

The Rambler - Steam Yacht - Stony Stratford 1878

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Nineteenth Century

The Rambler was one of five steamers purchased by the Midland Great Western Railway (MGWR) between 1876 and 1878. The MGWR had entered the carrying business on the Royal Canal in 1871, using horse-drawn boats initially. The other steamers were Pioneer, Mermaid, Conqueror and Rattler. Three of the five boats were tugs and the other two were reputed to have been used to carry freight as well as tow on the Royal Canal and the River Shannon.

Recent research (1) into the early life of The Rambler has uncovered her birthplace as Stony Stratford, an ancient coaching town on Watling Street, the old Roman road in England, far away from the sea. Edward Hayes Senior founded a forge here in 1840 called the Watling Works. Following their success with steam engines, this organisation grew into the Hayes Boatyard. Boats were built in the yard and then towed by steam tractor to a local wharf where they were launched sideways into the Grand Junction Canal. Some of the boats were dismantled when built, towed on the canal to London, and then re-assembled. They then continued their journeys by sea to their final destinations. (2)

Ernie Shepherd in his book "The Midland Great Western Railway of Ireland" states "August 1876 saw Mr Hayes of Stony Stratford offering to supply a tug for £830. This offer was accepted and in the following February, Hayes applied for payment due for Pioneer. Six months later, he offered a second tug for £985, the company offering £1000 if he substituted brass for iron tubes; this tug was apparently named Mermaid and was ready for inspection and trials in May 1878. A third tug Rambler came from the same source".

The towing experiment by railway on the Royal was not a success and the company ceased carrying cargo in 1886. The Rambler, which is 70 feet long, may have continued to be used as an inspection launch on the Royal Canal. During her most recent refit the current owner concluded that the struts over the saloon had been there since the vessel was built; this with the portholes and windows indicates she carried passengers.

Early Twentieth Century

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From 1920 to 1923 she was used by the Department of Agriculture and converted into a laboratory for an extensive fishery survey of Lough Derg with the steam yacht, Chang Sha. (3) Dr V S Delany when he purchased Chang Sha, also purchased The Rambler for his brother, T W Delany in 1923, who proceeded to convert her into a comfortable house-boat. She was in Ringsend Basin at the time and because she would not fit in the Grand Canal locks he had to undertake an arduous journey down the Royal Canal. At Richmond Harbour they took out the steam engine and fitted a 60 hp six-cylinder Glanefer paraffin engine; they completely re-decked her and restored the interior.

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T W Delany, who lived in Longford, kept The Rambler at Tarmonbarry in the summer and beside Richmond Harbour in the winter. He used her mostly for short trips but also attended the sailing regattas each year on the North Shannon, at the LRYC and the LDYC. Chang Sha and the Rambler often cruised in company. T W Delany owned her for sixteen years until his death in 1939 when she was sold to Captain Middleton, who at the end of World War II, brought her down river to Killaloe.

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Tom Middleton and his wife, Ann, lived on board the Rambler at a mooring on the river, just above the ESB mill in Killaloe. Their plan was to take in guests and to start a small sailing school based on The Rambler. This business never really took off, although they did have a number of clients over the years. Eventually they built a house on shore beside

the boat and moved in there. The Rambler was rarely moved in these years because of the difficulty in starting the Atlantic petrol/TVO six-cylinder engine. It required two strong men to swing the engine over. A small deck-house was built aft of the companionway to act as a deck-saloon for guests. In the late 1960s, the Middletons retired to Portugal and sold The Rambler.

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Latter half of Twentieth Century

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She was then bought by Arthur Kass, who lived beside Connaught Harbour in Portumna. He and his wife, Alma, were Estonians, and had fled the Continent at the end of World War II. His plan was to convert The Rambler into accommodation for visiting coarse-fishermen. She was towed by the ESB tug in about 1967 to Connaught Harbour, where she was completely stripped-out. The hull was divided into double and single cabins, and a large superstructure covered the entire deck, with the exception of the foredeck. She was re-named Calypso. Unfortunately this venture never got off the ground, due to planning and safety implications. Shannon Marine Services (Arthur's company) folded in 1970.

Calypso was purchased from the receiver by Ivan Smith who was, at that time, working in South Africa so she lay virtually unused on the north bank below Connaught Harbour. In the mid-1970s, Ivan stripped-out the hull and demolished the superstructure. The Atlantic engine was removed and a six-cylinder Ruston air-cooled diesel installed. She reverted to her original name, and a steel deck and wheelhouse were built. Towards the end of the 1980s Ivan reluctantly decided to sell her as pressure of time prevented him from completing the conversion. She was towed up to Shannon Harbour by the Phoenix, to be delivered to her next owner. When she was docked in Shannon Harbour, some plates were found to be cracked and repairs were necessary.

After some time, Mick and Fran Stains bought her, as she lay partially sunk outside the last lock at Shannon Harbour. They set about re-floating her and getting her engine going again. They did a complete refit with plenty of accommodation. She was based in Shannon Harbour after that and was used regularly on the Shannon up to around 1998. After that she became a permanent fixture tied up in Shannon Harbour until the current owner bought her.

Twenty-first Century

John Connon Junior took her by road back to Grand Canal Docks, and in the Outer Basin once again everything was gutted out, including the wheel house as all the decks surrounding it were very badly rusted. He then set about another refit, keeping in mind her age on the outside and comfort on the inside. It took John five years of steadfast work to complete her renewal, keeping in mind her age on the outside and comfort on the inside. John believes "we do not own these boats, we are mere custodians", a magnificent view shared by other heritage boat owners. . In recent years, the Rambler has sat in Ringsend, awaiting the opening of the Royal Canal to bring her back to her old stomping ground.

In 2010 she finally got a glimpse of both her past and her future. In May, with members of the Royal Canal Amenity Group on board, The Rambler led a flotilla of other heritage boats in a symbolic trip from Grand Canal Docks, through the Liffey flood gates and into Spencer Dock, the eastern end of the Royal Canal. See HBA Spencer Dock May 2011

In Feb 2011 for the first recorded time in 133 years, she once again made her way out into Dublin Bay, the final stage of the route she travelled when first coming to Ireland in the nineteenth century.

Research:

(1) B J Goggin of IWH <http://irishwaterwayshistory.com/> research on the MGWR

(2) Milton Keynes Heritage <http://www.mkheritage.co.uk/mkm/stonystratford/docs/hayes.html>

(3)Ruth Delany, The Shannon Navigation

The Rambler in May 2010 on the River Liffey when she led the way through the Flood Gates into Spencer Docks, followed by other Heritage Boats

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