

Float No. 3 - Royal Canal - late 1800's

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This boat is now known as the Killucan Project Barge and it currently lies opposite Thomastown Harbour on the Royal Canal at the 18th Lock.

Up until 1993 the boat had been lying half full of water a few miles east of Killucan where it lay since the canal was closed by CIE in 1961. The boat's exact origins are unknown but as it measures 60ft x 13ft it was most likely a former GCC Horse Boat. By her design and lines she was built in the late 1800's or early part of the 20th Century and operated as a horse drawn cargo boat. It is not known when she moved to the Royal Canal or whether she worked commercially there before joining the maintenance fleet and being renumbered to Float No. 3. One likely scenario was as horse traffic declined on the Grand she was transferred to the maintenance department and then moved in the early 1950's to the Royal Canal. What is known is that prior to 1961 it was used as a maintenance boat on the Canal.

It was one of a series of five maintenance boats referred to as "Floats" used along the Royal Canal. It never had an engine, and was mainly used to carry patching materials (Puddling Clay) to seal the bottom of the canal and rubble to beef up the canal banks. The last crew to work on her were Andrew Flanagan, William Leech and Richard Quinn. Little did they know the boat would be back in action in the area over 40 years later.

In the early 1990's members of the Royal Canal Amenity Group (RCAG) took on the idea of restoring one of the many derelict barges on the Royal Canal. Having surveyed all the resting hulls on the canal a former maintenance barge lying east of D'Arcy's Bridge in Killucan was selected as giving the best chance of a successful restoration. The boat was available to be bought for Â£10 from CIE on condition of purchase that when restored it would be used as a floating Museum of Canal Transport with displays of canal flora and fauna. Waterbus trips on the canal and a running commentary of canal sights would give those taking part a flavor of times past.

The proposers of the project ran into problems trying to find a suitable workshop in the greater Dublin area where the restoration could take place and in the end turned to the Executive of the RCAG for support. Eventually, after due consideration, the Killucan Branch of the RCAG agreed to take over the project. Killucan equally had difficulties in getting a premises but had luck in that Government funding became available to assist in restoring canal boats from the Grand Canal. "Killucan Community and Canal Development Limited" was formed and was successful in securing some of that funding for a barge renovation on the Royal.

Under the terms of the scheme the work was to be carried out as a Community Youth Training Project. The skills to be imparted were metalwork, welding, electrical work, plumbing, and all the skills needed in the complex job of restoring a barge. Trainees would be paid by FAS.

A workshop was located at the rear of the Topic newspaper printing works in Mullingar and FAS agreed to pay the rent. The restoration started in January 1996, just as the Celtic Tiger made its debut. The new economic circumstances and the subsequent drop in unemployment made it extremely difficult to find suitable trainees for the project and those that did join left as soon as they had learned the basic skills. With the pool of suitable trainees dwindling the project came to a halt. However by 2000 most of the major fabrication work had been completed, including the replacement of many ribs, the insertion of supports for a floor, a complete replating and the construction of a cabin frame. Waterways Ireland removed the unfinished boat to Thomastown Harbour where it lay on the hard stand for two years.

In the Summer of 2002 members of the community decided that the scheme would die if they didn't take some action. A compressor and sandblasting plant were borrowed from a local businessman. Paint was ordered and within a fortnight the boat was sandblasted and painted.

After some negotiations, Waterways Ireland agreed to assist the completion of the project. A Tullamore based company got the contract to carry out the remainder of the welding and the boat was returned to the water in 2002. Tenders were sent out for the interior refit and by the Summer of 2004 Inhouse Technologies of Dublin had completed the task.

A program of work has been agreed with the Dept. of Marine which, when complete, will allow this restored boat to bring a new lease of life to the restored Royal Canal.

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