

## Parade of Light Flotilla to Ballinasloe LDR - Jul 2009

19 August 2009

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Well, it was Friday the 10th July!

All of the sixty plus Cruisers and Barges that decided to make the trip up the Suck River to Ballinasloe, which was the final venue on the Lough Derg Rally 2009, were safely tucked away in their nice cosy berths at the Moycarn Hotel. The scaremongers who had warned of "M50 style tailbacks at the Pollboy lock", "decapitated skyscrapers (sorry "cruisers" railway bridge" and "a prop eating rock at the Coreen Ford" had all gone very quiet and the organisers were congratulating themselves (quite deservedly so) on a job well done!

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So, why is it that when you feel you are home and dry, there is always some genius who has to go and burst your bubble!

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After all, it must take a genius or at least someone of unparalleled vision (who also has good night-vision) to suggest that we take a dozen boats, dress them up with fancy lights, send them up a winding river just before dark to a nice brightly lit harbour, make sure all the Skippers night vision is well and truly wiped out by having a fireworks display, wait for it to get completely dark and then see how many can find their way home back down the winding river into their cosy berths at the Moycarn Hotel.

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Yep, that is pretty much what we got up to as a finale to this year's Lough Derg Rally, and "boy it was fun".

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Seriously though!

Earlier that evening Mags and I were just about to make our way back to the Moycarn Marina from the Civic reception welcoming the Rally to Ballinasloe, when Gerry Burke asked if we would like to join him on 68M in the Parade of Light flotilla later that evening. We were delighted to be invited along.

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"Settling in" for the journey ahead  
Volunteer Crew on 68M

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Someone had told me that the Branch safety officer, accompanied by other senior officials and aided by our resident Coast Guard member, would later be doing a RIB reeve up the river to ensure that all was in order and that a safe passage for all vessels could be assured. Sure with such an elite group looking after our safety, what could possibly go wrong? We were surely in safe hands!

Later that evening the sound of Barges warming up their engines was only just audible over the sound of clinking wine bottles as dozens of cruiser crews carried "provisions" onto the barges for the apparently marathon journey into the unknown (Well it was dark, after all!)

On 68M most of the passengers gathered into the wheelhouse to admire the skill of "Bargeman Burke" as he expertly manoeuvred his 60ft of steel up the winding river. However, as anyone who knows Gerry delegation skills will have already guessed, we were barely pulled away from the marina when Gerry decided to share his love of driving 68M with a few of his cruiser passengers and promptly stepped away from the wheel. (looks like there is no such thing as a free ride on 68M!)

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I myself felt that the decibel level in the wheelhouse was already high enough and decided to stay at the bow, where despite being just another "Barge Virgin", I could make myself look like I knew what I was doing by waving a piece of

jumbo sized rope around and mumbling the occasional sentence with terms like "springs" and "roaming fenders" be aplenty. To be fair, the average age of those listening to me was about "10" and consisted mostly of the offspring of those in the wheelhouse. Like myself they obviously preferred the fresh air, and subconsciously were probably aware that should any of the novice helmsmen make a bags of it, then it was certainly going to be easier to make your escape from the bow than the crowded wheelhouse (after all, we have all seen Titanic haven't we ?).

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I was quite happy talking with my young co-crew until one very observant young person pointed to a certain inflatable "figurehead" on the front of Les™ 41M and asked me "why is that there?". The internal panic which ensued I tried to find an answer, was further heightened when I realised that the "figurehead" had recently undergone a gender transformation!

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"Shore Crew" Les & PJ, in charge of spikes and lump hammers!

74M, 72M & 4B at temporary moorings, awaiting darkness .....

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Thankfully, at that point someone said we were stopping for a few minutes to allow it to get a little darker for our entry into Ballinasloe. "Great" said I, as I now could start waving ropes around again and ignore any more of those awkward questions!

"Now, so we are stopping, but there is no marina, or quay wall or floating jetties!" ah-ha I had forgotten, we were on a barge, so we simply pull up to the bank, turf Les and PJ onto the shore with a few large steel spikes and lump hammer, and "Hey-presto" we have our own moorings, simple eh!

Soon it was deemed dark enough to proceed, and the brightly lit flotilla moved upriver to Ballinasloe led by the Rally Commodore Carmel Byrne's boat "Desperado". The lead boat was followed by Fermate II, Chang-Sha, Paradise, 68M, 41M, 4B, 74M 76M(not in order).

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We arrived into Ballinasloe around 22:00 where the waiting crowd who had been attending the Pageant Night of the festival were enlightened by Daniel Becker who gave a short description of each boat's identity and history.

Suddenly the air erupted to the sound of fireworks and as 68M was one of the first boats to berth I was luckily able to run over to the opposite side of the marina where the full spectacle of the lit up sky could be appreciated against the brightly lit foreground that the parade of lights formed in the Harbour.

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However, all too soon the display was over and although a number of boats decided to stay in Ballinasloe for the night, others opted to make the trip back down the Suck to the Moycarn. You probably don't need to ask, which group we were in. Yep that's correct, we were heading back down river!

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Fireworks display against foreground of illuminated boats in harbour

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Suffice it to say the journey back down was an interesting event with Mick Moore and myself at the bow of 68M with torches spotting navigation markers and relaying their position back to Gerry, who by now had (thankfully) taken control of the helm again. It was somewhere around the second set of marks that I realised how fortunate I was to be spotting on the Stb side and had the much easier job of locating the "red" markers compared to poor Mick who had the almost impossible task of finding the "black" markers. However, notwithstanding the difficulties of finding black markers in the dark, Gerry got us all safely back to the Moycarn without any problems and after 68M was securely tied up, even treated us to a little beverage, to settle the nerves of course!

I think I can safely speak for all of the other cruiser families who were able to be part of this very special event through the generosity and willingness of the barge owners who welcomed us on board, when I say it was a most memorable occasion and really enjoyed by all. It was a genuine surprise to me when I realised just how many of the passengers, who despite being on the waterways for many years, had never actually experienced the pleasure of being on a moving barge before.

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This is only the third Derg Rally for the crew of our cruiser "Reflection", but two of the things which really stand-out for us is, the diversity of the craft attending the event and the welcoming and inclusive attitude, particularly of those who have attended for years. Long may it last, so that the rally continues to go from strength to strength each year.

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