

HISTORY REVEALED AT TOOME

Artefacts dating back some 9400 years have been found during archaeological excavations at the site of the Toome Bypass.

Although investigations are at an early stage, it is thought that the area shows the earliest evidence of settlement and farming in Ireland. The 8000 specimens suggest that the site could have been used by hunter-gatherers even before the Mountsandel settlement was established, further north on the River Bann at Coleraine.

The extremely rich excavation site, containing the posthole remains of a dwelling, evidence of cereal growing and many flint blades and tools, is located on a flat plane in the lea of a drumlin near what was once a tributary of the Lower Bann. This site was probably very attractive to early settlers and farmers being beside the salmon and eel-abundant river and near the floodplains providing rich pastures and arable land. The dating of the specimens, using radiocarbon-techniques, will enable archaeologists to pinpoint the exact end of the Mesolithic period and start of the Neolithic period when man began to domesticate animals and cultivate land.

As a condition of building the Toome Bypass, the Department of Regional Development, Roads Service employed Northern Archaeological Consultancy Limited to survey the site. Following the present finds, many prominent archaeologists from all over Ireland have been arriving to see the evidence at first hand. Finds from more recent times include shards of decorated pottery from the Neolithic period and lined water troughs or 'fulachta fiadhs', common in Ireland circa 1,400BC, and believed to have been used for bathing, cooking and laundry/textile production.

Environment & Heritage Service, Natural Heritage has also funded the Queen's University of Belfast to carry out a palaeoenvironmental study in the Toome area. The buried deposits beside the edge of the lake have shown that lake-levels around Toome began to rise about 9,000 years ago, soon after the Ice Age ended. 6,000 years ago areas of open water developed at Toome and along the Lower Bann as sea levels rose further. At times, water levels would have fallen and this enabled prehistoric peoples to take advantage of the rich fishing and hunting grounds by the river and lakes. By about 3,500 years ago, sea levels were no longer having such a large effect inland and lake-levels started to fall. With a small volume of water in the area, the river changed course, possibly flowing further to the west. Peat began to develop in the old river channel. Ancient pollen and insect remains in these peats suggest that the area was still subject to seasonal flooding. Tree-ring evidence indicates that lake levels have risen and fallen over the millennia and in the more recent past, before the lake lowering schemes. Ordnance Survey memoirs record that inhabitants had to use boats to move around from house to house during the winter months.

The construction of the Toome Bypass will continue as scheduled. After being properly catalogued, it is anticipated that a selection of the artefacts will be placed on public view at a location close to the original site. It is expected that the full collection will be held and displayed by the Ulster Museum in Belfast.

WINTER ANGLING RESTRICTIONS ON LOUGH BEG

Lough Beg is increasingly used for recreational angling during the winter months, when the three wildfowling clubs, which own or lease shooting rights around the edge of the Lough also are engaging in their legitimate sporting activity.

In an effort to ensure that both anglers and wildfowlers can enjoy their sport safely and without undue disturbance from the other sportsmen, Bann System Ltd has held discussions with wildfowlers' representatives, the BASC and Countryside Alliance. It has also consulted the Northern Ireland Pike Society, Coleraine Pike Anglers and other angling interests.

It is clear from these consultations that Saturday morning, particularly during December and January, is the time when there is most potential for the two activities to clash. Therefore, we are voluntarily introducing the following measures for January and December 2003:

1. Angling will NOT be permitted anywhere on Lough Beg until after 10.30 am, apart from those areas listed in paragraph 2 below, and which are denoted on the map on the right. After this time, anglers are free to use any legal methods anywhere in Lough Beg.

N.B:- These restrictions will only apply to Saturday mornings and only during the months of January and December 2003.

2. Angling can take place BEFORE 10.30 am, without restrictions, in the following areas:
 - a) The whole of the river Lower Bann channel between Toome and Newferry and 20 yards on either side of it, but excluding the area shown as hatched on the map. This hatched area is to be avoided by anglers until after 10.30 am, as the channel runs quite close to a number of shooting hides.
 - b) The small area of land known as "The Point", at the Southern entrance to the Lough, where anglers may fish into both the Lough and river channel.
3. There are no restrictions placed on anglers' access at any other times, days or months throughout the year 2003.

4. The conservation area near Church Island and marked on the map should be respected by both anglers and wildfowlers throughout all months of the year. This should enable both fish and birds to have an undisturbed refuge at all time.

Further consultations will be held with all interested parties during 2003, to assess the outcome of the above plan.

Edward Montgomery, Bann System Ltd
Tel: 028 70344796

RESEARCH PROJECTS ON LOUGH NEAGH EELS

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, is carrying out a three year research project on Lough Neagh eels. This work is being sponsored by the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure.

For further details contact Marcus McAuley on 028 9025 8898.

WETLANDS WILDFOWLING COMMITTEE

There are a number of organisations involved in wildfowling activities on Loughs Neagh and Beg.

The Lough Neagh Management Strategy highlighted the need to have one voice representing all wildfowlers and recommended that consideration be given to the establishment of a wildfowling committee to provide this co-ordination role. To this end, a public meeting for all Lough Beg and Lough Neagh wildfowlers was held on the 15th September 2002. The wildfowlers present supported the establishment of a self funding Wetlands Wildfowling Committee (WWC), administered by the Scottish Association of Country Sports.

An initial meeting of the WWC took place at the end of January 2003 and was chaired by Ian Clark, a representative from the Scottish Association for Country Sports with Conor Douglas, a representative from Derryclone Wildfowling Club, as the Deputy Chairman. At this meeting, two wildfowling representatives for the north-west region were elected at public meetings to be held in the near future. It is hoped that the WWC will act as the conduit for information between the wildfowlers, management organisations and the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee.

For further information contact Ian Clark on 01698 885206 or Conor Douglas on 028 3831 4126.

CANOE TRAIL FOR THE LOWER BANN

The Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) commissioned a Strategic Review of Canoeing Opportunities in Northern Ireland in 2002. This Review highlights the Lower Bann as one of the most appropriate waterways in Northern Ireland in which to develop a long distance, high profile canoe trail for local and visiting canoeists. The Lower Bann scores highly because:

- The 38 mile long river is a considerable challenge for most paddlers;
- The canoeing is easy with slow flowing waters;
- The river is close to several canoe clubs with active populations and to two busy outdoor centres;
- Locks allow the falls to be avoided (through the locks themselves are difficult to negotiate);
- Portglenone and Kilrea allow for stops and purchases along the way
- The adjacent forests provide informal wide camping opportunities;
- Drumahelis marina provides more formal camping facilities;
- The river supports an interesting range of fauna, including otters, heron, kingfishers, salmon, eels and passes through pleasant rural countryside.

In order to make this trail a reality, the major infrastructural needs are jetties above and below locks to allow for portage. Waterways Ireland is well advanced in achieving this goal. Information boards, web pages and marketing material would also be needed. Hopefully the Lower Bann Partnership will be able to lend its support to this project. It will bring benefits for canoeists and local businesses alike.

EASIER AND LONGER LOCKING

New jetties – Waterways Ireland will be making navigation through the locks on the Lower Bann easier by providing jetties above and below each lock. The jetties will provide a convenient location for boaters to tie up whilst arranging for safe passage with the lock keeper. Each jetty will be approximately 30m long and will have ramp access for disabled users. Waterways Ireland hopes to have the jetties in place for the summer, but this is dependent on obtaining planning permission.

Extended Locking times – Waterways Ireland has indicated that the extension of the local operating times on the Lower Bann last summer was successful. There were significantly more lock passages than in previous years, with approximately 200 and 300 at Movagh and Portna respectively. As a result, the locks will again be operational from 8am to 8pm from June to September.

The Advisory Committee applauds Waterways Ireland for their vision and encourages all users to make the most of the jetties and extended lock opening time.

Further details can be obtained from Waterways Ireland on 028 6634 6216.

NORTH-WEST GAS PIPELINE

BGE (Northern Ireland), has been awarded a licence for the conveyance of gas along a 'North-West Pipeline' from Carrickfergus to the existing power station at Coolkeeragh.

A route corridor for the pipeline has been selected and an environmental impact assessment carried out. It is anticipated that the pipeline will cross the Lower Bann River between Movanager and Vow, north of Kilrea. Route maps and a copy of the non-technical summary of the Environmental Statement can be obtained from Sperrin House.

SLUICE GATES UPGRADE

Work is due to start on 24 March 2003 on the refurbishment of the sluice gates at Toome. Rivers Agency and the project engineers, Atkins, hope to have the work completed by 5th September 2003.

TOOME BYPASS UPDATE

Despite the recent wet weather, the construction of the Toome Bypass is progressing well.

Embankment construction, for the river crossing, is progressing rapidly on either side of the river. The underlying soils here are particularly weak, requiring innovative construction techniques. Some 400 precast concrete piles have been driven 17 metres down through the poor soils into the underlying rock layer. These piles have now been trimmed back to existing ground level and enlarged concrete heads have been cast onto each pile to provide a stable support platform for the higher areas of embankment rising up to the new river crossing. Elsewhere band drains have been installed to help accelerate consolidation of the shallower areas of weak underlying soils further way from the river. Once installed, the band drains allow water trapped beneath the newly constructed embankment to quickly percolate up to the surface, allowing the embankment to settle more rapidly. Some 20,000 band drains have been installed, ranging from 8 to 15 metres deep.

The embankments are being constructed using rock fill from F P McCann's quarry at Knockloughrim. To date, over 350,000 tonnes of material has been imported and placed. The rockfill embankments are being reinforced using layers of geotechnical fabric. The higher embankments are being constructed in three stages with a 3-month rest period between each stage. The rest period allows the underlying soils to stabilise thus eliminating the potential for slip failures in the underlying soils. Embankment settlement is being carefully monitored using instrumentation installed in and under the embankments.

The design of the new bridge to carry the bypass over the Lower River Bann is progressing rapidly. The bridge will be a bowstring or tied-arch bridge as previously illustrated. The shallow depth deck supported from the two side arches will permit the river to remain navigable whilst keeping the height of the approach embankments to a minimum in this environmentally sensitive area.

The Toome Bypass Environmental Statement suggested the most environmentally friendly way to construct the bridge was assembly of the superstructure – the steel arches and bridge deck – on one side of the river. The superstructure would then be floated across the river on a barge. Further examination by the construction team showed this to be less environmentally friendly than originally thought. Considerable dredging of the riverbanks would be necessary to accommodate the large barge required to carry the weight of the bridge. The construction team has re-evaluated the construction of the bridge and has developed a procedure that equally satisfies the aspirations of the Environmental Statement, i.e. minimal damage to the ecology and landscape of the river. Temporary steel supports, ‘dolphins’ have been installed in the river to support segmental construction of the bridge over the river. The only remaining in-river work will be the removal of the temporary dolphin supports after completion of the bridge.

Piling for the bridge abutments is complete and construction of the reinforced concrete abutments will start shortly. Fabrication of the superstructure is underway in Fairfield Mabey’s works at Chepstow, Wales.

Signs on the banks of the River highlight the safe navigation channel through the temporary dolphins.

Drawings showing the construction sequence of the bridge are available from Sperrin House.

WILLOW SCULPTURE

A Willow sculpture, created by local artists, Julie McGowan and Tracey Gallogly has been erected at Oxford Island National Nature Reserve.

The sculpture was inspired by the natural environment and its organic form, texture and movement leave it to the individual to decide what it is.

Funding for the project came from the ABC Millennium Awards Scheme.

Further information about the project can be found at www.wetlandswillowcraft.com

THE HABITATS REGULATIONS

'The Habitats Regulations' transposes the EU Habitats and Birds Directives into NI legislation. Implementation of the Habitats Regulations will have implications for local and central government bodies ('competent authorities') that have jurisdiction over Natura 2000 sites (SPAs, SACs etc). The Regulations will give legal protection to vulnerable Natura 2000 sites and will protect habitats and species important in a European context.

The regulations state that if a project is to take place that may have an impact within or upon a Natura 2000 site, an impact assessment must be carried out to determine if there could be any adverse effects on the protected features of the area. An initial 'test of significance' will be carried out that will act as a broad filter identifying if further assessment is needed. If the project is necessary for conservation it can usually go ahead; if not necessary for conservation, a fine analysis, termed an 'appropriate assessment' will be done to determine the likely impact of the proposal on the site's important features. These assessments will be applied using the precautionary principle and the cumulative effects of the proposed project with other existing projects will also be considered. If there are no alternatives and the project is going to significantly affect a Natura 2000 site, it can only go ahead for reasons of overriding public interest, national security or defence or strategic regeneration.

All new plans must undergo an assessment and go through the existing consent process. There is need for all competent authorities to communicate effectively with each other and designate a 'lead authority' if necessary. All competent authorities have a requirement to apply the Habitat Regulations. Failure to implement the legislation at a national level could result in an EU member being taken to court, with the competent authority giving evidence/defending the action.

Further details and copies of the document can be obtained from EHS, Commonwealth House, Belfast.

Rosemary Bradley, Higher Scientific Officer, Environment & Heritage Service

ATTENTION ALL FARMERS AND LAND MANAGERS

The Countryside Management Scheme will be open for application from 3rd February to 14th March 2003. DARD is holding a series of road-shows in February to give advice on Good farming Practice and CMS form completion.

For details of the roadshow dates and locations contact Darren on 028 9052 4637.

NEW PUBLIC JETTY IN COLERAINE

Coleraine Borough Council is working in partnership with Waterways Ireland, the navigation authority for the majority of the Lower Bann River, to provide a public jetty near to Coleraine Town Centre.

After consulting river users and the Lower Bann Advisory Committee, it was decided that the most appropriate site would be on the west bank of the River, near the public amenity block at Christie Park. Planning permission is currently being sought.

The 60m long floating jetty will be accessed by a ramp and will therefore be suitable for disabled users. The majority of the jetty will be 2.4m wide and will have a 0.5-0.6m freeboard. There will be a 2.4m long section at either end with a 0.3m freeboard to facilitate canoeists. If all goes to plan, it is anticipated that the jetty will be in place for the start of this year's boating season. The Council are currently exploring the possibility of operating a water taxi from this site.

THE TRAMP

A professional salvage team has been called in to raise the sand barge, The Tramp after its collision with The Norman sand barge left it at the bottom of Lough Neagh in August last year.

The Tramp sank at position 54°40.1'N, 006°29'W approximately 1.25 nautical miles west of the Ballinderry River in five metres of water.

Lough Neagh Rescue was quickly on the scene. The area was monitored by EHS Water Management Unit but there was no major pollution problem. The crews of both vessels were uninjured. Other vessels should avoid the area as very little of the Tramp remains above water.

The Tramp was the largest vessel on Lough Neagh carrying in the region of 500 tons of sand. It came to Lough Neagh in the 1970s after trading on the continent.

The boat should be raised by the end of January 2003.

NEW LAND MANAGEMENT SCHEME

The MOSS scheme – Management of Sensitive Sites is a voluntary land management scheme, recently introduced and administered by Environment & Heritage Service.

It is designed to ensure the positive management of land within Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs). The aims of the scheme are:

- To conserve and enhance the nature conservation interests of the land;
- To conserve and enhance the diversity of plant and animal species found in each ASSI and;
- To introduce or continue a land management regime that will create the conditions necessary to ensure that the special interests are maintained or enhanced.

Anyone who owns or manages land within an ASSI, providing payment is not being received for the same under any other Government scheme for the protection and management of the environment, is eligible to join. Land managers must join the scheme for a minimum of 5 years, abide by the agreement conditions, carry out operations as laid out in the agreement, keep records and allow EHS representatives on to their land at all reasonable times.

If you are involved in managing ASSI, around Lough Neagh or along the Lower Bann, and are interested in finding out more, telephone 028 9054 6582, or write to MOSS SCHEME, Environment and Heritage Service, Conservation Designations and Protection, Commonwealth House, 35 Castle Street, BELFAST, BT1 1GU.

SAFETY FOR ALL BOAT USERS

1. Check and heed local weather forecasts.
2. Lifejackets must be carried for everyone on board and should be worn on deck, in dinghies, in open boats and whilst pottering on jetties.
3. Beware of local hazards such as strong currents, weirs and low bridges.
4. Do not overload your boat.
5. Use a kill cord on outboard motors.
6. Never drink and drive/sail/cruise/canoe.
7. Make sure you are safely tied up.
8. Do not navigate in the dark.
9. Always use the chart and stick to the marked channels.
10. Beware of dangers of fire and exhaust fumes on board cruisers, particularly when using petrol or domestic gas.
11. Ensure that your boat is seaworthy, your engine is regularly serviced and that you have enough fuel.
12. Take particular care when using locks.

13. Take care of the environment and be aware of and be courteous to other water users.
 14. Get proper training. Join an association or club.
-

SALMON NET BUY OUT

As of December 2002, 60% of the salmon net owners in the Fisheries Conservancy Board area agreed to be bought out. Only 5 nets were fished on the north coast and one in Co. Down in 2003.

These 6 nets caught 3488 salmon, compared to an average annual catch of 11500 salmon for the previous 5 years. Therefore some 8000 additional salmon could have made it into the river systems last year. Several clubs have reported improved catches and more salmon on the reeds.

IMPACT OF WIND FARM

Consultants are currently carrying out an environmental assessment into the potential impacts of the erection of a wind farm on the Tunes Plateau off the north coast near Castlerock and Portstewart.

It is anticipated that this study, including details of the impacts on fish and bird migration, land and sea-scape, marine life, noise pollution etc., will be completed by the early summer.

CULTURAL AWARENESS PROGRAMME

The South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association are commencing a Cultural Awareness Programme with the aim of promoting good community relations and raising awareness of the south Lough Neagh Wetlands.
For further details contact 028 3885 2550.

THE LOUGH NEAGH PARTNERSHIP

The Lough Neagh Advisory Committee has been and is involved in setting up a company limited by guarantee.

The major initial role of this company or Partnership will be to secure and administer funding for the implementation of projects that will benefit the environment, the economy and local people. It is envisaged that the Partnership will have objectives based on the following:

1. To encourage the protection, management and sustainable development of the area and to ensure local stakeholders have an input to this process.
2. To promote rural regeneration for the benefit of the public, inhabitants, interested parties and users of the area in a common effort to protect the environment, to provide facilities in the interests of social and economic welfare and to advance education.
3. To facilitate the development, management and marketing of the Lough Neagh Wetlands.
4. To protect, conserve, sustain, enhance and raise appreciation and awareness of the natural and built environment.
5. To provide and facilitate the provision of recreational opportunities for the local population and visitors.
6. To provide and facilitate the provision of opportunities to raise the social and cultural identity of the wetlands amongst local people and visitors.
7. To undertake a co-ordination and networking role with other agencies and interested parties within the public, private and community sectors involved in rural regeneration, the environment and tourism.

If the organisation you represent has legitimate interests in Lough Neagh, Lough Beg or the lower reaches of the inflow rivers and is interested in becoming a membership organisation, complete the form below and return it to Sperrin House before 7th March 2003.

It is envisaged that the directors of the Partnership will be drawn from the membership organisations according to a pre-determined formula.

Further details of the Lough Neagh Partnership can be obtained from Sperrin House.

LOUGHSHORE TRAIL

Look out for the Accommodation Guide to approved accommodation in proximity to the 128 mile cycle route around Loughs Neagh and Beg, the Loughshore Trail.

You can also take a break from cycling and go walking, golfing or fishing or enjoy some of the many watersports on offer. Equally, when its time to rest and refuel, the Lough Neagh region has a wide range of quality accommodation, pubs, cafes and restaurants to suit you and your family's needs. For more details contact the local Tourist Information Centres or visit the following websites:

www.loughshoretrail.com

www.sperrintourism.com

and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board website,

www.discovernorthernireland.com

CLLR SEAN McKAVANAGH

The Committee was saddened to hear of the death of Sean McKavanagh in December 2002.

Sean had been a representative of Craigavon Borough Council on the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee since the Committee's inception in 1994. His knowledge of the Lough and the local people was wide and varied and his commitment to the work of the Committee was highly valued. His modest nature and calm demeanour will be greatly missed.

The Committee extends its condolences to Mrs Vera McKavanagh and the rest of the McKavanagh family.

MISS NINA MURDOCH

Miss Nina Murdoch died in December 2002.

She had been the local agent for Shaftesbury Estates of Lough Neagh Limited in Ulster for over half a century. Miss Murdoch represented the Estate's interests on the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee from 2000, until ill-health led to her retirement last year. Her knowledge of wildfowling and sand extraction around Lough Neagh was extensive and she was unfailing in her loyalty to Shaftesbury Estates. Her presence at meetings will be missed.

The Committee would like to extend their sympathies to Mrs Elizabeth Meharg, Miss Murdoch's niece and the wider family circle.