

# The Mountmellick Canal

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Photographs on cover and page one: Russell Brothers barge on the Mountmellick Canal, 1914 (Russell Brothers' Photography Collection); Tow path near Kilnacash, 2008 (Jim Fraher)



*This map, reproduced by kind permission of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland, shows the system of rivers and canals once used to bring goods to the Midlands. The Mountmellick Branch of the Grand Canal, which extended from Monasterevin, County Kildare, to Mountmellick, County Laois, was in operation from 1831 until 1960.*

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
The Heritage Council





*“My first memory is the boats tipping up the canal. The boats had only a single stroke engine and they were driven on crude oil, which was very, very cheap. . . . They started them up and all you could hear was the little boat tipping up... pip...pip...pip...pip...pip...pip.”*— Bill Lawlor



**F**or more than a century, the Mountmellick Canal flowed through the lives of people in Monasterevin, Portarlington, Mountmellick and all points in between. In its first years, the canal brought passengers, materials and coal to Kildare and Laois. Later its main cargoes were flour, malt and porter.

When the canal closed down in 1960, most people forgot about it.

Then slowly, steadily and silently, the man-made banks of the Mountmellick Canal became one of the rarest things in Ireland: a haven for wild nature.





During the early days of the industrial revolution, England, Scotland and Ireland were gripped by "Canalmania": a canal-building craze.

Steam engines enabled mills, mines and factories to produce goods at a rate never before imagined. However, in places with no natural waterways, transportation of industrial products was a problem.

Canals appeared to be the perfect solution, particularly when it came to transporting fuel and agricultural produce. Governments, landlords and the new class of industrialists put up funds to built canals. Money also came from speculators, who hoped to make a killing from their share of profits from the goods and passengers.

Especially in Ireland, there was the hope that if the government helped create the infrastructure to transport manufactured goods, industry would follow.

Like the rest of Ireland, Laois, then known as Queen's County, was primarily farmland. Still, it made some sense to open a branch of the Grand Canal to Mountmellick. Since the mid-1700s, this town, with its large Quaker settlement, had been known as the "Manchester of Ireland".

By the time that canals were being built in Ireland, Mountmellick had become the wealthiest and most industrialised town in Laois; it also had the highest population.

In 1801 nearly 4,000 people worked in several large spinning and textile mills in and around Mountmellick. Textiles were also a cottage industry in the area; many farmers and their families supplemented their earnings by weaving at home.

*MOUNT-MELLICK, a market and post-town...containing 4577 inhabitants....It consists of one principal with some smaller streets, and in 1831 contained 700 houses, many of which are very neat and some elegant buildings: from the extent of its trade and manufactures it ranks as the chief town in the county.... A branch of the Grand Canal, which has been brought to the town from Monastereven [sic] has greatly promoted its trade in corn, butter, and general merchandise, which is rapidly increasing. – Samuel Lewis, A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland, 1837*



Ordnance Survey Map, Mountmellick, 1839



Mountmellick's breweries sold beer to people in the town and surrounding area. The Quaker-run breweries also supplemented the diets of the students at the Mountmellick Provincial School with beer.

Mountmellick boasted several tanneries. A thriving tannery in the nearby town of Portarlinton was also expected to benefit from access to the canal.

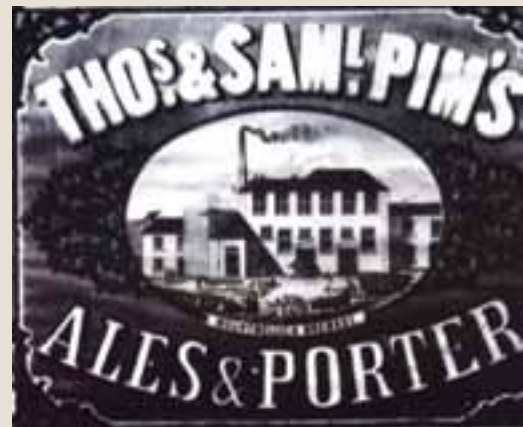
In the 1820s, the Irish Parliament agreed to loan the Grand Canal Company money to build a branch from the Athy Branch of the Grand Canal at Monasterevin to Mountmellick. Messrs Henry, Mullins and McMahon, who had been responsible for cutting most of the Grand Canal, were hired to construct the new branch. Following in the footsteps of his father, John Killaly, an engineer for the Grand Canal Company, Hamilton Killaly supervised the project.

Beginning in March 1827, crews were hired to dig the canal. Some local men probably joined these crews, particularly during the winter, when work on farms was scarce.

Construction of the canal proceeded at an average rate of 25 metres per day. The workmen dug the canal bed and constructed a bank on either side, with a drainage ditch along the outer base of each bank. Because the canal generally followed the flood plain of the River Barrow, it was dug into relatively flat ground. Only three locks were necessary to enable barges to negotiate changing ground levels.



*Described in the 1840s as "a spinning mill, worsted factory and thickening mill," New Mills is the only known example of an integrated woollen mill in the county. It was operated by John Millner on a site just west of Mountmellick.*



*In the early 1800s, Anthony Pim (1774-1842) operated a malting and brewing enterprise in Mountmellick. After his death, his sons Thomas and Samuel continued the business on Market Street. They also had a general provisions store on Main Street that sold everything from bluing to baked goods to snuff. In addition, the Pim brothers operated a hardware and timber business.*



*Warehouses on the quay at Monasterevin, built by the Grand Canal Company, probably in the 1790s.*



*The terminus at Mountmellick had a full harbour, as well as the goods stores shown here.*





## Bridges



*The substantial triple-arch Mountmellick Aqueduct carries the canal over the Triogue River. This was the only large river crossed by the Mountmellick Canal. To negotiate streams and drains, the Grand Canal Company constructed nine single-arch culverts, seven of which continue to function.*



*Wheelahan's Bridge*





*Kilnacash Bridge is one of 27 bridges built along the Mountmellick Canal. Some carried roads and railways over the canal; others carried the canal over streams and drains. Today 23 of the original bridges continue to function.*



*A name was given to each of the 14 bridges that carried roads over the Mountmellick Canal. Some were named after people, including Johnny Dunne's Bridge, which is shown here. More than half the bridges were named after their location, usually their townland. Among these are Lea Bridge, Ballymorris Bridge, Woodbrook Bridge and Kilnacash Bridge.*





By July 1829, the canal was ready to receive water all the way to Mountmellick. However, because of its porous gravel bed, two more years passed before the Mountmellick Branch was completely watered and ready for operations; it opened in March 1831.

For the next 16 years, the Mountmellick Branch of the Grand Canal had a virtual monopoly on both passenger and goods traffic.

While travel by canal barge was much slower than by stagecoach, the difference between the two was like the contrast between a luxury cruise ship and a cramped budget airline today.

Up to twelve people might crowd into a single stagecoach with another eight riding on top. On the long, dusty, crowded journey, travellers rubbed shoulders as the coach lurched over bumpy roads.

In contrast, the passenger barge, which measured 16 metres by about 3 metres, glided along the smooth surface of the canal. Passengers sat on the upholstered benches that lined the cabin walls. Up to 45 passengers could ride in the state ("first class") cabin. In pleasant weather, they were able to leave their cabin and enjoy the passing scenery from a deck on top of the cabin.

*In 1815, Portarlinton and Mountmellick were served by the Dublin to Limerick Stagecoach, which left the Hibernian Hotel on Dawson Street in Dublin at 6 a.m. each morning. It stopped at Monasterevin, Portarlinton and Mountmellick before pulling into Parsonstown (Birr) for the night. The next morning the coach passed through Moderenny and Nenagh. The stagecoach reached Limerick at 2 p.m.*

*...we slipped through the water in the most delightful manner imaginable, at a rate of four miles per hour. . . .*

—Sir John Carr, describing a journey from Athy to Dublin on a passenger barge in 1805.



*The Harcourt Lock on the Grand Canal by James Barralet, late 1700s*





Accommodation was more modest in the "common cabin" in which 35 passengers sat back to back on a central bench, as well as on benches along the walls.

Both classes of passengers could order hot dinners during their journeys. Bacon, chicken and mutton were cooked on a stove in the stern of the boat, usually by the captain's wife, and served by two "suitable girls". Passengers could also purchase tea, wine and porter. In fact, one of the captain's jobs was ensuring

that passengers – particularly those in the common cabin – remained sober during the journey. Another rule enforced by the captain was to limit the number of live chickens brought on board, as they disrupted the passengers.



*In the pre-railway era many people chose to travel by canal wherever possible: it was more comfortable, less tiring and more reliable than road travel, and... there was more than a suggestion of adventure in embarking on a canal journey across the Bog of Allen towards the western sea.*

–W.A. McCutcheon

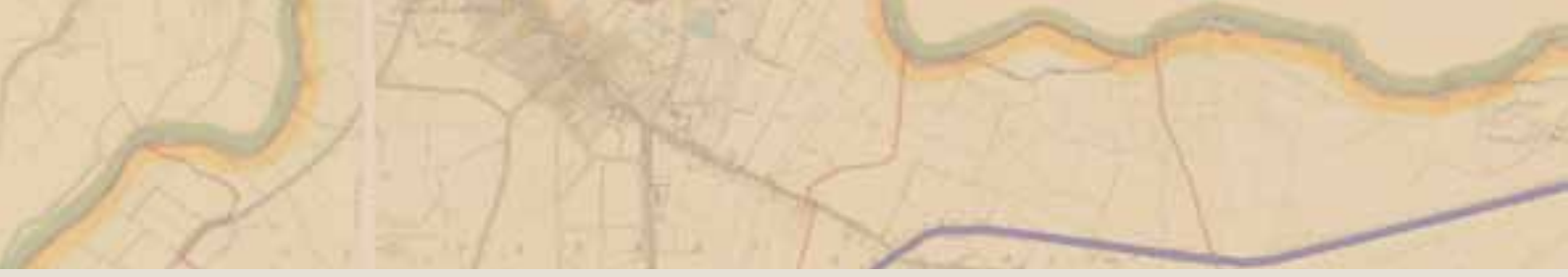


*These grooves on the quoin of a bridge were worn by towropes as horses pulled canal barges.*



*Horses pulling canal boats used towpaths like this one. One contractor, Henry Odum, informed the Grand Canal Company that he needed 16 horses to service his stage of 12 Irish miles.*





The Grand Canal Company promoted the idea that travel by canal barge was safer than by stagecoach. The company let the public know that a blunderbuss and a case of pistols, like the one shown to the right, had been supplied to the officers of every passenger boat.



To make canal travel even more appealing, after 1834 the Grand Canal Company introduced "flyboats". Previous canal barges moved at an average speed of 5 kilometres per hour (3 mph). The new flyboats, drawn by four fast horses, which were changed often, achieved up to three times that speed, including time spent at locks. These smaller, slimmer, faster passenger boats accommodated 20 in the state cabin and 32 in the common cabin. They offered cold snacks, rather than hot food.

*My grandmother, Emma Cooke Blanc, had been brought up by her aunt and uncle, the Hendersons of Lough Villa, Bracklone. In her teenage years she travelled from Portarlinton to Dublin on the canal boats. She often told of how the captain of these boats never ate his meal with any of the other crew members, but sat on his own, rather in the manner of a sea captain. – Ronnie Mathews*

The Grand Canal Company set up a schedule of flyboats by day and regular passenger boats by night. The company also subsidised stagecoaches on the routes from Mountmellick to Mountrath and to Abbeyleix via Maryborough (Portlaoise). These stagecoaches met the canal barges and helped the passengers on their way.



*Italian immigrant Charles Bianconi operated coaches between major stagecoach routes and stops along the Grand Canal. Passengers arriving at the canal terminus at Mountmellick could take a Bianconi coach – or "Bian" as they were known – to Birr. In these coaches, which were based on the Irish jaunting car, luggage was piled in the middle, while passengers sat on two benches facing outward. A major reason for their success was Bianconi's excellent horses.*

*This illustration of a Bianconi car was engraved by John Harris and published in 1856. It is based on a painting by Waterford artist Michael Angelo Hayes (1820-1877).*



# Locks

Because the Mountmellick Branch followed the flood plain of the River Barrow, only three locks were necessary to help barges negotiate changing ground levels. The locks divided the Mountmellick Branch into four sections that are known as "reaches".

Every time a lock keeper opened a lock gate, the reach above that lock lost water. To ensure that the water remained deep enough for barges to operate, the Grand Canal Company had its workers dig two artificial channels, known as feeders.

The fourth reach at the Mountmellick end was topped up by a 4 km channel off the Triogue River at Kilnacash. The other feeder was 3 km long and originated in boggy ground at Kilbride Wood. It flowed into the canal at Woodbrook Bridge.



*Today both feeders are largely dry and overgrown.*

Each lock keeper was responsible for making sure that boats passed safely through his lock. If a boat damaged the lock gates, all traffic on that branch of the canal would be affected until the gates could be repaired and the lock be made to function again.

The lock keeper maintained not only his lock, but also the banks of the canal between his lock and the next one. He also had to make sure that privately owned boats had paid their lock dues. As part of his remuneration for these jobs, each lock keeper was provided with a house and a small garden.



*Coughlan's Lock in Coolnafearagh, County Kildare, was the first of the three locks on the Mountmellick Branch of the Grand Canal. Coughlan's Lock House is the only lock house on the Mountmellick Branch that is inhabited today.*



*When the Portarlington Ring Road was constructed in 1970, the stretch of the canal that included the second lock was filled in. Today the lock keeper's house stands empty. All that remains of the lock is a portion of the north-west side wall, which is visible from the road.*



*No trace of the canal line exists near the third lock at Tinnakill. The lock has been infilled and the lock keeper's house is empty, though it was inhabited until recently.*





Unfortunately, the canal had been so expensive to construct that fares on the passenger barges remained high. Although trade on the Mountmellick Branch built up slowly from 1831 to 1834, profits never exceeded £100 per year.

However, for the towns of Mountmellick and Portarlington, the canal traffic was a bonanza. As well as bringing in goods, the canal made it possible for businesses to ship their products for sale in Dublin and possibly for export to the wider world.

When the potato crops began to fail in 1845, Mountmellick was one of the hardest hit towns in Ireland. For years, labourers throughout Britain and Ireland had come to work in its factories and mills. As many businesses shut down during the famine years, these workers remained behind, becoming destitute.

As food prices soared, people rioted in the streets. In February 1846 the Board of the Grand Canal Company agreed to let provisions pass toll free on the canal in order to alleviate the distress of the starving people. That same year, goods barges moved up and down the canal in convoys, and troops were stationed along the canal banks to protect cargoes.

By March 1847, 3,300 people had come to depend on the Mountmellick Relief Committee for food. Typhus and cholera spread among the weakened population. By the end of the famine years, more people in Mountmellick had died from a fever epidemic than from starvation.

As businesses failed and people suffered, Mountmellick's population plummeted. When the famine years ended, the town's population had dropped by about one-third.



*Quakers Joseph and Margaret Beale, shown above, played important roles in Mountmellick's history during the 1840s. Margaret Beale supported the development of Mountmellick Embroidery, which began in part as an effort to teach impoverished young women a marketable skill. When the potato crops began to fail, she and her relatives ran a soup kitchen for the poor.*



*Among their other business interests, the Beales owned Monordree (Monordreigh) Mill, a woollen mill in Barkmills townland. This mill was known for its massive 40-foot-high (more than 12-metre-high) waterwheel, the largest such wheel ever to operate in Laois. When the Famine struck, Joseph Beale converted this textile mill into a flour mill to grind Indian corn to feed the people facing starvation. During food riots, the mill came under attack; rioters were held off by Joseph Beale and his two eldest sons.*

*Eventually Joseph went bankrupt and emigrated to Australia. Margaret remained behind and managed the mill, which had reverted to textile production, for another two years before leaving with the rest of her family to join her husband.*







The Famine devastated passenger traffic on the canal, then the railways dealt the final blow. Even the flyboats, with their breathtaking speed of up to 10 miles per hour (16 kph), could not compete with rail travel, which was more than twice as fast.

In 1847 the Great Southern and Western Railway Company opened a line from Dublin to Portarlinton. Railway travel was so convenient and fast that by 1850, according to historian W.A. McCutcheon, it had become "as unthinkable to travel by canal as it had been a century earlier". When the Central Ireland Railway Company began to run from Portlaoise to Mountmellick in 1885, passenger traffic to Mountmellick via the canal came to a complete halt.



*This goods shed at the Portarlinton Railway Station was opened around 1850 by the Great Southern & Western Railway Company.*



© Barry Pickup

*No. 186, built in Manchester in 1879, may well have passed through Portarlinton and Mountmellick before its service on the GS&W Railway ended in 1964. This picture from 1979 shows 186 on a turntable in Bray.*



*The Mountmellick Railway Station was in operation from 1885-1962.*



*This bridge carried the Dublin to Portarlinton train over the Mountmellick Canal. Today the canal's bed has been filled in to make a road. However, it is still possible to see marks left by barge towropes on one of the bridge's piers.*





*In 1851, the Royal Irish Beet-Root Sugar Company opened up on the site of a former brewery outside Mountmellick. Representing an investment of £10,000, this was the first factory in Ireland to extract sugar from beet. Two steam engines supplied enough power and steam to process 300 tons of sugar beet per week. The factory was featured in an 1852 article in the Illustrated London News. After the business closed down in 1862, some of the buildings were used as malt houses and to store grain.*

After the railway reached Portarlinton in 1847, the primary business on the Mountmellick Canal became the transportation of bulky, low value cargo. Guinness porter was the main product brought down from Dublin. There was also heavy traffic in coal, timber and hardware and messy smelly commodities, such as manure, tar and hides.

Barges left Mountmellick and Portarlinton and travelled back to Dublin laden with tons of malt, flour, wheat, beet and sugar.

At Portarlinton, a wharf and stores served Odlums Mill, which opened in 1876. The strategic location of the mill near both the canal and the railway allowed it to make use of all available means of transportation. To ship wheat and flour, the Odlums owned and operated three barges on the canal.



*Odlums Mill opened in Portarlinton in 1876. Rather than relying on waterpower, in its early years the mill was powered by steam engines, fuelled by coal. During the summer of 1899, the mill burned down. It was rebuilt in 1903 and again in 1978. Now powered by electricity, Odlums is one of the few flour mills still in operation in Ireland.*





*Mr. W.P. Odlum of Maryborough is building new mills near Portarlinton. The site of the mills is an excellent one, placed between the railway station and the town and beside the canal. The Earl of Portarlinton has generously given the stone for the purpose. Mr. James Lynch of Maryborough has charge of the work and the new mills on which Mr. Odlum intends to expend £6,000 are being rapidly built. – The Leinster Express, 26 August 1876*

In 1914, Bob and George Russell opened Russell Brothers sawmills on a 25-acre site in Portarlinton. Like Odlums Mill, Russell Brothers was adjacent to both the canal and the railway. Timber harvested from large estates was shipped via the canal to the mill, where it was processed. From there, it was transported to Dublin and on through Liverpool and throughout the U.K. Wood from the Russell Brothers' mill became bobbins in the cotton mills of Lancashire. Much of the timber was also sent to Wales, where it was used as pit props in the coal mines.

Before 1940, malt was the principal cargo from the terminus at Mountmellick. Although it was shipped year round, extra barges were hired during the summer to bring the new malt to Guinness in Dublin.



Timber being loaded on to a canal barge from the Russell Brothers wharf on the Mountmellick Canal, 1914 (Russell Brothers Photography Collection).

*Years back the canal ran along beside Odlums all the way into Mountmellick and into Portarlinton. That's why the factories were there. There were the remains of an old railway line in Russell's Yard where they used to load things onto it and bring them over to the canal. – Peg Moran*





To manage the tons of goods that were shipped on the canal, the Grand Canal Company employed canal agents. Each agent had to check the goods off the boats and arrange for them to be picked up or delivered to their final destination.

The agent kept records of all boats that stopped at his station, along with the length of their stays. He received payments, maintained accounts, and kept the company aware of any breakdowns, bad weather or delays. This information, which was sent to the office of the Grand Canal Company at James's Street Harbour in Dublin each day, allowed the company to monitor the movement of boats.



*You talk about the supermarkets now. But there were big merchants everywhere who had big shops that had groceries, hardware... The boats would come through Lowtown, just outside of Dublin. At Lowtown they would change for the Barrow line or the western line through Tullamore and Daingean... They brought all types of goods for merchants in towns...*

*Waiting for them would be the carts, at first, then lorries afterwards, from Pims and Smiths and Williamses and McElroys. There were several wholesalers who distributed goods to the smaller towns. But the main deliveries were done through the canal – Bill Lawlor*



James's Street Basin (also known as the Grand Canal Harbour) in Dublin, 1949 (Guinness Archive, Diageo Ireland)





Bill Lawlor, the son of the Grand Canal Company agent John Lawlor, was born in the agent's house in Mountmellick, where he still lives today.



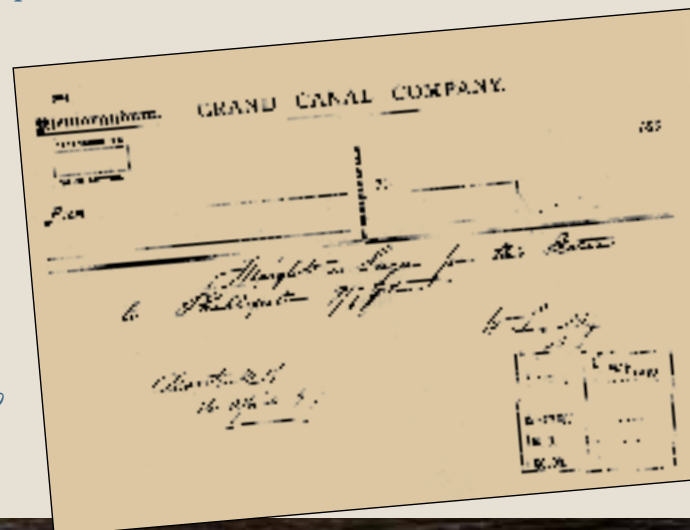
In 1923 John Lawlor became the Grand Canal Company agent on the Mountmellick Branch. He supervised goods shipped on the canal until it closed to commercial traffic in 1960. The Canal Agent's House was part of his payment.

*He had to do all the clerical work. There was an awful lot of clerical work attached to it. . . . The Grand Canal Company had a foolproof clerical way with their business. Every day you had to post even if there was nothing in or nothing out. . . .* —Bill Lawlor

*My father came to Mountmellick in 1923 as a manager of the Grand Canal Company's branch in Mountmellick. . . . He was in charge of the whole thing.*

*At the time there was no such things as supervisor for this and inspector for that. The man in charge was the man in charge. He got everything done.*

*Local people loaded the boats and unloaded the boats. He would have to go around and resurrect five or six people when the boats come in. He'd have to get the boats unloaded as quickly as possible and on to the next station.* —Bill Lawlor







In 1911 the Grand Canal Company fitted a Bolinder semi-diesel engine onto one of its horse-drawn canal barges. The motorised boats were given a number, followed by M (for motor). The first ones were launched on 1 August 1911. In 1925 the company began to build up a fleet of motor-driven barges and, by 1939, all its barges had engines.

Although most barges on the canal were owned and operated by the Grand Canal Company, some belonged to merchants or independent operators. Known as "hack boats" or "byetraders", these barges had the designation "B" after their numbers.

W.P. and R. Odlum owned two of the first motor barges on the canal: 17B and 18B, which began as horse-drawn barges. They also owned the motor boat 97B. Each barge carried 42 tons. In 1939, the Odlums sold 18B and replaced it with 118B, which was built at the dockyards in Ringsend. This boat held

45 tons. Because of the Second World War, no engine was available for this boat and the Odlums were lent one by the Grand Canal Company.

Independent traders hired out their boats during busy seasons or served a particular merchant along the canal. One such trader was P. Cafferky of Mountmellick. Beginning in March 1927, he operated 31B which traded on the Shannon until he sold it to Williams & Woods in the 1940s.

Until 1946, the motor barges had four crew members. The master was the captain of the barge. The engineman, or fitter, looked after the engine. The deck-hand assisted the master and the fitter. And finally, there was the greaser, who was usually the son or nephew of the master. He was along to get experience, although he often had specific jobs, such as cooking meals and keeping the boat tidy.



© James Burke

*Barge 118B was built in 1939 for W.P. and R. Odlum. For the next decade or so the barge was used to haul grain and flour between Odlums Mill in Portarlinton and Dublin. Today 118B is privately owned. This photo from August 2004 was taken as the barge passed Bagenalstown, in County Carlow, on its way to a workshop for restoration.*





The crew lived in the cabin, which contained bunks, a table, a stove and some cupboards. The bunks were arranged along the sides of the cabin. The water barrel on each boat was painted a distinctive colour. People living along the canal probably could identify which crew was on a boat by the colour of its barrel.

In 1932 the Grand Canal Company began to build up a fleet of lorries to carry goods from the canal to customers. The railways had ended passenger traffic on the canals. Nearly a century later, lorries would finish off goods traffic and ultimately cause the demise of the Mountmellick Canal.

Traffic to Mountmellick ceased in 1940 when the last load of malt from Codd's Maltings was shipped to Dublin. However, grain barges from Dublin to Odlums Mill kept the section to Portarlinton open.



Built for D.E. Williams of Tullamore in 1910, 31B spent many years on the Grand Canal under several owners, including P. Cafferky of Mountmellick. In the 1940s, the barge was sold to Williams & Woods Ltd and used to haul confectioneries, earning its nickname "the Jam Boat". Today 31B is privately owned.



This photo, from around 1942, shows workers at Codd's Mills, the building that presently houses the Mountmellick Development Association. Names were provided by Una Bloomer, whose father, William Hibbitts, was a maltster for Codd's. Back row (left to right): Jim Murray, Martin Hibbitts, Billy Miller, Unidentified, Edward Laffey, William Murphy, Jim Kirwan. Front row: Jack Geoghegan, William Hibbitts, Chris Palmer, Paddy Conroy, Dan Hickey, Joe Murray, Jack Flynn.



This building was originally a steam-operated flour mill erected in 1840 by Samuel Sheane. In the 1880s, when Eugene Codd took over Irishtown Maltings from James Sheane, he changed the defunct flour mill into a malt house. Codd's shipped its last load of malt on the Mountmellick Canal in 1940. Today the old mill has been converted into the Mountmellick Development Association building.



*There was 12 stone in those bags of malt, they came down from Codd's Maltings on carts, there were nine or ten carts carrying eight bags at a time. They would be loaded onto that boat there off the quay. A few boards went down there to make a walk up. A lad would carry a sack on his back and put it down individually.*

*The last of those [barges] went out on the 6th of March 1940. More boats came in after that one with other stuff, but that particular job was over. The malt was finished. —Bill Lawlor*





During the Second World War, the canal once again came into its own. Because of the scarcity of petrol and oil, the government commissioned 29 wooden horse-drawn barges, designated G boats, to bring turf to heat homes and businesses. Between 1941 and 1945, Grand Canal Company Boats and G boats delivered thousands of tons of turf throughout the Republic.

After the war, traffic on the canal again declined. In 1950, the Grand Canal Company became part of Córas Iompair Éireann, the new transport authority set up by the government. The authority also took over the lorry services related to the canal. As goods traffic shifted to the roads, the canal trade dwindled to nothing.

*When I came to Odlums in 1955, the barges were no longer in use—they were tied up at the mill. John Scott, who had been the last General Manager of the Grand Canal Company was, at that time, the General Manager of Odlums. He sold 118B to the Waterford Harbour Board, which used it to maintain the river marker buoys. Then I think it became a private boat. —Loftus Odlum*

*The canal was our swimming pool. During the 1920s there were swimming races from bridge to bridge. When I was young, Vic Fisher and Joe Walsh would dive into the canal off the railway bridge.*

*There was fishing for pike, roach, eels and tench. Some people used floatboards, but that was frowned upon. You baited a hook, tied it to a floating board and walked beside the canal pulling it along.*

*Youngsters caught lifts on the barges and travelled from one bridge to another.*

*We skated on the canal when it froze. In good weather, there was a regular walk in Portarlinton in a circular loop along the canal and you would see wildlife. Swans and coots nested in the banks and there were always herons and waterhens. The canal was part of life. —Ronnie Mathews*



*The Ordnance Survey maps of 1839 and 1888 referred to this bridge as Moore's Bridge; in 1907 its name was listed as Blackhall Bridge. In 1970, when the canal near Portarlinton was filled in, the bridge was almost destroyed. The Bridge Restoration Committee restored the bridge in 2000, as part of a millennium project.*



*This photo from the early 1950s shows William Lynch outside the Lynch family home, with the Grove and the Blackhall Bridge in the background.*



*Mrs Bridget Lynch and her son William at the Grove near Blackhall Bridge in the 1950s.*





The canal officially closed in 1960. Afterwards, in places where the canal ran through privately owned land, CIE offered to sell on portions of the canal.

A large section at Portarlington was infilled in 1970 to create a bypass around the town. Responsibility for those sections of canal that remained unsold was eventually transferred to the Office of Public Works and now rests with Waterways Ireland.

One of the last sounds of the Mountmellick Canal was a great banging, rippling noise that happened whenever a car or lorry crossed over the canal bridge beside Odlums Mills. This cast iron and timber bridge had been known as the Swing Bridge because it pivoted to one side to let barges through. After the Portarlington portion of the canal was filled in, the Swing Bridge was taken down.

*. . . now you hear about lorries being too big and not alone is it costing fortunes of money to do the roads but it's costing fortunes to maintain them. . .*

*They brought 50 tons of stuff on the boats and it took them 72 hours to bring them from Dublin to Mountmellick. It may seem slow now, but when you think about it, [each canal barge] carried 50 tons.*

—Bill Lawlor





In 1940, when the last load of maltings from Codd's passed down the Mountmellick Canal, Laois and Kildare still contained many wild grasslands filled with plants and animals that had evolved, over the centuries, to live in this part of the Midlands. Local bogs were also relatively undisturbed.

As the years passed, however, development and agriculture began to force the native plant and animal communities off the land. Many of them found a home along the abandoned and neglected canal.

Today the old Mountmellick Canal offers plants and animals a nearly unbroken band of rare, natural habitats. This accidental nature preserve weaves like a ribbon through County Laois.

So far over 200 different species of plants have been discovered along the old canal. These plants provide food and shelter for countless birds, insects and other creatures.

Although it was never an economic success, by becoming a reservoir of biodiversity the Mountmellick Canal has truly made Laois a richer place.



*Skeagh Bridge*



*This woodland on the banks of the empty canal bed near Kilnacash Bridge is just one of the wild habitats found along the old Mountmellick Canal.*



*When it opened for operation in 1831, the Mountmellick Canal was 19 kilometres (12 miles) long. Since 1960, when traffic ceased, 58 percent of the canal bed has been filled in, although occasionally one of its banks or ditches has survived. Native grasslands have colonised some of the dry banks, while portions of the canal that still contain water offer safe harbour to plants and animals of the Irish wetlands.*



*The Triogue River as it flows towards the Mountmellick Aqueduct, which carried the Mountmellick Canal over the river. The trees in the distance follow the line of the defunct canal.*





## Who Owns the Mountmellick Canal?

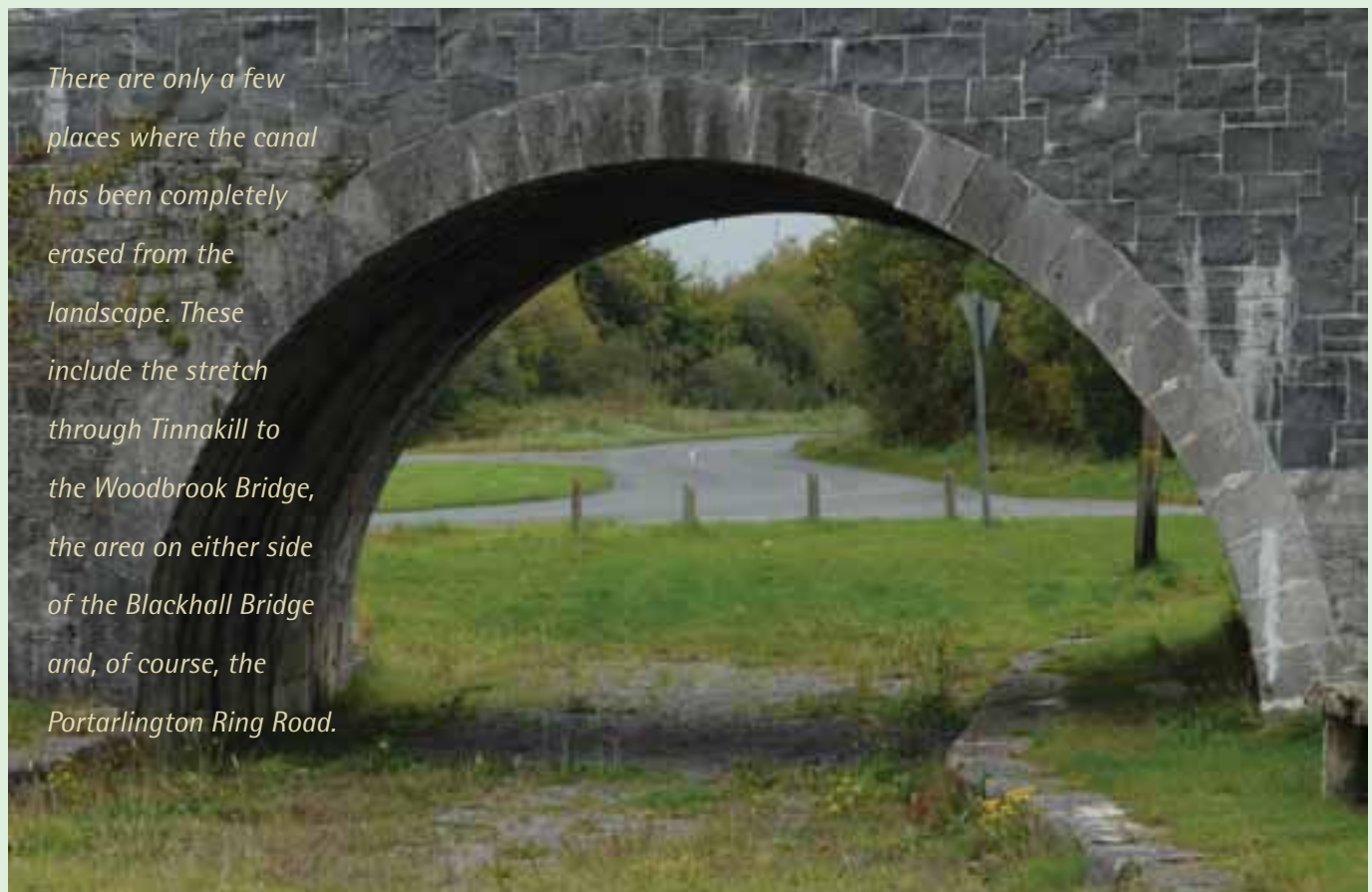
After 1960, landowners were given the option of buying sections of the canal adjacent to their property. Many of them took up that offer and today most of the canal – 61 percent – is privately owned. The rest belongs to Waterways Ireland and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

In most cases, the new owners simply fenced off the canal with a hedge and/or reinforcing fence, and let nature take its course.

Trees and bushes along the canal grew without human interference. Grasses and wildflowers began to take over its banks.

As a result, large portions of the canal now make up a long strip of wild woodland. Many of the banks along the canal have become wild grasslands, rich with different species.

There are two main reasons that the plant communities found along the Mountmellick Canal have become so scarce in the rest of the county. The first is loss of habitat. As more land has been developed, wild areas have disappeared. The second is the use of chemicals on the land. Pesticides and herbicides poison wild plants and animals. Fertilisers cause strong growth in a few species – such as garden plants, commercial grasses or food crops – which then smother native plants.



Blackhall Bridge





*Trees line the banks of the old canal near the place where Woodbrook Bridge once stood.*

## Mountmellick Junction to the First Lock at Coughlan's Bridge

If you want to see what the Mountmellick Canal looked like during the days when barges passed up and down to Dublin, you could visit the first section of the canal in Monasterevin, County Kildare. Here the Mountmellick Branch separates from the Athy Branch of the Grand Canal at Mountmellick Junction. This first stretch of the canal, which still contains water, extends to the first lock. Today it belongs to Waterways Ireland and is open to the public.

Several different species of plant grow along the towpath, where horses walked as they pulled the canal barges. Among the more interesting plants found here are burnet saxifrage and rough hawkbit.



*Rough hawkbit, Leontodon hispidus, Crág phortáin gharbh*



*Burnet saxifrage, Pimpinella saxifraga, Ainís fhiáin*





## The First Lock at Coughlan's Bridge to the Second Lock at Portarlinton

Just past the first lock, the waterless canal passes through farmland. Because grazing animals have access to the canal here, its banks and bed have been somewhat eroded. But in places, the banks are covered with the plants of limestone grassland, including lady's bedstraw, quaking grass, and yellow rattle.

Butterflies and a host of beneficial insects depend on wild grasslands, like this one, to complete their life cycle. Without these plant groups, butterflies have no place to lay their eggs or feed. Unfortunately, this type of habitat is among the most threatened in Ireland because of development and changes in farming.



*The first lock on the Mountmellick Branch was known as Coughlan's Lock.*



*Looking north-west along the dry canal bed just north of the first lock.*

*limestone grassland*





*Once found in meadows and pastures throughout Ireland, yellow rattle takes its name from the sound of its seeds shaking inside the dried seedpods. This parasitic plant was once viewed as a pest because it hampers the growth of grasses. However, in wilderness areas, yellow rattle's feeding habits are an advantage. The plant checks the growth of grasses or clover, allowing a greater variety of species to flourish.*



*Yellow rattle, Rhinanthus minor, Gliográn*

*Bumble bees are the main visitors to yellow rattle's complex flowers. From May to August any bee that sticks its proboscis into one of the golden flowers is showered with pollen, which it then carries to the next plant.*



*Quaking grass, Briza media, Féar gortach*





In wetter sections, meadowsweet, yellow flag iris and hard rush thrive. The edges of the banks are home to a number of trees, including grey willow, hawthorn, hazel, ash and the occasional black poplar.

Next, a waterless segment of the Mountmellick Canal passes beside the Coolnafearagh Bog. Of exceptional interest here is an area of cutover bog, rich with plant species, between the canal bed and the road.

A belt of fen that runs parallel to the road contains stands of great fen sedge, making this this area a Priority Habitat under the EU Habitats Directive. Nearby drains and pools are home to a great variety of plants, including bog cinquefoil, marsh bedstraw, royal fern and greater stitchwort.

Frogs and newts thrive in this area, along with many different types of insects. Among them is the rare marsh fritillary, which is protected under European law. The largest spider in Ireland, the fen or bog spider, is also found here. It hunts on the edges of pools, lying in wait for anything that becomes trapped in the water.



*Great fen sedge, Cladium mariscus, sábhsheisc*

## *a belt of fen*



*Marsh fritillary, Euphydryas aurinia, Fritileán réisc*

*The marsh fritillary feeds primarily on devil's-bit scabious, a plant that flourishes in the belt of fen at Coolnafearagh near the Mountmellick Canal. This richly coloured butterfly was once found throughout Europe. Today Ireland contains a large proportion of the European population of the marsh fritillary, but even here its numbers have fallen by 50 percent, as grasslands have been developed for housing or agriculture.*





# *dry high bog*

Along the line of the infilled canal some interesting species have colonised the grassland in the open fields on the north bank, including eyebright, self-heal, milkwort, quaking grass and red fescue.

South of Coolnafearagh Bog on the opposite side of the road lies Clonanny Bog, which is still being cut from the south side. The small section of dry high bog that remains is covered in places with cross-leaved heath. Spotted orchid is common here, along with several other plants, such as lousewort, marsh helleborine and twayblade.



*Cross-leaved heath*  
*Erica tetralix*  
*Fraoch naoscaí*



*Marsh helleborine*  
*Epipactis palustris*  
*Cuaichín corraigh*



*Common spotted orchid*  
*Dactylorhiza fuschii*  
*Nuacht bhallach*





The canal has been filled in at Wheelahan's Bridge. At first glance, the grasses around the bridge may appear untidy. But closer examination reveals grassland rich with plant species, including false oat, silverweed, cock's-foot, Yorkshire fog, meadowsweet, quaking grass and lady's bedstraw.



*Cock's-foot grass, Dactylis glomerata, Garbhfhéar*



*Silverweed, Potentilla anserina, Brioscán*



*The main road once passed over Wheelahan's Bridge. Today, the bridge has been bypassed by a new road to the north.*





*Lady's bedstraw, Galium verum, Boladh cnis*

*In summer the grasslands surrounding Wheelahan's Bridge are filled with lady's bedstraw. Some people say that its bright yellow flower-heads – which look like constellations of tiny stars – smell like honey. Others think they stink of urine. Years ago, dried bedstraw flowers were used to scent linen because they release the same chemical that gives a lovely scent to new mown hay.*

*The name lady's bedstraw comes from a medieval legend that the plant offered itself as a bed for Mary on the night that Christ was born. The next morning its white flowers had turned golden.*

Further on, a patch of neglected grassland offers a home to many different plants, including red fescue, bartsia, silverweed and meadow fescue. Wild grassland has colonised an open field on the north bank. It is possible to see selfheal, autumnal hawkbit and quaking grass.



*Harvestman  
Phalangium opilio  
Pilib an fhómhair*

*Specialised hunters of the grasslands, harvestmen belong to the same animal group as spiders and scorpions. Their flexible stilt-like legs allow them to move through the jungle of grass stems and leaves in search of prey.*



*Yorkshire fog, Holcus lanatus, Féar an chinn bháin*

# wild grassland





*At Bergin's Bridge, ivy broomrape covers the slope leading from the road down to the canal on the south side.*



*Ivy broomrape, *Orobanche hederæ*, Múchór mhór*



*Ivy broomrape is the single most interesting species found along the Mountmellick Canal, which seems to be its primary habitat in the county. Because it lacks chlorophyll (which gives most plants their green colour), this close relative of the snapdragon has a weird, otherworldly appearance. Rather than converting sunlight into food, ivy broomrape draws nutrients from the roots of the ivy plant. The plant flowers in June and July, relying mainly on bees for pollination.*

*Lea Church was already in decline around 1830, when workers were digging the canal banks. The new canal interrupted the tree-lined south-east approach to the church's graveyard. By 1838, the church was in ruins. The church graveyard now contains an extraordinary abundance of ivy broomrape.*



*Surviving fragment of Lea Church*





Between the canal and the track that leads to Lea Church lies a small triangular field. This little pasture is filled with a number of interesting plants, among them common bent, Yorkshire fog, spotted orchid and lady's bedstraw.

An extraordinary abundance of the somewhat ghostly plant ivy broomrape grows in Lea Church Graveyard and along the canal banks nearby.

The canal is open most of the way between Lea Castle and Portarlington. In many areas, it is encroached upon by the usual canal bushes, including grey willow, blackthorn, holly, hazel and hawthorn.

Westwards from Lea Lane, the channel gets wet and muddy; in places there are pools. The plant community here is dominated by reed sweet-grass, horsetail and wild iris. This place is home to several waterhens.

An old hazel coppice can be found much of the way along the towpath south-west of Lea Castle. Mugwort is common in some of the fields nearby.



Graveyard of Lea Church  
Lichen, Léicin

Several dozen lichen species may grow on a single mature oak tree or an old gravestone. These unusual organisms are the product of an intimate relationship between an alga and a fungus. Lichens were once used to make dyes. Today they are valued because of their important contribution to biological diversity and also because they can be used, like the canary in the coal mine, to monitor pollution. When lichens falter, humans will soon be in trouble.

*pasture*



Centipede, Céadchosach

Illustration from *On The Genesis of Species* by St. George Mivart, F.R.S. (1827-1900.) London: Macmillan and Co. 1871.

*Dragons of the insect kingdom, centipedes ripple along on dozens of legs, grabbing prey with their venom-filled fangs. They hunt in the dark corners of the natural world: under bark and beneath stones and logs. Despite their name, centipedes do not have 100 legs: the usual number is about 50. Millipedes, on the other hand, have two pairs of legs on each of the 20 to 100 segments that make up their round bodies.*



## The Second Lock at Portarlinton to the Third Lock at Tinnakill

Between 1969 and 1971, Laois County Council filled in most of the canal between the Second Lock and Blackhall Bridge to make the Portarlinton Ring Road. Today this stretch of just over three kilometres is the longest continuously in-filled piece of the canal.



*Canal stores along the Mountmellick Canal, now the Portarlinton Ring Road.*



*The stores of the Grand Canal Company once held goods that were traded up and down the Mountmellick Canal. Today the stores buildings face the Portarlinton Ring Road, built over the defunct canal.*



*Ballymorris Fen*

*flooded*



Just west of Ballymorris Crossroads, where the canal bridge once stood, there is a wonderful corner of wet, callow-like flooded grassland. More than 30 different species of wetland grasses and other plants thrive in this spot, which may have been formed after the bridge was demolished.



*Purple loosestrife, Lythrum salicaria, Créachtach*



*Meadowsweet, Filipendula ulmaria, Airgead luachra*

*Purple loosestrife stands up to two metres tall; up to a third of that height is its purple-red flower spikes. These flowers are a favourite food of hoverflies. The emperor moth feeds on plant's leaves, which turn gorgeous shades of red and yellow in autumn. The name loosestrife comes from a Greek-derived term that means "deliverance from strife". According to Pliny, if a person placed this flower on the yoke of quarrelling oxen, it would make them get along.*

*grasslands*



North-east of Blackhall Bridge the old canal disappears. The only sign that it ever existed is the railway bridge.

Further on, the canal is open, well-preserved and often contains water. A belt of woodland runs along the south bank part of the way to the spot where Woodbrook Bridge once stood. On the north bank, there are the remains of a hazel coppice. The woodland floor is home to a number of plants. Some – such as bluebell, common dog violet and primrose – are easily recognised wild flowers. However, the richness of this habitat is evident in plants seen less often, such as false brome, wood sanicle and ivy broomrape.



Woodlouse, Cláirseach



Wood sanicle, *Sanicula europaea*, Bodán cuille

*All creatures have strange relatives. For prawns, lobsters, crabs and crayfish the odd cousin is the woodlouse: the only crustacean that has evolved to live on land. Though it may have left water behind eons ago, the woodlouse's body has difficulty retaining moisture. During the day woodlice have to hide in damp places so that their bodies do not dry out. They breathe through tiny holes in their hind legs.*

*belt of*





## The Third Lock at Tinnakill to the Terminus at Mountmellick

There is no open water in the last section of the Mountmellick Canal, which stretches from the third lock to the terminus at Mountmellick. More than half of this part of the canal has been filled in. However, between Tinnakill Lock and Dangan's Bridge, there is a good stretch of open, dry canal bed.

The infilled canal runs through open fields on either side of Tinnakill Lock. In places, almost nothing remains to show the line of the original canal, although the wood on the south-east side of the road is rich in species, especially the boundary, which is a high bank with a ditch on either side.



Wood mouse  
*Apodemus sylvaticus*  
Luch fhéir



Pygmy shrew  
*Sorex minutus*  
Dallóg fhraoigh

Woodlands shelter two tiny mammal species: the wood mouse and the pygmy shrew. The wood mouse is the most common mammal in Ireland. The pygmy shrew has to eat constantly because of its small size; it thrives in places where there are enough worms, grubs and other invertebrates to satisfy its voracious appetite.

*The incredible ears of the brown long-eared bat are nearly as long as its body. Although common in Laois, this bat is seldom seen in flight because it hunts in woodlands, rather than open areas. The bat flies with its ears extended forward, listening for the delicate movements of spiders and moths among the leaves. A resting bat folds its ears neatly sideways into "rams' horns"; it hibernates with the ears tucked beneath its wings.*

*In summer, these bats roost in houses, churches and outbuildings. A pile of moths' wings is one clue that the bat has roosted above. However, the bats find houses too warm for hibernation. Instead they probably pass winter months in crevices in stone buildings, in tree holes and under bridges.*



© John Altringham

Brown long-eared bat, *Plecotus auritus*, Ialtóg chluasach choiteann

*woodland*





The Mountmellick Canal's third lock takes its name from nearby Tinnakill Castle, which was built in the 1700s.

Once the residents of Tinnakill Lock House got up during the night to see passenger and cargo barges on their way along the last stretch of the Mountmellick Branch of the Grand Canal. Today all traces of the canal line have been eradicated. The lock house stands like an island in a sea of cultivated land.

Wild nature can create a habitat even on a pile of broken stones. The chamber of the third lock has been filled in and a patch of limestone grassland has developed here. More than 16 different species of grassland plants have been counted in this one spot. Countless butterflies, insects and other organisms depend on this habitat.

The only sign of canal plants is a stand of marsh woundwort in the corner of a field.

Although it has been abandoned, the lock keeper's house is not beyond repair. Swallows often nest inside. Outside, some of the ornamental plants that were once tended by lock keepers' families have grown wild. These plants include a few old roses, French marigold, bridewort and the Duke of Argyll's teaplant.

Further down the line of the canal, Skeagh Bridge stands isolated on the edge of a small patch of grassland that is being colonised by its own interesting mixture of species.



Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*, Fáinleóg

*The young swallows that hatch in the Tinnakill Lock House will spend about three months in Laois. As they feed on local insects, these fledglings will absorb the smells and sounds and other features of this Midland landscape. When the weather cools and the insects become scarce, the young swallows will fly off to South Africa. Next spring they will cross three African deserts and dodge the bullets of Mediterranean sportsmen as they make the 9,500 kilometre journey back. It is likely that 70 percent will not survive the harrowing journey. When the swallows return to this peaceful place, males will arrive first to set up their territories. Females will appear about two weeks later.*

*patch of limestone*





*Black knapweed, Centaurea nigra, Mullach dubh*

*Black knapweed literally keeps its powder dry. While many flowers, such as dandelions, must close to protect their pollen from rain, the thistle-like knapweed flowers keep pollen safely packed away.*

*Every knapweed flower-head is made up of about 100 tiny flowers, or florets. A tiny test-tube like structure at the end of each floret holds a drop of nectar. When a butterfly or moth reaches in its long tongue to drink the nectar, the flower releases its pollen.*

*During the Middle Ages, ointments made from black knapweed were used to treat wounds, sores and even epidemics, such as plague. The flower's Latin name comes from the mythical centaur Chiron, who was said to have taught mankind how to use medicinal plants. His image appears in the constellation Sagittarius.*

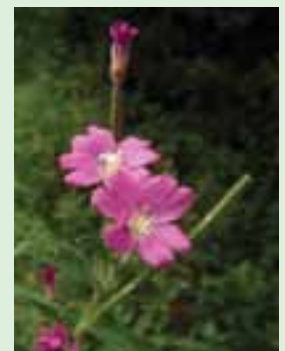
Many wild species have come to live in the stretch between Skeagh Bridge and Dangan's Bridge. Among them is a rare whorl snail, *Vertigo moulinsiana*, which belongs to the group of special species and habitats that are vital to the conservation of biodiversity in Europe. For that reason, this section of the canal has been designated a Special Area of Conservation under the EU Habitats Directive.

The canal channel here is choked with a variety of plants, including reed sweet-grass, yellow flag, horsetail, great hairy willowherb and purple loosestrife.

East of Dangan's Bridge is one of the few places in Laois where it is possible to see the canal as it once was: wet, open and with little woody vegetation.



*Horsetail*  
Equisetaceae agg.  
*Cuiridin*



*Great willowherb*  
*Epilobium hirsutum*  
*Saileachán mór*



*View from beneath Dangan's Bridge*

*grassland*





Further down the line, there is a stretch of the canal that was hedged off and forgotten about. Like a jungle, this area shows how any part of the canal, if left alone, would return to nature.

The next section, which passes through Clonterry Townland, is one of the most interesting natural areas along the length of the Mountmellick Canal. Although the canal bed has been filled in, a high bank with deep ditches on either side remains.

There is no way to tell whether the canal bank here was always this high or whether it was made higher using spoil from the canal. Whatever the story, today this bank has become a rich limestone grassland, home to more than 40 different species of wild grasses and flowers.

Like a time capsule, this bank contains many of the natural grassland plants that would have thrived in Laois before modern farming. In a very real way, this bank offers a glimpse of the landscape of ancient Laois.

While devil's-bit scabious and oxeye daisy would be familiar to most people around here, there are many plants less often seen, including the pyramidal orchid.



*Pyramidal orchid, Anacamptis pyramidalis, Magairlín na stuaice*



*Ox-eye Daisy, Leucanthemum vulgare, Noinín mor*

*The pyramidal orchid thrives in the dry limestone grassland along the canal banks in Clonterry Townland. During July and August this orchid sends out spikes up to two feet high that end in a pyramid-like cone of rose- or magenta-coloured flowers. Charles Darwin described the sweet, slightly animal smell of the flowers as "foxy". He counted 23 species of butterflies and moths visiting the pyramidal orchid.*

*natural grassland*





*Kingfisher, Alcedo atthis, Cruidín*

Towards Kilnacash Bridge, the line of the canal is marked by two high wooded banks, fringed with trees, and a wet ditch on either side. The ditch on the south-east side is home to purple loosestrife, angelica, watercress and much marsh bedstraw, among others.

South-west of Kilnacash Bridge the open canal is bounded by overgrown hawthorn hedges. Young trees – beech, ash, hawthorn, elm, holly and even damson and rowan – grow along the edges of the channel.

*plants*

*Habitat loss has affected the kingfisher, which lives near rivers and streams. This iridescent bird chooses a “favourite” branch and studies the surface of the water. Then it dives for small fish and aquatic insects, catching the occasional small stone as well. Food plays a central role in kingfisher courtship. Holding a fish – head facing outwards – in his beak, the male approaches a potential mate. He tries to feed her the fish. If she is not interested, he eats the fish himself.*



*Kilnacash Bridge*

A great range of wildlife, including waterhens and kingfishers, lives near the Mountmellick Aqueduct which carried the canal over the Triogue River.

Finally, near Debicot Bridge and the terminus of the canal, the plants again reflect the original limestone grasslands. Among them are quaking grass, sweet vernal grass, hogweed and tufted vetch.





Sometimes wilderness survives because humans set aside a special nature area; sometimes it occurs because nature has been allowed to take its course. This is what happened with the Mountmellick Canal. People made it, they used it and mostly, they forgot about it. Then nature took over.

Today the banks of the old Mountmellick Canal offer a ribbon-like strip of natural habitats. Many of the plants and animals that live here have become scarce in the rest of the county and indeed in Ireland as a whole.

Worldwide as many as 30,000 plants and animals become extinct each year. That is why a place like the abandoned Mountmellick Canal is so important: it has become a reservoir of biodiversity. Long stretches of the canal offer habitats where plants and animals can live out the natural course of their lives without interference.



*Old rose growing outside the Tinnakill lock keeper's house*



*Line of canal near Clonterry*

It is also one of the few places where people, in an increasingly pressurised modern world, can have contact with wild nature.

Although the Mountmellick Canal never was a profitable venture, in ecological terms, it has become a treasure.



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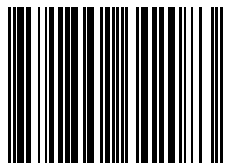
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The Heritage Council



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