

MARINA MAKEOVER

Visitors to Ballyronan this summer will be pleasantly surprised to see many changes to the marina due to Cookstown District Council and Traad and Ballyronan/Ballinderry Development Association, the local community group, working in partnership to regenerate the area.

The Council has enhanced the mooring facilities for water-based users through the addition of electricity, water, lighting and safety equipment in service bollards along the length of the main jetty. The deck timbers have been replaced, the security gate has been refurbished and berth fenders and mooring cleats have been added. The marina will now be much more user friendly and should attract many more of the boating fraternity.

The revamped marina will shortly be complemented by the completion of the Community Centre, incorporating a function hall, café, retail units and public toilets.

The attractions of the adjacent caravan park, play and picnic areas, woodland nature trail and beach make this an excellent site for relaxation and recreation. The enhanced marina and new community centre will be officially opened late in the summer.

Hide and Seek

Facilities for bird watchers will also increase significantly at Ballyronan marina with the opening of a new bird hide in June 2000. With six viewing windows, four of which open out to facilitate telescopes, twitchers and nature lovers can enjoy panoramic views of Ballyronan Wood and Bay.

The hide incorporates two large full colour interpretative panels, identifying all the dabbling duck, diving duck and swans found on the Lough. It is partially screened by gorse, halfway along the old breakwater.

The hide also provides full disability access. The flat site is complete with an access ramp and handrails. It is wheelchair accessible and can accommodate up to 20 people. A 'key-holders' system is in operation. Funding for the hide was sourced from Cookstown District Council, Environment and Heritage Service and the Landfill Tax.

For further information about the facilities available at the marina or bird hide telephone Cookstown District Council (028 8676 2205).

TOOME BYPASS

In January 2000 Roads Service and the Environmental Consultants, W S Atkins held an exhibition illustrating the proposals to construct a bypass for the A6 around Toome village.

The A6 is the main Belfast to Londonderry road. It currently passes through the village of Toome where the continuing growth in traffic levels cause ever increasing traffic congestion at peak periods, significantly damaging the quality of life in the village. The new scheme will see a considerable fall in traffic through Toome and show consequent environmental, community and safety benefits.

The preferred by-pass scheme was selected as providing the best balance of limited environmental impacts and good value for money. The bridge carrying the bypass would have a single span and be of 'Bowstring' or tied-arch construction and cross the Lower Bann River north of the existing bridge. The minimum navigation clearance of 3.5 metres above the full width of the river would be maintained and the abutments would be back 5 metres from each bank to allow free passage for anglers and ramblers.

Every effort has been made, says Road Service to minimise adverse environmental effects including the planting of native trees and shrubs as environmental screens, the creation of grassland areas for wild flowers, pollution control measures and management agreements to create further grazing land suitable for swans near their existing grazing grounds in advance of the main construction works.

The method of bridge construction which has been chosen will, it is claimed, minimise the risk of adverse effects on the river habitat and fishery interests. The timing of the works may be influenced by the need to minimise disturbance to the river habitat or the grazing swans.

Roads Service must now publish notices in the local press declaring that it intends to make an order directing that the bypass will become a trunk road and that an environmental statement has been prepared. These notices will be published shortly and will explain where the order and environmental statement may be inspected and where written opinions/objections may be submitted. Depending on the nature and weight of objections to the published proposals, the Minister with responsibility for Regional Development may decide to hold a Public Inquiry before taking a decision on the way forward. The 18-month contract to construct the bypass is currently programmed to start in late 2001.

LOWER BANN EROSION RIVER BANK RESTORATION SCHEME COMPLETE

Work on the Lower Bann river bank restoration scheme opposite Drumaheglis Marina was completed during April. The unseasonably dry weather in March was perfect for planting the willows, rushes and also fixing the willow hurdles.

A team of volunteers under the expert supervision of Conservation Volunteers made an excellent job, enhanced by their ability to establish excellent relationships with the three farmers involved in the scheme. New fencing will protect the area against livestock and hopefully the planting work will go some way to manage the side effects of water-based activities.

Now monitoring of the work can begin. The success of the project cannot be measured overnight, long term results will take long term evaluation, but hopefully some measure of success will be evident within the next two years.

The Coleraine LEADER II group planned this project with assistance from Coleraine Borough Council, the Lower Bann Liaison Officer, and Conservation Volunteers during spring and summer 1999 in an effort to address the increasing problem of riverbank erosion. They matched their own LEADER funds with successful applications to Coleraine Borough Council, The Honourable the Irish Society and UWT 'Landfill Tax'.

Coleraine LEADER II would like to thank Conservation Volunteers, particularly Jack Chestnut, who played an invaluable role in technical planning, pricing and implementing the work, to Caroline Marshall for her expert support and help in delivering the project and to the farmers involved, for both their financial contribution and help with the work.

DRAWING UP A MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR LOUGH NEAGH

The Lough Neagh Co-ordinating Committee is committed to producing a management strategy for Lough Neagh and has just appointed, Dr. Peter McKinney as facilitator to take this process forward. This strategy will provide a framework in which landowners, government agencies, businesses and all other interested parties can work together to address a range of issues relating to the Lough.

The greatest threat to the Lough is poor water quality, primarily caused by too much phosphorus, which acts as a fertiliser, entering the system. There are a host of other issues though, such as how the water levels in Lough Neagh and the river flows in the Lower Bann should be managed, how tourism and recreation should be developed and how nature conservation interests should be protected. Some of these issues centre on the Lough itself, like the development of recreational boating. Others such as the water quality issue can only be tackled on a catchment wide basis.

The management strategy will address all relevant issues and, through involvement of all stakeholders, develop an integrated approach to their management. This will be a complex task.

Peter has been employed to draw up the strategy and will work through a steering group drawn from the Lough Neagh Co-ordinating and Advisory Committees. All those with an interest in Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann will be hearing more about the strategy development process and will be invited to have a proactive input.

In his role as facilitator, Peter is keen to hear the viewpoints of those with an interest in issues relating to the Lough and he may be contacted at the address on the back page of this newsletter.

BEAT'N BOAT SEVEN MEN AND A BOAT

Great excitement has been generated at Portneal Fishing Lodge with the opening of a game fishing beat controlled by the Lodge. This project, along with the need for a new fishing boat, was identified by Tom Maguire, Angling Development officer for the Lower Bann and Moyola in his angling Development Programme.

Guests at the Lodge will now have their own private fishing. The beat starts at Kilrea Bridge and continues for a considerable distance downstream. This water was always considered as a good salmon holding area with good numbers of fish caught each year. Local anglers will also benefit from the beat, with fishing permits and the boat available for hire.

The fishing boat, commissioned by Kilrea Enterprise Group, was launched by Nick Parry (angling correspondent for the Sun), assisted by the veteran angler and writer Speedy Moore. Tom explained that the new boat will complement the existing land based facilities at Portneal Fishing Lodge and, although not a disabled anglers' boat, it will also help less-able bodied anglers to take to the river.

Other guests included John Dallat MLA, Tommy Collins MBE, Graham Kane, Kilrea Enterprise Group, Edward Montgomery, Bann System Limited, Tom Maguire, Angling Development Officer, Kenneth Crooks and Barney Coleman, boat builder.

MOLES IN THE ESTUARY

The moles in the Bann estuary were built to their present standard in the 1930's to aid navigation at the entrance to the Lower Bann river.

They are now in need of repair and Coleraine Harbour Commissioners intend to spend in the region of £300k for their repair. It is envisaged that the work will start in May, but that there will be no effects on navigation while work is taking place.

RIVER BANN AND LOUGH NEAGH ASSOCIATION

Have you considered joining the River Bann and Lough Neagh Association?

The River Bann and Lough Neagh Association was formed in 1964 with the express purpose of preventing the impending closure of the River Bann navigation between Toomebridge and Coleraine. This pressure as well as that of other interested users, did in fact achieve this aim.

RBLNA wants the River Bann and Lough Neagh to be used properly and enjoyed without being spoilt. Its aims and objectives are to preserve and promote the amenities of the river and lough, their tributaries and associated waterways.

For ten pounds a year you can be part of this. The Association meets about four times a year and all members are welcome to attend all meetings. If you are not already a member, please complete the slip at the bottom of this page and send it with a cheque for £10, payable to River Bann and Lough Neagh Association to:

Miss Helen Holmes
Treasurer RBLNA
23 Druminerick Road
KILREA
BT51 5SY

or

Miss Anne McGarry
Secretary RBLNA
21 Largy Road
CRUMLIN
BT29 4RN

River Bann and Lough Neagh Association to join Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI)

At a recent meeting of the RBLNA it was agreed to apply to IWAI to form the River Bann and Lough Neagh branch of IWAI. This will follow up the links which have already been established between the two organisations and is a logical development to ensure that the members of RBLNA can benefit from being part of IWAI.

The RBLNA works closely with many organisations interested in waterways and joining IWAI is seen as a progressive move as the whole future of Irish waterways is undergoing change at present and RBLNA wants to be involved in that change.

LOUGH NEAGH BOAT RALLY “2000”

The River Bann and Lough Neagh Association has organised a Boat Rally on Lough Neagh on 23rd, 24th, and 25th of June.

The Rally will gather at Ballyronan Marina from midday onwards on Friday 23rd June to coincide with the opening of the local Community Hall and associated buildings at the Marina. Music, dancing and a late bar will make for an enjoyable evening.

After an overnight stay at Ballyronan, all Rally boats will cruise to Kinnego Marina where the Lough Neagh Sailing Club is holding an “Open Day”. In the evening there is a cruise to Coney Island for a Barbeque and overnight stop.

Sunday 25th June is decision time for skippers and crews to decide how to spend their Sunday. There is a range of options to consider. Sail to Maghery and cruise up the Blackwater River? Cruise to The Battery or Antrim Marina, or return to Ballyronan? The choice is yours!

Obviously the Rally Schedule depends on the weather being suitable but June is usually quite good and the organisers are hoping for favourable conditions and a good turnout of boats and people.

All details for the Rally can be obtained from Jim McGarry, 21 Largy Road, CRUMLIN, BT29 4RN Tel: 028 9442 3760.

PILOT BOOK

Michael Savage of the River Bann and Lough Neagh Association, is continuing to coordinate the production of a dedicated pilot book for the navigable waters of the River Bann and Lough Neagh. This venture is a first for RBLNA and will be the only dedicated pilot book written for the system. Generous sponsorship has been obtained and much detailed research is being undertaken. It is anticipated that the pilot will be published in May 2001.

NEVER MIND THE NILE – CRUISE THE BLACKWATER

Michael Savage of the River Bann and Lough Neagh Branch of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland is preparing a detailed navigational pilot book for the system. The following account of the Blackwater River has been distilled from Michael’s notes.

The Blackwater River flows into the southwest corner of Lough Neagh. Once entered at Maghery, via the river mouth or the Derrywarragh Canal the river provides 10 miles of deep and wide channel navigation to Blackwatertown. The tree-lined route offers an assortment of attractions to explore along the way.

From Maghery the river heads southwest and offers long panoramic views towards Dungannon.

Approximately 2 ½ miles from Maghery the Blackwater is joined by the now abandoned Coalisland canal and the river Torrent, sometimes called the Tyrone navigation. The canal had 7 locks. The entrance is reedy and shallow but can be entered with care and bank moor. The remains of the first lock are worth visiting and are about 15 minutes walk on the north bank of the canal. There is an accommodation footbridge across the canal to the south bank. The reopening of the Coalisland canal could provide 4 ½ miles of interesting navigation to the centre of Coalisland.

There are several bridges along the next section of the river including the M1 motorway bridge, Verner's bridge and Bond's bridge. Beyond Bond's bridge, a fine example of a bowstring bridge, on the east bank of the river, there is a landing stage for the Argory. The Argory, a National Trust property is an early Victorian house set in 200 acres of wooded countryside. Sweeping lawns and formal gardens with public walks surround the house and a shop and tea garden are open during the summer season.

One and a half miles further on is the entrance to the first lock of the Ulster Canal. This is easily missed in mid-summer as trees and bushes obscure the entrance. It is difficult to bank moor here but the effort is well worth it. There is a large inhabited lockkeeper's house. Adjoining the upstream entrance of the lock are the remains of a substantial dry dock. The Ulster canal, built between 1830 and 1841, was abandoned in 1931. A very positive feasibility study for the reopening of the Ulster canal was published in June 1998. The canal would reconnect the Blackwater with the river Finn to Lough Erne and would open the whole of the Northern Ireland system to the rest of the inland navigation in Ireland.

Beyond the Ulster canal lie the towns of Charlemont and Moy, on the east and west banks of the river respective. Of the twin settlements Moy is the larger, with several listed buildings in the centre of the tree-lined square. The remains of Charlemont fort overlook the river on the Tyrone border and can be glimpsed through the trees from the river.

For two and a half miles the river continues its meandering course through wooded countryside to the small town of Blackwatertown. The second lock of the Ulster canal and the lockkeeper's house is located on the Charlemont road. A short walk along the road takes you to the Mullylagan canal bridge from which views of the bed of the canal and an accommodation bridge can be seen.

At present Blackwatertown is the limit of navigation on the Blackwater River but, with plenty of facilities along the way and the opportunity to explore the Tyrone and Armagh countryside, a cruise in this 10-mile stretch of water alongside the 'Orchard of Ireland' will be a day well spent.

If this article has whetted your appetite for a cruise up the river, contact Sperrin House or Michael Savage (07715368050) for more detailed navigational notes.

If you would like further information on the re-opening of the Ulster Canal, please contact Shane Belford, Ulster Waterways Group (028 9042 5230).

NEWS UPDATE FROM LOUGHSHORES AREA BASED STRATEGY

Since the last issue of Eel Express, the Loughshores Area Based Strategy has finalised its commitment of funding to supported projects. By March 2001, the Strategy aims to have provided over £940,000 to projects in the Loughshores area. As well as representing a very substantial investment, the Strategy has proved to be very successful in attracting funding for supported projects from other sources and in total, in excess of £4.8 million will have been spent on the regeneration of the Loughshores area.

Lough Neagh Cycle Way

Work continues on the Lough Neagh Cycle Way with the recruitment of a Project Officer to oversee the implementation and initial marketing of the project. Jim Bradley, who many of you will know from the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre, will take up the post from 1 May on a secondment from Craigavon Borough Council. Paul Carr, LABS Strategy Manager is heartbroken at passing the work over to Jim but so far, appears to be bearing up well.

Quay Development Programme

Work continues on the Strategy's Quay Development Programme with Ballyronan, Emerson's and Gawley's Gate completed, work ongoing on Curran, Brocagh and the Battery due to commence shortly.

Finally, some contact information update. The LABS office number has changed to (028 867 36667 in line with all telephone numbers in Northern Ireland. For those of you with access to the internet, you can contact Paul or Geraldine by e-mail on the following addresses:

paul@loughshoresabs.co.uk and
Geraldine@loughshoresabs.co.uk

Or you might just wish to have a look at the LABS website on
<http://www.loughshoresabs.co.uk>

TRAAD PARK, BALLYRONAN

In March of this year the Magherafelt District Council purchased a 40-acre site on the Lough shore, south of the University of Ulster's fresh water laboratory and half a mile north of Ballyronan, with a view to developing a nature reserve/parkland area. The Council hopes to have Phase 1 of the park opened to the public in the spring of 2001.

As well as becoming an area of conservation, the formation of Traad Park will provide recreation in the form of walks in a natural environment, and education through the development of various educational packages pitched at different age groups.

A management committee has been set up to address various issues at the planning stages. The Committee is made up of the following groups, agencies and individuals with an interest in the area:

British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Ballyronan & Traad Development Association, Northern Ireland 2000, Magherafelt District Council (Planning), University of Ulster, Lough Neagh Co-ordinating Committee, Environment and Heritage Service, Local Resident, Magherafelt District Council and Scotts of Toomebridge.

At the initial meeting of the Committee, members unanimously agreed that the acquisition of the University of Ulster's ground was very important to the overall success of the project. The Council are pursuing this.

As the project develops further information will be submitted to The Eel Express.

THE BLACK PIG

It is a well-known 'fact' that Lough Neagh exists because a lady, long ago, left a well uncovered.

The lady, it seems, went to this deep well, a source of abundant water, to fill her bucket. Back at her house a small black pig ran against a pot of boiling water on the fire. The pig squealed, loud and hard, and ran. She heard the noise, realised what had happened and ran after the pig – forgetting to put the cover back on the well. The water poured out forming the Lough and the river. It is not recorded if she caught the pig but it must have run towards Coleraine for the valley was thereafter called BLACK PIG VALLEY.

FOCUS ON PHOSPHORUS

Agricultural & Environmental Science Division (AESD) of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development operates a regular monitoring programme on Lough Neagh and its rivers to provide the most comprehensive nutrient budget of any large lake in the British Isles. In addition AESD is conducting research on identifying factors influencing phosphorus losses from land to water and improving nutrient management in Northern Ireland agriculture.

Below, Dr Bob Foy has summarised recent trends in the phosphorus status of Lough Neagh.

Lough Neagh is eutrophic, which means it is over enriched with nutrients so that it produces large quantities of algae, particularly blue-green algae. The algae reduce water transparency to 2 to 3 feet in summer and can also reduce oxygen concentrations, especially in the deeper parts of the lake and during calm weather. When the algae die or are eaten, the resulting organic matter settles onto the lake sediments and sustains the enormous midge populations. The dense clouds of midges found in spring and summer around the shores of Lough Neagh provide a vivid indication of the extent to which the lake is out of balance.

To grow, algae require a range of nutrients. In Lough Neagh, as in most freshwater lakes, the most important nutrient is considered to be phosphorus.

Of the lakes in Ireland, Lough Neagh is by far the most enriched with phosphorus. In 1999 the average phosphorus concentration was 155mg/m³. To ensure that the Lough was no longer classed as eutrophic would require lowering this concentration by over 75% to 35mg/m³, which is the maximum phosphorus concentration set by the OECD for moderately enriched or mesotrophic lakes. Not only is Lough Neagh highly enriched, but it is getting worse. As Figure 1 shows, the 1999 phosphorus concentration was over 60% higher than in 1987.

Phosphorus sources

A phosphorus reduction programme at sewage treatment works and the reduction in the phosphorus content of detergents has reduced the loading from these sources since 1981. Monitoring of the Lough Neagh rivers has shown that 62% of the phosphorus now entering Lough Neagh is from agriculture (Fig 2).

Agriculture is not only the largest source of phosphorus, but agricultural phosphorus loss has increased steadily over the past 25 years. The reasons for this increase remain rather uncertain. Phosphorus lost in dirty water discharges from farmyards and slurry tanks has reduced over the past decade. Studies in Northern Ireland show that spreading manures when the ground is wet and/or before rain, can enhance phosphorus losses. However, the volume of manure produced in farms has not increased radically in recent years but river phosphorus losses have. Similarly the amounts of phosphorus fertilisers spread on fields has not increased significantly over recent decades. A feature of agriculture in Northern

Ireland is that more phosphorus fertiliser is spread than is removed in crops or through grazing. Thus the amount of phosphorus in the soil is increasing year on year. The loss, of even a small proportion of the accumulating soil phosphorus, is sufficient to account for the increase in phosphorus concentration in Lough Neagh.

In 1999, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, UFU, NIAPA and the Fertiliser Manufacturers Association, launched Responsible Phosphorus Management. This initiative encourages the more efficient use of phosphorus in agriculture, through recognising the nutrient value of animal manures, and so preventing the unnecessary build up of soil phosphorus beyond that required for efficient agricultural production. It is too early to judge how effective it will be. Lough Neagh's current status did not happen overnight. It reflects deterioration over the past 100 years. Thus it is likely that restoration will be a long-term project.

Further information can be sourced in the internet at:
<http://www.afsni.ac.uk/Research/eutrophication.htm> and
http://www.afsni.ac.uk/Research/P_sources/index.htm

WILDLIFE 2000

IRELAND'S LARGEST ENVIRONMENTAL FAIR 26TH-27TH AUGUST AT OXFORD ISLAND NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE

“WILDLIFE 2000” is being organised by representatives from Craigavon Borough Council, WWF, WWT, The National Trust, Earthfest and RSPB. As this is a unique time in our history, the Committee is keen to celebrate the future of Northern Ireland's wildlife and its natural environment and also to embrace the wider aspects of environmental sustainability biodiversity, conservation, healthy environments and healthy lifestyles.

Visitors and exhibitors will experience a blend of demonstrations, walks, talks, workshops, fun activities, side shows, boat trips, stands, food, children's activities and much much more!

This is an excellent opportunity for small businesses and voluntary groups to an intricate part of this event giving them the chance to get their message across as well as displaying and selling goods and giving the opportunity to do some “networking”.

For further information please contact Mrs Conac Lavery at Lough Neagh Discovery Centre on 028 3832 2205.

NORTHERN IRELAND PROTECTED AREAS NETWORK

The Northern Ireland Protected Areas Network (NIPAN) was set up at the beginning of this year to:

- Act as a network for the exchange of information, ideas and good practice among network members, statutory agencies, key decision makers and the wider community.
- Advise statutory agencies, key decision makers and the wider community on key issues including the need for adequately resourced management.
- Develop combined 'policies for action' and to act as a sounding board for government in respect of policy development.
- Promote and develop a holistic approach to the management of protected areas; including, health, lifestyle, social and economic concerns as well as environmental issues.
- Encourage and advise upon professional standards in protected area management across Northern Ireland.
- Forge links with similar network in other countries to exchange best practice.

To find out more about NIPAN, contact Tony Gates, Chairman, (028 4372 4059), Caroline Marshall, Secretary, (028 7930 1289).

BAR MAID SAILS INTO SUNSET

The Bar Maid, which dredges the channel at the Barmouth, has not been operational for the last eighteen months.

It has become very costly to upkeep the Maid and for this reason, Coleraine Harbour Commissioners have decided to sell the boat. Interest in the vessel has come from the UK and Europe and it is most likely that she will be leaving the shores of the north coast.

The channel is being kept clear by the "Otterbank", which is leased from the Port of Londonderry. This is not a dredger, but a 'plough boat' which drags the sand deposits from the mouth of the river onto the deeper waters further out to sea. This process has been operating successfully for the last 18 months.

BANN ESTUARY

A SPECIAL PLACE

Environment and Heritage Service has recently declared the extensive dune systems and river margins within the Bann Estuary as an Area of Special Scientific Interest.

Not only do the dune systems record physical history but archaeological finds show that the area has been used by people since Neolithic times. Dune types vary from small, frontal dunes that often reform each Spring to the older, sable dunes (known as grey dunes) at Grangemore.

Sediments underlying the dunes have been dated and show that estuarine clay was deposited during a period of high sea-level around 6,000 years ago. Buried soils within the dunes show that the dunes established at various periods in their history, which dated shells in gravel beds record stormy conditions during Medieval times. These deposits are important because they help in the understanding of soil development as well as the progress of environmental change since last Ice Age.