

# THE GRAND CANAL

On 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1772 the Grand Canal company was formed to build a canal as a private venture to connect with the River Barrow. By 1779 the first 12 miles of the Canal out of Dublin was built and one year later the Canal reached Sallins. By 1786 the Canal was extended to Monasterevin and as originally planned the Canal and the River Barrow were joined there. However, the River Barrow from Monasterevin to Athy, proved difficult to navigate and so the Grand Canal was continued to Athy in 1791 and it was there that the river and canal connection was finally made.

Passenger services on the Grand Canal commenced in 1778 and canal company hotels were opened at Portobello Dublin and Robertstown. The hotel at the canal harbour in Athy which was opened in or about the 1790s catered for canal passengers, but there is no evidence that it was a Grand Canal company. The boats and the main stopping places were supplied with clocks to ensure strict adherence to punctuality. In the year of Rebellion in 1798 it was noted that the Grand Canal company's clock at the local harbour was the only public clock in Athy. Twenty years later the company ordered that the Athy clock be kept ten minutes slow so that boats arriving at Robertstown would be in time to allow passengers to change boats.

Portobello Harbour was the main terminus in Dublin for passenger boats. The Canal boat left Portobello each morning at 5.00 a.m. for Athy on a journey which would take 13 hours. The Athy boat for Dublin also left the local harbour at 5.00 a.m. each morning. The journey time was improved in 1834 when 'fly boats', pulled by four horses, were first employed on the Dublin Athy route. The journey time was reduced to 11 hours, with the canal boats leaving Portobello at 7.00 a.m. The passenger boat service to Athy ceased on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1847 following the earlier opening of the railway line between Dublin and Carlow.

What is referred to as the Barrow Line of the Grand Canal joins the main Grand Canal a short distance below the 19<sup>th</sup> lock at Lowtown. It passes through Rathangan and Monasterevin before entering Athy at the 26<sup>th</sup> lock at Cardenton. The 27<sup>th</sup> lock at Lennons Bridge soon follows before reaching the final lock, lock 28 on the Grand Canal where it joins the River Barrow in Athy.

The arrival of the Grand Canal to Athy in 1791 coupled with the improvements in the Barrow Navigation brought huge commercial advantages in their wake to the town of Athy. Goods could now be brought from and sent to Dublin with relative ease and as a consequence the commercial and retail life of Athy improved. Employment was enhanced with several families who would in time become synonymous with Canal boating taking up work with the canal company and later purchasing their own boats. These families included the Mahers, Rowans, Dunnes, Hughes and Careys and in addition to these canal boat owners many other local men found employment as lock keepers, boat men and as loaders and unloaders of the canal boats in the local canal harbour. These latter workers were known as 'bulkiers'. Many Athy men worked as crew members on the local canal boats and they included men who were masters, engine men, deck hands or greasers.

During the Great Famine Athy, because of its location on the Grand Canal, was one of the centres designated to store and distribute Indian meal imported from America. At the same time a number of Grand Canal storehouses were used as temporary workhouses due to overcrowding in Athy's work house.

Following the withdrawal of passenger boat services the Grand Canal continued to be used for transporting freight. Agricultural produce, turf, malt and locally made bricks were sent from Athy to Dublin, while on the return journey canal boats carried barrels of Guinness with an array of goods for local shops. Following the setting up of the sugar factory in Carlow in 19..... traffic on the Grand Canal increased but by 1960 the trade boats were withdrawn, bringing to an end over 170 years of freight traffic on the Grand Canal.