

Clare and Ennis (**draft of a work in progress**)

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In 1828 Daniel O'Connell was elected to the House of Commons for County Clare. As a Roman Catholic, he could not take the Oath of Supremacy and so could not take his seat, but the **Emancipation Act 1829** removed that obstacle. However, it was not retrospective, so O'Connell had to stand again in County Clare; he was elected unopposed in July 1829.

On Sunday 31 January 1830 "The Patriotic member for Clare, Daniel O'Connell Esq, sailed from Howth [...] at 8 o'clock, for England, to attend his Parliamentary duties"¹ and when Parliament resumed on Thursday 4 February 1830

*Daniel O'Connell Esq took the oaths prescribed by the Catholic Relief Bill, and his seat as a member for the county of Clare. The honourable member seated himself on the third row of the opposition side of the house, and exactly opposite to Mr Peel.*²

Daniel O'Connell's letter

Before he left Ireland, O'Connell issued a letter to "the people of the County of Clare":

MY FRIENDS AND BRETHREN — I take up the pledges which I made to you when I called on you to repose in me the high and awful trust of being your Representative. I will endeavour honestly to redeem those pledges. [...]

*My Parliamentary duties will naturally divide themselves into two distinct branches: the first relates to your local concerns; the second, to those mighty interests in which your prosperity is involved with that of all Ireland.*³

There were four local concerns: two about canals and two about ports. One proposal was for an asylum harbour, a place of refuge from gales, on the west coast of Clare, at Malbay: there was nowhere to which a sailing vessel could run for shelter. However, as such a harbour would have been on a lee shore, safe entry during an Atlantic gale would have been difficult, and even Thomas Steele, whom O'Connell mentioned in this context, might have found its design beyond him.

The second ports proposal was for piers to provide shelter at Carrigaholt and Kilrush. O'Connell said

*The commerce of Kerry, Clare, and Limerick, are interested in these works. We shall certainly obtain the powerful assistance of the patriotic Member for Limerick. His assiduity, information, and public spirit, render him a model which Irish representatives should imitate.*⁴

A few years later, O'Connell was rather less complimentary about the MP in question, Thomas Spring Rice.

The third proposal was for a canal from Galway Bay to Limerick via the Shannon at Killaloe, which would have meant digging through some large hills. However, the real problem with the proposal is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Irish economy. Each Irish port served its own hinterland, shipping out local produce and shipping in coal, timber and other overseas goods. But the ports did not need to trade with each other, as each performed the same functions.

The final proposal was for a short canal at the village of Clare [now Clarecastle — a "miserable village", according to William Bilton,⁵ although Emily Taylor thought it "a pretty,

small town"⁶], which would allow "vessels of burden" to reach the town of Ennis. It would connect the estuary of the River Fergus, which was navigable, with the tide, as far as Clare, with the river above the bridge at Clare: the river was relatively deep up to Ennis. John Killaly wrote in 1822:

*The river Fergus is navigable for vessels of 100 tons burden, from its junction with the Shannon at Bay [Beagh] Castle to the port of Clare; the passage here is obstructed by a ledge of rocks, stretching quite across the bed of the river, over which the water runs with great velocity; from the head of these rapids to the town of Ennis, a distance of two miles, the depth varies from 10 to 20 feet.*⁷

Killaly said that, in 1817, he had, "under the orders of the Directors General" of Inland Navigation, designed a short canal of 64 perches [410 m if he was using Irish perches] to enable vessels to get through Clare. His canal would have had one lock, with a fall of 7 feet 6 inches [2.3 m], and a public road bridge. If it were catering only for the boats using the Shannon and Fergus estuaries, it would cost just under £10000; for an extra £2000 the lock and bridge could be made big enough to cater for seagoing vessels.

The Ennis sea-port and the Wyndham Canal

The proposal to link Clare to Ennis had several variants and it attracted much local support. In 1830 Charles Wye Williams said that John Grantham had surveyed the area and favoured the improvement of the navigation to Clare and its extension to Ennis.⁸ In 1831 the "Mechanics, Artizans and Labourers of the Town of Ennis" presented a humble address to "his Excellency the Marquis of Anglesey, Lord Lieutenant General and General Governor of Ireland", when he visited County Clare. They wanted more employment, an army barracks, relief from the effects of the Subletting Act, repeal of the Acts of Union and a canal from Ennis to the navigable part of the Fergus.⁹ In June 1831 Mathew Barrington declared that parliamentary approval would be sought for the construction of a canal through Clare and other land between there and Ennis, for the construction of one or more drawbridges and for the charging of tolls, rates and duties.¹⁰

The Lord Lieutenant sent Killaly back to survey the Fergus between Ennis and Clare;¹¹ in July 1831 he reported that a canal could be constructed, with a five-foot-high [1.5 m] embankment that would also carry a trackway [towing-path]. A swivel bridge would be needed at Clare to carry the mail-coach road across the canal. There were three options: with a lock at the southern end (total cost £28500), with a single pair of tide gates instead (£24000) or with no gates but a much wider canal, capable of carrying steamers (£22500). The first and second options would convert the Fergus into a floating dock, allowing vessels to remain afloat, but the second option would provide access only at high water. The same restriction would apply to the third option, with the further drawback that vessels would have to sit on the bottom, as they did at Clare, when the tide went out.¹²

In early 1832 William Smith O'Brien presided at a meeting in Ennis to promote the canal proposal. It considered two estimates: Killaly's and John Grantham's much cheaper proposal, costing £16000. A committee was formed and a Memorial was sent to the Lord Lieutenant.¹³ The committee asked the Commissioners of Public Works for funding. It pointed out that Killaly's 1817 estimate was for a canal that would cater only for small craft; it acknowledged that tolls on the canal would not be enough to pay for even the cheapest of his three new options; it also submitted John Grantham's cheaper proposal. It said that the canal would facilitate the export of corn and the import of general merchandise and of seaweed for use as manure; it expected many other benefits to follow.¹⁴ However, the Commissioners said that, on the information provided, the trade of Ennis was insufficient to justify the expenditure. They had reservations about aspects of both Killaly's and Grantham's proposals — and even more about an estimate submitted by one James Tobin, who said that he could implement Killaly's third option for under £14000.¹⁵

In 1837 Thomas Steele pressed for the resurrection of the project.¹⁶ The second set of Shannon Commissioners were surveying the port of Clare while Steele, using the slogan "Ennis a Sea-port — Out-port of Clare", proposed that the town of Ennis should develop between Clonroad, on the western side of the deep-water section of the River Fergus, and Cappahard, on the eastern side.¹⁷ He persuaded Mr O'Brien, the CoDSPCo's "General Inspector of the stations on the Lower Shannon", to ask the company to relocate its small steamer **Wye** to the Fergus, where it could ply between Ennis and Clare as a pleasure vessel, a tender to the steamer at Clare and a tug for lighters. He even devised his own scheme to enable the **Wye** "with her falling mast and chimney" to tow lighters from the tidal port of Clare to the deep water above the bridge.¹⁸

In August 1837 the High Sheriff and the two County Clare MPs signed a memorial to the Lord Lieutenant seeking his assistance in making the Fergus navigable to Ennis.¹⁹ In September 1837 Steele expressed his confidence that the project would proceed.²⁰ However, in that year the second Shannon Commissioners said

[...] the trade is too inconsiderable to justify, at present, the expense of construction and maintenance. The navigation would then, however, only reach to within a quarter of a mile of the town of Ennis, and it would, therefore, be still necessary to transport the produce that distance, by means of carts. Under these circumstances it appears to us more desirable to make the shipping point at Clare, as the difference of the cost of carriage from Ennis to that place will very little exceed that from Ennis to the shipping quay obtained by the improvement [i.e. a canal], and certainly not sufficiently so to counterbalance the cost of rendering the river navigable for large vessels; if confined to a barge navigation, the expense of double shipment would much exceed that of the direct carriage from Ennis to Clare.²¹

The canal proposal had thus been rejected both by the Commissioners of Public Works and by the Shannon Commissioners, but even then the canal's advocates did not give up. In May 1838 "Statisticus" abused all and sundry for their failure to have the Fergus improved; he or she also argued that the work could be done for less than the engineers had estimated.²² Later that year Colonel Wyndham of Ennis promised to donate £5000 towards the cost²³ and the project was thereafter referred to as the Wyndham Canal.²⁴ However, letters to the **Clare Journal** included one from Thomas Steele suggesting that it should instead be called the Wyndham Ship Canal.²⁵ On 30 July 1838 the Shannon Commissioners asked Henry Buck to check John Killaly's estimates of the cost of the elements of a navigation to Ennis.²⁶ By August £7000 had been collected towards the cost, but the **Journal** found itself forced to reprove Mr Steele for a letter "written in a very angry strain of invective".²⁷ The Wyndham Canal was never built; there were brief attempts to resurrect the proposal in the 1840s²⁸ but nothing came of them.²⁹ Ennis and County Clare were therefore spared any twentieth-century temptation to waste money on restoring a short ship canal.

The estuary issue

The Mechanics, Artizans and Labourers of the Town of Ennis, and their supporters amongst the merchants, gentlemen and politicians, might have been better off lobbying for improvements in the Fergus Estuary between Clare and the Shannon, instead of worrying about linking Ennis to Clare by water.

Captain Mudge pointed out that there were no directions, in any books or charts, for travelling up the Fergus Estuary to Clare, and there was "not one buoy or beacon in the whole river". The mouth of the Fergus was about five miles wide, but the navigable channel was only three quarters of a mile wide (and much narrower in its upper reaches). Only vessels drawing sixteen feet [4.88 m] could travel to Clare; although Hely Dutton had said that vessels of 200 tons could go there, Wolfe put the limit at 150 tons.³⁰ There were no

leading marks for the upper reaches, so Mudge and Wolfe agreed that it was essential to take a pilot, but

*At present there is not any body or persons having jurisdiction over the waters of the Fergus, and therefore it remains unshackled by duties, taxes or tolls of any kind; the pilots are self-constituted, and of course are generally very bad.*³¹

The channel wound its way through the mud:

*The river beyond Coney Island winds through vast banks of mud, extending from 1 to 1½ miles from the shore, decreasing gradually in width from 600 yards, and varying in depth from nine to three feet up to the town of Clare, nearly seven miles in a direct line, and nine following the channel.*³²

The quay at Clare

At Clare, most vessels had to sit on the bottom when the tide went out. There was a pool about a furlong [200 m] downstream: some parts had six feet [1.8 m] of water at low tide but others had only four [1.2 m]. Anchor cables and warps often blocked the navigation and Mudge thought mooring buoys should be provided instead.

From there to the quay at Clare the river was very shallow, with only 2–3 feet [0.6–0.9 m] of water at low spring tides. As freshes scoured the bottom, it was rocky; Mudge felt that loose rocks could be removed at low tide, which would be a cheap improvement.

The quay was 80' [24.4 m] long; it could accommodate one vessel and a boat at each end. Although it was very small, it was "of considerable service" in enabling vessels to load and discharge cargoes.³³

Trade

County Clare was, according to Henry Inglis, "not only a fine corn country, but an extensive cattle-breeding country".³⁴ But when Captain Mudge visited, most of its produce was sent, and most of its imports arrived, by road; the cost of carriage was around 13 shillings per ton. Mudge found that the county exported 3000 tons of wheat, 8000 of oats, 2000 of barley and 300 of beans, as well as unknown amounts of butter, bacon and cattle. The grain was sent to Limerick by land and the pigs were driven [ie walked] there.

The principal imports were 2500 tons of coal, which cost 22 shillings in Limerick but, at 13 shillings per ton for carriage, cost 35 shillings in Co Clare; 1000 tons of timber, 1000 of bricks and 500 tons each of salt, slate, flags slate and whisky, also carried by land from Limerick, at 13 shillings per load; and 500 tons of iron, for which carriage was quoted at eight pence per hundredweight [again, roughly 13 shillings per ton].³⁵

Land carriage was used despite the poor condition of the roads and the cost of land carriage:

*[...] the roads between Limerick and Ennis are in a most disgraceful state, and that part from Clare to Ennis is almost impassable; indeed it is so bad that the mail coach has been within these few days obliged to proceed by another route, although I am informed not much better. The road leading from the Quay to Clare is two feet deep in mire, and full of pits and holes, nor could I learn whether or not it was likely to be repaired.*³⁶

One or two vessels did use Clare each month, carrying in coal and carrying out grain.³⁷ James Macbeath, a merchant at Clare who bought over £50000 worth of grain each year, said that the trade was six times what it had been thirty years earlier, but there had been no improvement in the facilities. Insurance was more expensive for the Fergus than for the

Shannon and he had to pay higher freights to get traders to send ships to Clare. However, the currents were gentler than at the Narrows on the Shannon. Macbeath said that steamers could use the Fergus: one of them had taken baggage to Clare for the army.³⁸

In autumn 1835 John Barrow saw two small vessels being loaded with grain but several more under sail on the estuary. He said that large quantities of butter were sent to Limerick but did not say whether they went by road or by water.³⁹ The Railway Commissioners said that 3067 tons of corn, meal and flour were sent by water from Clare in 1835, along with £700 worth of other articles; 1671 tons of coals, culm and cinders were imported, along with 39 packages of wrought iron and hardwares weighing 6½ tons.⁴⁰ For a time lead was also exported through Clare: a vein of rich ore had been discovered at Quin, a few miles away; three mines had been opened and two more were in prospect; in six months over 1000 tons were exported to England.⁴¹

Steamers at Clare

In 1836 James Macbeath's wish was granted:

*In compliance with a requisition recently forwarded by the merchants, traders, and inhabitants, of Ennis and its vicinity, to Charles Wye Williams Esq, he has, with that kindness and liberality for which he is universally celebrated, been pleased to direct that the **Clarence** steamer should henceforth ply between Clare and Limerick. We earnestly hope that the Company, which has evinced such prompt attention to the interests and wishes of the requisitionists, will in return meet with such support and co-operation from the merchants and traders of Ennis as will enable them to continue this mode of communication, which cannot fail eventually to prove the greatest benefit to the agricultural and commercial interests of this county at large.*⁴²

The Pilot, "the newspaper which acted as [Daniel] O'Connell's unofficial voice",⁴³ was even more complimentary:

*That public benefactor of Ireland and the empire, Mr Charles Wye Williams, of Liverpool, leaves town this evening for the Lower Shannon and Fergus Estuary, and we understand principally for the purpose of taking measures for the permanent establishment of steam navigation on the latter magnificent expanse of water.*⁴⁴

Thomas Steele involved himself. He landed on Coney Island from the **Clarence** and persuaded the inhabitants that a steamer station would be established there and that it should be called, not Williams-town, but Williams'-Steam, "as an appropriate compliment to Mr Charles Wye Williams of Liverpool, to whom Ireland and the entire Empire are indebted for the first great impulse given to Steam Navigation".⁴⁵

By 1837 a jaunting-car was in operation, carrying passengers between Ennis and Clarecastle.⁴⁶ The 28-mile [45 km] steamer journey between Limerick and Clare took 3½ hours and the fare was 1s 6d first cabin and 1s 0d second cabin. In 1836, which was not a full year of operation, 2581 passengers were carried.⁴⁷ Although the journey was slow, the steamer was much cheaper than the coaches running between Limerick and Ennis: all three of them, which could carry a maximum of 15 passengers each, charged 2½d (inside) and 1¼d (outside) for a journey of 20½ Irish miles [42 km].⁴⁸ And if the roads were as bad as Captain Mudge had said, the steamer would have offered greater comfort too. However, despite the expectations of the **Clare Journal**,⁴⁹ the scheduled passenger service seems to have ceased in 1840⁵⁰, although a cargo service seems to have been provided when required.

Notes and sources

¹ *Tipperary Free Press* 3 February 1830

² *Standard* [London] 5 February 1830

³ *Morning Post* 20 January 1830

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ [William Bilton] *The Angler in Ireland: or an Englishman's ramble through Connaught and Munster during the summer of 1833* Vol I Richard Bentley, London 1834

⁶ (Emily Taylor) *The Irish Tourist; or, the people and the provinces of Ireland* Darton and Harvey, London 1837

⁷ J Killaly 26 June 1822 "No III Mr Killaly's Report on the Central District" in *Employment of the Poor, Ireland. Copies of the Reports made to the Irish Government by the Civil Engineers employed, during the late Scarcity, in superintending the Public Works; — and, An Account of the Appropriation of the Sums expended, to provide Employment for the Irish Poor, during the last year* Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 16 April 1823 [249]

⁸ Charles Wye Williams quoted in *Dublin Evening Post* 27 July 1830

⁹ *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier* 9 April 1831

¹⁰ *Limerick Evening Post* 24 June 1831

¹¹ *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier* 12 July 1831

¹² *Limerick Evening Post* [*The Limerick Evening Post and Clare Sentinel*] 21 October 1831. Killaly's report was dated 29 July 1831

¹³ *Saunders's News-Letter* 3 February 1832

¹⁴ *Limerick Evening Post* 7 February 1832

¹⁵ *Limerick Evening Post* 21 February 1832

¹⁶ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 26 January 1837

¹⁷ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 9 February 1837

¹⁸ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 6 April 1837

¹⁹ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 10 August 1837

²⁰ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* and *Saunders's News-Letter* 14 September 1837

²¹ Shannon Commissioners 2.2 *Second Report of the Commissioners appointed pursuant to the Act 5 & 6 William IV cap 67 for the Improvement of the Navigation of the River Shannon; with maps, plans, and estimates*. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty HMSO Dublin 1837

²² *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 7 and 17 May 1838

²³ *Waterford Mail* 16 June 1838

²⁴ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 12 July 1838

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- ²⁵ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 30 July 1838
- ²⁶ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 9 August 1838
- ²⁷ *ibid*
- ²⁸ *Limerick Reporter* 5 November 1844, *Morning Chronicle* 3 April 1845, *Freeman's Journal* 26 February 1846
- ²⁹ Ciarán Ó Murchadha *Sable Wings over the Land: Ennis, County Clare, and its wider community during the Great Famine* Clasp Press, Ennis 1998
- ³⁰ Hely Dutton *op cit*; Wolfe *op cit*
- ³¹ "No 7 Report of Captain Mudge, on the Navigation of the River Fergus. Limerick, February 4, 1832" in *River Shannon Navigation. Copies of a Letter from the Chief Secretary of Ireland, respecting the River Shannon, and of Answers to the Same*. Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 11 August 1832. 731
- ³² *Sailing Directions for the Lower Shannon, and for Lough Derg; with some Hydrographic Notices of Lough Ree and Lough Erne*. By Commander James Wolfe RN; being the result of Surveys made by Order of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. Hely Dutton [*op cit*] had said that vessels of up to 200 tons could reach Clare
- ³³ "No 7 Report of Captain Mudge, on the Navigation of the River Fergus. Limerick, February 4, 1832" in *River Shannon Navigation. Copies of a Letter from the Chief Secretary of Ireland, respecting the River Shannon, and of Answers to the Same*. Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 11 August 1832. 731
- ³⁴ Henry D Inglis *Journey throughout Ireland, during the spring, summer, and autumn of 1834* 4th ed Whittaker & Co, London 1836
- ³⁵ "No 7 Report of Captain Mudge, on the Navigation of the River Fergus. Limerick, February 4, 1832" in *River Shannon Navigation. Copies of a Letter from the Chief Secretary of Ireland, respecting the River Shannon, and of Answers to the Same*. Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 11 August 1832. 731
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- ³⁷ "No 7 Report of Captain Mudge, on the Navigation of the River Fergus. Limerick, February 4, 1832" in *River Shannon Navigation. Copies of a Letter from the Chief Secretary of Ireland, respecting the River Shannon, and of Answers to the Same*. Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 11 August 1832. 731
- ³⁸ Evidence of Thomas Steele in *Report from Select Committee on Shannon Navigation: with the minutes of evidence and an appendix*. Ordered, by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 29 July 1834. 532
- ³⁹ John Barrow Esq *A Tour round Ireland, through the sea-coast counties, in the autumn of 1835* John Murray, London 1836
- ⁴⁰ Appendix B No 9 "Return of the Tonnage and Estimated Value of the Exports and Imports of the several Ports in Ireland in the year 1835; including the coasting trade" in *Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to consider and recommend a General System of Railways for Ireland*. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty. HMSO, Dublin 1838

⁴¹ Mary John Knott *Two Months at Kilkee*, first published in 1836, Clasp Press, Ennis 1997

⁴² *Dublin Evening Post* 9 August 1836 quoting the *Clare Journal*

⁴³ Patrick M Geoghegan *Liberator: the life and death of Daniel O'Connell 1830–1847* Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 2010

⁴⁴ *The Pilot* 17 August 1836

⁴⁵ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 17 October 1836

⁴⁶ *Clare Journal* 25 May 1837 quoted on www.clarelibrary.ie

⁴⁷ Appendix B No 6 Inland Navigations: Lower Shannon "Extracts from Communications received from Charles W Williams Esq" in *Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to consider and recommend a General System of Railways for Ireland*. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty. HMSO, Dublin 1838

⁴⁸ Appendix B No 5 Public Conveyances in *Second Report of the Commissioners appointed to consider and recommend a General System of Railways for Ireland*. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty. HMSO, Dublin 1838

⁴⁹ *Clare Journal, and Ennis Advertiser* 1 June 1840

⁵⁰ The series of "Cheap travelling" ads in Dublin newspapers no longer mentioned Clare: see *Warder and Dublin Weekly Mail* 12 December 1840, *Dublin Evening Mail* 25 January 1841

Note:

Draft Notes prepared for me by Brian J. Goggin on 29 December 2019. Brian died on 21 October 2020 and we sadly never got to finish our discussions. Brian's family intend to publish his research papers at some stage and they may well include these notes.

Eric Shaw – September 2021