chandlery; you could get them from boat suppliers in London. They used to get their nails from London because they only used to stock a few in Galway, there not being a big enough demand for nails here since the Hooker, the boat native to Galway, would have been built using pegs.



After the First World War outboard motors started to come on the scene and by the end of the Second World War they had become more reliable.

Although lakeboats were designed for fishing, people wanted bigger and faster boats.

Consequently the design changed, the engine had to go flatter so that the boat would rise and 'plane' or 'semi-plane'. It did not take long for engine boats to replace the original lakeboats. Despite the evolution of the design of boats and the emergence of fibreglass boats in the 1970s, there was still

demand for Frank's boats. Some didn't like the performance of the fibreglass boats, finding them dead in the water and not drifting well, which was essential when you were casting for fish. With fibreglass boats, however, there was no need for maintenance

and with this being much more convenient for people, fibreglass boats became commonplace. Many asked Frank why he didn't switch to making such boats but due to his age and the necessity of having to go to England to train, he chose not to.

He had all his own templates and once he retired he offered them to a few people but nobody wanted them. With boats having evolved and made from fibreglass there was too much work involved in making wooden boats and in their maintenance and so his templates would have been superfluous. The situation now was that the handier the boat was, the better – no need to paint or wash it!

Some of his customers would come back in the spring and ask him to repair and/or paint the boat but most people would do it themselves...and badly! They would usually bring the boat to be





repaired in the autumn or even in the spring when they were preparing to use the boat or when they would see that there was something wrong with the boat, e.g. that it was rotting.

His customers varied from businessmen, ordinary workingmen and commercial fishermen. He sold boats around the country, sending one to America and to England. His grandson, who now lives in Scotland has one too. His boat legacy is therefore, alive and kicking.



Frank Kavanagh did not name his boats unless an individual wanted a particular one. 'Mayfly' would have been a popular name for boats in spring, whereas 'Hopper' would have been common in the autumn or during September due to the abundance of Grasshoppers; insects also used for fishing. Although the majority of Frank's boats were the same he would also have to build boats in accordance with his customers' wishes. Some would want the transom wider for example, or the boat a bit longer, higher in the stem or even wider in the middle. He would, therefore, have to work off any plan with which a customer would have come in. All his boats would have been decorated with a nameplate – Frank Kavanagh Marine Ltd., Galway. His boats were usually used for leisure but he also made them for commercial purposes.

Although Frank Kavanagh retired in 2003 he had stopped building boats back in the 1990s due to situations out of his control. In 1998 there was uproar all over Ireland and in particular on Lough Corrib, due to a law forcing anglers to carry a fishing licence when trout-fishing. Fishermen consequently went on strike and didn't fish. Frank, therefore, didn't build a boat for two years. Until then, his business had been doing very well but the strike came at totally the wrong time for him and he had to sell the business. He did, however, continue to repair boats and did so until he retired.

The average age for a boat would be between twenty and thirty years, thirty-five years if they are well maintained. Frank's son has

one he built 29 years ago. The lakeboats were not expensive. One of the last one's Frank built and sold back in the 1990s cost around £800, which was not bad. Back in 1947 when Frank started his apprenticeship an 18ft boat cost £32, which was a lot of money back then, bearing in mind that Con Hickey, himself, only paid himself £5 a week in wages. The money was relevant to the period.



Frank no longer has any of his boats, as he says, "I'm like the shoemaker who couldn't afford a decent pair of shoes!" He is however not stuck for a boat, should he ever need one as there are many of his still around, owned by fishing clubs and those in private ownership.

Although Frank was present at one occasion of the Blessing of the bay, he did not go out of his way to bless his own boats although some of his customers would have had them blessed. He would also be present when his boats were launched unless they were taken away from Galway to other parts of the country and beyond.

There are many superstitions regarding fishing / boating tradition and amongst those Frank are familiar with is that told to him by Claddagh people over fifty years ago that if a fisherman were to meet a redheaded woman on the street on his way out to the trawlers or hookers he would not go out to sea that day. Meeting a rat on the quay would also bring them bad luck, in their minds. According to Frank, whether that was pure superstition or just bad luck, there must have been some truth in it. He had heard of the tradition of nailing a coin to the boat for protection, but in his mind, that was more to do with coastal fishing. He had, however, often put a plaque of St. Christopher on the boat for people at their request, to keep them safe. People would also leave things on the seat rather than nail things or attach a bottle of holy water to the boat by a string.

In Frank's opinion, boatbuilding is a lost craft as there is too much labour involved. People also do not have the money today to mind them and they will not pay anybody else to do it. They will do the work themselves rather than having a proper job done. He does believe, however, that it will return when the last boat has gone and they are unavailable. Frank, however, is not bitter about the loss of such a craft as there are some great boats out there, such as cruiser classics. He does think, however, that some copies of lake boats are truly awful and, in his mind, not as effective. Although boatmakers worked painstakingly long hours and for little money, for him, it was a labour of love.

I would like to thank Mr. Frank Kavanagh for his willingness to be interviewed for this article and for the pictures he provided.