

Launch of the HBA, Dublin - 2001

11 January 2009

Last Updated 03 April 2011

Â

It was agreed that old Canal Boats (Irish Barges) attending the World Canal Conference in force would be stunning, so the 'HBA Launch' sub-committee was established

The Idea

The Heritage Boat Association (HBA) as an idea was spawned a few years before its official launch. A number of Canal Boat owners wanted a grouping to serve their specific needs and after a couple of informal, well attended and productive meetings in Athlone, a group of four was tasked with the formation details. The logo, structure and membership were researched and put forward at the first official meeting; a committee was formed and all that was then needed was a high profile launch.

The World Canal Conference was to happen in Dublin during the IWA Dublin Branch Rally in May 2001. Old Canal Boats attending in force would be stunning, so the HBA Launch sub-committee was established and the crews of Dabu (ex Horse Boat 2), 4E, 35M and 68M all committed to make the journey to Dublin. This was the year of the foot and mouth crisis, which threatened to shut down the waterways system. However, the round trip started on April 13th in Clare and finished nine weeks later, in Shannon Harbour on June 17th.

Â

Off to Dublin

The Treacys on 4E set out from Killaloe, Co. Clare and were joined as they progressed north on Lough Derg at the Hare, by the Burkes on 68M and then at Portumna, by the Roches on 35M. Meelick Quay on the River Shannon was the first overnight stop; ambient lighting for the evening was provided by Gerry Burke in the shape of nice spirit lanterns with expensive start-up needs, brandy! Departure times for the following morning were set at â€œquarter pastâ€• or maybe â€œtwo pastâ€•, a tradition still in existence within the HBA today.

Â

The fleet progressed onto the Grand Canal at Shannon Harbour on Saturday with an overnight stop near Ferbane. Mini-cabs were organised for a night out in the local pub but males from 4E dancing together went down like a lead balloon with the locals. 4E's youngest crewmember (four at this point) was fixated with being the first boat in the queue which lead to a stressed skipper retorting â€œI'm not going to be dictated to by a four year oldâ€•, the joys of canal boating! Logistics came strongly into play with the never ending car shunting and as the Friday and Sunday evening drives got longer for Clare people it got shorter for East Coast people.

Â

As we struggled along the dreaded Pollagh stretch, the Baylys on Dabu joined us having left their winter base in Richmond Harbour further north on the Shannon. First tractor tow was called for at a grounding on what became the famous â€œAndy's Islandâ€•. Overnight was The Thatch pub and as a result departure next morning was delayed to â€œtwo pastâ€•. This first leg ended in Tullamore and all the crews retired home.

Â

The next weekend, we spent Saturday night in Daingean in cold April weather, warmed by big fires lit on each barge. This leg concluded in Edenderry Harbour with the fleet left for the week in the care of Sean O'Reilly. The following week 4E and 68M progressed on to Robertstown for Saturday night and as we were now deep in â€œCanal Boatmen Countryâ€• and the tom toms were telling everyone of our progress, socialising was the order of the day. Dropping back to Lowtown on Sunday we returned to normality for another week.

Â

Over the May Bank Holiday weekend, 4E got a paint touch-up (this against advice I'd given to fellow skippers on how damaging lock-work was on paintwork!) Dabu and 35M caught up with us and Robertstown was again an overnight stop. Sunday the fleet moved on to Sallins where some watched Clare take a beating at the hands of Tipperary. Monday we reached Hazelhatch, which was planned to be our springboard into Dublin. While negotiating Devonshire Bridge that day, 35M lost her wheelhouse, in the best canal-boat tradition. A quick tidy-up followed and the following week Bayly, Bayly and Roche pulled off an amazing reconstruction job under Hazelhatch bridge.

Â

On Saturday May 12th, the main Dublin rally fleet moved into town, while a group of us travelled by road to Athy to help get 54M (Aisiri) into Dublin for its own Ministerial launch. A great day handling this locally converted â€œnewâ€• machine with Gerry stage-front getting her around the sharp bend before the lock in Monastrevin, he did it!

Â

Arrival in Dublin

The following day, Sunday May 13th, had to be one of the toughest days on both boats and crews I have ever experienced. We were on the move from 5.30 am until 11.00 pm with the fleet being swelled by Siobhan Hynes and John

Thompson on 36M, Roger and Steph Lorenz on Neptune and John Treacy at the helm of 42B Snark. Metal channels left on bridge inner walls, lime-scale on lock-chamber walls, low pipes across the navigation, debris in the canal, stone-throwing kids etc. etc., made this a trip to remember. Tired, loaded with rubbish taken off the props, battered and bruised we finally limped into Dublin.

Â

Newspaper reports the next day were torn between descriptions of attacks on boats and the pleasant scenes of the main Dublin Rally fleet on the Liffey at Islandbridge. This was the largest fleet of Canal Boats to move through Dublin since the 1950s and feelings ran high over the condition of the navigation, putting the HBA launch in jeopardy.

Â

HBA Launch

However, common sense prevailed and on Wednesday May 16th in a torrential downpour, Sile De Valera, Minister of State for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, raised the HBA burgee on 4E's mast and we were officially launched.

Â

The party naturally went on all night. The turn-around point was probably the big "do" in a marquee on Mespil Road closing the World Canal Conference. Gerry and I performed (sang would be an exaggeration!) "Clare to Here".

Â

Our Journey Home

Waterways Ireland (WI) put in a huge effort de-scaling lock chambers and their staff put in a long day on May 26th to get us back safely to Hazelhatch. 4E was added to the casualty list as a "seep" became a torrent, and after an all night vigil some fast-setting cement did the trick. June Bank Holiday weekend had us in Sallins for Saturday night, Robertstown on Sunday and back to Edenderry on Monday and Sean O'Reilly's care for the week.

Â

The following Friday evening our hosts in Edenderry provided a fabulous barbecue for the returning crews which developed into a great night with many locals joining in. At Ballycommon on Saturday, we were met by a delegation of Kilbeggan Line activists complete with pony and a bottle of Kilbeggan whiskey. [This was subsequently brought by water on 35M and presented to Colin Becker, IWAI President at the Lough Derg Rally]. It's hard to believe this small group of four returning Canal Boats would spawn the major canal rally that takes place today at Ballycommon every year.

Â

Sunday's target was Tullamore with 4E towed the last two levels after her long-suffering drive plate simply shattered. Help from the Thomas at Celtic Canal Cruisers had us mobile next day. On Friday June 15th, we were treated to another great barbecue, this time hosted by the IWAI Offaly branch, making us feel like conquering heroes. Saturday was again a Ferbane overnight but much quieter this time (no dancing). And on Sunday June 17th 2001, we all four arrived into Shannon Harbour. The epic was over.

Â

This trip was something the crews involved will never forget, working closely together for over two months, sharing something special. The many who helped us on our journey and looked after the fleet between weekends won't be forgotten. The old-timers, who constantly turned up on the bank to tell tales of the trading times, got as much joy at watching us travel as we got from again working the system.

Â

Thanks to Gerry for the use of his meticulous log; there is the bones of a book on the trip --- and yes, it was A Long, Long Way from Clare to Here.

Â

© Joe Treacy, Skipper 4E

Â

Â

Â

ÿ

Â