

# RIVER BARROW

The River Barrow rises in the Slieve Bloom mountains and flows 190 kms. south to the sea at Waterford estuary. It is Ireland's second largest river and drains a vast area of Ireland's midlands. In ancient Ireland rivers were important channels of communication and the River Barrow was traversed by a ford near to where the town of Athy is now located. The ford was the site of many battles between feuding tribes from Munster and Leinster and the Annals of Clonmacnois gives details of these parties battling at the ford on the River Barrow during the reign of Felim, the Law Giver 111AD to 119AD. In that battle Ae, the son of Dearghail, the foster of Eochy Finn, was killed and thereafter the ford bore his name and the village which was founded in the latter end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century was called Ath Ae meaning the ford of Ae.

The ford on the River Barrow again featured when the Dalcassians and the warriors of Desmond returning from the Battle of Clontarf in 1014 squared up to each other before the courage of the Dalcassians prompted the men of Desmond to withdraw. Keating in his history of Ireland tells us that the Dalcassians slaked their thirst with river water at the Ford of Ae.

After the Normans landed in 1169 they travelled by boats up the River Barrow and within a short time most of Leinster passed into the hands of Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, better known as Strongbow. Normal fortifications were soon erected at the crossing points in the River Barrow at Ardreigh, Ath Ae and Rheban and villages developed in each of these locations. The original castle in Woodstock was erected in or about 1215 and represented the earliest building in what we now know as the town of Athy. The castle's position with the River Barrow to its rear and an extensive wood to the front made the Norman fortress almost impregnable and was well sited to protect the Ford over which it was to stand for many centuries.

The Norman settlement was by the 13<sup>th</sup> century the location of a monastery of the Order of Crouched Friars and in 1257 the Dominican Order established their friary on the east bank of the River Barrow. River weirs were important sources of food for the inhabitants of the area and the Dominicans and the Crouched Friars both had eel weirs which were the cause of rivalry between the two religious houses. This culminated in Court proceedings in 1347 when several members of the Crouched Friars including Thomas the Chaplain, John the prior and Friar Martin of Athy, with others, were indicted for calling by night to the fishing weirs belonging to the Dominicans and by force of arms taking away a net with fish, the property of the Dominican Friars, to the value of 100 shillings.

The weirs existed for many more years for in 1601 Patrick Cullen received from the Queens of England 'two weirs at Athy upon the River Barrow for taking eels', part of the property of the Crouched Friars.

Prior to the building of the Grand Canal which was extended to Athy in 1791 the River Barrow was an important means of communication with the seaport of Waterford. While the Barrow as navigable in the early medieval period, the building of weirs across the river for fishing and milling prompted the passing of an Act of Parliament in 1537 making it illegal to build a weir without putting a flash lock into the weir to allow boats to pass. In the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Irish House of Commons sought to improve navigation on the River Barrow, but without any great success. A Barrow Navigation company was incorporated in 1790 and from then marks the beginning of the commercial use of the River Barrow south of Athy for bringing imported goods from the Continent and Great Britain to Athy harbour through the port of Waterford.

The Crom A Boo Bridge in the centre of Athy named after the Fitzgerald family battle cry was built in 1796 by James Delahunty, knight of the trowel. South of the bridge at its junction with the Grand Canal is the one horse bridge which is the narrowest masonry bridge over the River Barrow. It was built in or about 1791 to allow horses pulling canal boats to cross from the Grand Canal onto the Barrow navigation.

A major drainage scheme was carried out on the River Barrow between 1926 and 1934. Much of the river's catchment area around Athy was subject to flooding and to alleviate same the Commissioners for public works deepened and widened the river channel. The headquarters of the Drainage Scheme was located in the former Hannons Mills in Athy and upwards of 800 men worked on the scheme at one time.

The River Barrow at Athy is a notable coarse fishing venue offering a great variety of angling experiences with some of the best pike, perch and roach fishing in Ireland. The towpath on the Barrow Navigation south of Athy offers quiet traffic free walkways through the countryside which supports a varied range of plants and animals and important wildlife habitats. Indeed many of the species once common throughout the Irish countryside but which are now declining as a result of modern farming methods still thrive along the banks of the River Barrow.