

Ballycommon and the Kilbeggan Line of the Grand Canal - 2001 to 2007

21 October 2008

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The Heritage Boat Association's involvement with Ballycommon and the campaign to restore the Kilbeggan Line started on Saturday, June 9th 2001, when The Fleet was returning from the launch of the HBA in Dublin. Four boats, 4E, 35M, 68M and Dabu attended the inaugural event.

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The Kilbeggan Harbour Restoration Group had just been presented with the Endeavour Cup by the IWAI and they wanted to mark the occasion in some way. It was agreed that Andy and Cathy Roche on 35M would carry on board a bottle of vintage Kilbeggan Whisky, along the Grand Canal, down the Shannon and to Lough Derg. This would then be presented to Colin Becker, President of the IWAI.

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When The Fleet arrived from Edenderry that day, a group of about twenty were gathered at Ballycommon for the official ceremony, which was short and sweet. Brian Quinn presented Andy with his precious cargo for Colin, a few people spoke and some photos were taken for the local newspapers. Then in true canal boat tradition some sampling went on, as Brian had brought some whiskies and liqueurs with him for us to taste.

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Later we all retired to Hennessy's Pub where a decision was made by those present, that the HBA would have an annual Canal trip which would encompass an event in Ballycommon.

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The First Kilbeggan Rally 2002

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The first official Rally took place the following year, over the Whit weekend of June first. It was officially launched in Tullamore by Tommy McKeigue, Cahorliach, Tullamore Town Council and Brian Cowan, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs. The public was then invited to travel on boats in The Flotilla to Boland's Lock.

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When we got to the Lock we were given a tour of the restored lock house by the owner Martin O'Rourke, and all who travelled were served tea, coffee and wine. We then moved on to Ballycommon and on Sunday we walked the eight miles of the Line to Kilbeggan Harbour. When we got there the Kilbeggan Gang served us with tea, sandwiches and Kilbeggan Whisky in the restored Harbour building.

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Also waiting for us in Kilbeggan was Paddy 'Waxer' Dunn the last skipper of 68M. Paddy told us that the last time he was in the Harbour was in 1932 on 14M with a load of Tar.

That evening the crowd assembled in Hennessy's Pub for drinks and afterwards a gang came back to 68M where when the session ended there was no need for lights, as it was well after dawn.

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Some of The Fleet in 2002 were; 34B, 35M, 68M, Chang Sha, Dabu, Rin Dun and Sno Cat.

On the way back down to Tullamore on the Monday an incident happened above Lock 24 involving Dabu and Rin Dun. It was due to this incident that the term 'Fender Class' was created with Rin Dun being appointed the first member of the Fender Class.

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Kilbeggan Rally 2007

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The HBA and the Offaly branch of the IWAI join forces every year in the expectation that one day soon the Ballycommon Rally on the Grand Canal will be no more and in its stead will be the annual run up the Kilbeggan Line to the newly watered harbour. The presence of our Minister of Finance, Brian C, doing some sums on the back of a Waterways Ireland 'Guide to the Grand Canal' (now including the Kilbeggan Branch), led a few of us to believe that this might happen before the current bilge pump on Vicki May burns out! Then again, that might be a titch optimistic.

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But if we could make Kilbeggan by water during the life of the next pump we would be more than happy campers! I mean pumpers! And congrats to kids of all ages who made great progress in filling the Branch line from the Main by bucket chain. There were many claims of foul play, by and of some of the older 'kids' in an effort to establish the most productive bucket chain team, but in the end we reckoned somebody had left the plug out of the harbour and the water was escaping as fast as we could bucket. Maybe we will have more luck next year!

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