

Importance of Lough Corrib in the early 1900s

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Note: This is a synopsis of a presentation give at the “Farming and Country Life 1916” event which took place on 10th/11th June 2016 in the Teagasc Mellows Campus in Athenry.

In 1911 Galway was a county in decline. Its population has fallen to 182,224 in the ten years after 1901. The pre-famine population was 422,923 so the 1911 population represented a fall of over 240,000. In addition, the rate of births and marriages was below the national average.

Lough Corrib played many roles in the life of the people living around the Corrib from early times as is clearly seen from the recent discoveries of bronze-age wrecks and Viking battle-axes on the bottom of the lake. This gives us a clear hint that the Corrib was a very important transport route from early times. At the beginning of the 20th century, the roads around the Corrib were of very poor quality rendering transport of goods and people extremely difficult. It was recognised in the middle of the 19th century that the Corrib had the potential to provide much improved transport potential at which time (ca. 1850) there were about 110 boats of from 5 to 8 tons plying the lake. It was even suggested by Rev. John D’Arcy Vicar of St. Nicholas Parish that with the addition of navigation beacons, ships drawing 15 feet could navigate the whole Corrib. He was rather ambitious. However, this knowledge did indeed encourage improvements to the navigation and in June 1859 an Award was made appointing the Lough Corrib Navigation Trustees to maintain and repair the various navigational aids on the river and lake including the Eglinton Canal. The outcome would be a navigation channel having a depth of 6.5 feet at ordinary summer level – today this is about 3 feet in certain stretches. The Friars Cut was made navigable in 1845 and the Eglinton Canal was built between 1848 and 1842 and there were even plans to link the Corrib and the Mask with a canal thus facilitating navigation from Galway Bay almost to Ballina.

The result of all this work is that at the beginning of the 20th Century Lough Corrib had enormous potential for transport of people and goods. There were large piers at Woodquay, Kilbeg, Oughterard and Cong with minor piers at Keelkyle, Knock, Maam, Annaghkeen, Ballynalty, Ballymagibbon and Annaghdown. Coal Park Quay catered for Clonbur and the pier at Doon catered for Carragarew and Drumsnamh. In 1905 *the S.S. Clodhna* sailed for Coal Park Quay and Maam every Friday departing Wood Quay at 8 a.m. leaving Coal Park for Maam at 1 p.m. In 1906 the S.S. *Fairy Queen* also transported goods and passengers between Galway and Cong. Other steamers that plied the lake included *The O’Connell*, *The Enterprise*, *The Lioness*, the *Eglinton*, the *Widgeon*, the *Saint Patrick* and *The Father Daly*. The *Eglinton* traded between Galway and Cong for over 30 years. The *Saint Patrick* was a screw steamer 70’ x 15’ x 5’3” and operated until 1914. She had a crew of 6 and was certified to carry 150 passengers. In addition to the steamers, there was a fleet of hookers and sailing boats that carried people and cargo from one end of the lake to the other and from the steamers to small local piers. These boats were also used to carry animals out to the islands.

Tourism and employment

Even at the beginning of the 20th Century, Oughterard was famous as a location for angling. In 1907 the fishing in Oughterard gave employment to 50 men who got 11/6 a day if they had a boat. Typically they caught 8 trout per day which was sold at 1/8 lb. At that time there were four hotels in Oughterard.

Currarevagh, the home of the Hodgson family since the 1600s, located on the lake shore about 4 miles from Oughterard has been run as a sporting lodge for paying guests since 1890 and they have a brochure dated 1900 with instructions on getting to there from London Euston Railway Station. This the owners believe makes it the oldest fishing and hunting lodge in Ireland, certainly the oldest in continuous ownership.

The Guinness family had a very great impact on both the infrastructure of the Corrib and the quality of life enjoyed by the inhabitants, particularly those living in the vicinity of Cong. Sir Benjamin Lee Guinness purchased the Ashford Castle Estate in 1852 and until his death in 1868 he worked tirelessly to improve both the castle amenities and the living conditions of the tenants. He reclaimed lands, built bridges, planted many trees and at one time employed over 300 people at a time when there was little other employment available in the Cong area. Sir Benjamin was succeeded by his son Lord Ardilaun who continued the work of this father. He planted over one million trees on the estate and eventually there was 25 miles of pathway throughout the estate. In the early 1900's he decided to add to Ashford House at a cost of 1 million pounds and this gave a large amount of local employment. He died in 1915 before the work was complete. The estate was the location for some of the most famous woodcock shoots in the world and this provided employment for a large number of 'beaters' from the local community. Starting on the 28th January 1910, six guns shot 77, 86, 228 110, 86 birds given a total of 587 for 5 days.

Lord Ardilaun also took a keen interest in the Corrib steamer service and the paddle steamer *Lady Eglinton* which plied between Galway, Oughterard and Cong was subsidised by him for twenty years as the other steamers were unable to cope with the transport demands. He also contributed to the establishment of a trout hatchery in Oughterard in 1907. One only has to view the historic photographs to see the number of people involved in the above activities. Ashford Castle has been hosting distinguished guests for almost 800 years – one of the most prominent being the Prince of Wales, who subsequently became George V of England. In honour of his visit in 1905, the Guinness family built a special dining room which still bears his name proudly to this day.

Other activities that created employment around the Corrib were a number of mines, the most famous being the Clements mine in Carrowgariff on the left hand side of the R345 just east of Maam Bridge. The ruins and the tailings are still to be seen today. Other mines were located around the lake in Curraun and Glengowla - now used as a mining museum. Poitín making also employed many people on both the western and eastern shores and is the subject of a story called *An Stilléara* in *Cumhacht na Cinneamhna* a book written by Tomás Bairéad of Moycullen who clearly had an intimate knowledge of the Corrib and poitín making.

Boat building

Given the number of boats on the lake in previous centuries, it is likely that there were many boat builders producing a variety of boats. Like Maurice Semple, I have found it frustrating to find so little information on the boat builders and their products. The following paragraphs summarise the information I have been able to accumulate and perhaps readers will assist in filling the many gaps. Brief details of some of the most famous of the Corrib boat builders are provided in the following paragraphs.

John and Michael Walsh: John's boat building business was initially located in Oughterard and according to Semple, the family had been boat builders for over three centuries. After a spell abroad, John returned to Oughterard and when business in Oughterard was slack, Michael moved to Galway and set up business at 4 Woodquay in November 1882. He built many different types of boats including sailing boats and sold them to clubs all over Ireland. Michael was proud of the performance of his sailing boats at the annual Salthill regatta.

John Lynch: John Lynch a Ship's carpenter worked for a consortium that set up a factory where the current NUIG Bailey Allen hall is now located. The consortium decided to build a twin-screw steamer for the Galway Liverpool route and named it '*The Emerald*'. This vessel was launched on 26th January 1871 and went down the Eglinton Canal to the sea. John Lynch also had a ship yard at the docks and in 1898 he built the last Corrib steamer, the *St. Patrick*. This was a substantial vessel of some 100 ft. long capable of carrying up to 200 tons of cargo. It was intended to ply on the lake and the bay, this being facilitated by the Eglinton Canal.

Keneaveys (Kinneaveys): The Kinneaveys started building boats in 1861 on Inchagoill Island where they built row boats, sail boats and pucans. They had a large workshop there and during the recent restoration work there, the boiler used to steam the ribs was unearthed. It may also have been used to power a band-saw to cut the planks¹. The outline of the workshop is also visible. This continued down the generations and when Martin Kinneavy moved to the mainland in 1922 he continued to build boats at Camp Street in Oughterard. When Martin died, his son Patrick took over the business and Kinneaveys built boats at this location up until 1966. The 1996 Oughterard Newsletter announced that one of the last Kinneavy boat to be built by Paddy Kinneavy for a Tom Coyne in 1960 had been restored and relaunched. The first boat my father owned was a Kinneavy boat and it had the necessary equipment to add a sail.

Lough Corrib as a recreational amenity.

In addition to its importance for angling, the Corrib was very important as a rowing and sailing amenity. Competitive rowing began on the Corrib in 1864 when the Corrib Club was formed. At the beginning of the 20th Century there were a large number of rowing clubs in Galway: Corrib Club (1864), Commercial Club (1868), The Royal Galway Yacht Club (1882), St. Patrick's Rowing Club (The Temperance Club) (ca. 1880), Celtic Rowing Club (1910), The Galway Athletic Rowing Club (1880), Citee of the Tribes

¹ Mary Lydon (nee Kinneavey) tells me that her father certainly used a band-saw in his workshop in Camp Street.

Rowing Club (1924) and the famous Menlo Emmets Rowing Club(1920).

The advent of yacht racing on the Corrib largely coincided with the foundation of the Corrib Club. Yacht racing took place all over the Corrib – Kilbeg was a popular venue for races. By using the Eglinton Canal, yachts could race on both the Corrib and Galway Bay. For example, the 36' yawl Restmore with a draft of 8' arrived from Galway Docks and was the largest yacht ever to sail on the Corrib. Travel up the river was facilitated by lifting the drawbridge on the railway line. Such was the importance and popularity of rowing and sailing on the Corrib that workers in the city got a half day off to attend the Menlo regatta.

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Author Details

Michael J Hynes grew up in Cornamona on the shores of Lough Corrib. The son of a dedicated fisherman he was introduced to the lake at an early age. For much of his professional life he taught chemistry in NUI, Galway and retired with the grade of professor in 2008. He now runs his own company, REACH for hynes and chairs the board of Business Quality Assurance International. He is currently the chairman of the Corrib Branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) and a member of the IWAI Council.