

## Bumblng in Ireland – Gillie & Robin Whittle

The inspiration for this trip came from Ted Palmer and Robert Antipoff, who sailed the River Shannon in *Kittiwake* (520) (see Winter 2004 edition of *The Shrimper*). The long winter evenings provided planning time, and we purchased Ordnance Survey maps and contacted Waterways Ireland for the necessary Registration and Licence that we needed in order to sail on the Irish waterways.

We arrived at Rosslare on the ferry from Fishguard at 6.30am on 10<sup>th</sup> May with the sun rising on a beautiful morning with wisps of mist floating over the fields. It was quite a long drive to Killaloe-Ballina, just north of Limerick, through beautiful lush green countryside. We were impressed by how tidy and well-kept all the roadside and houses and farms were: everywhere looked prosperous and the fields were full of well-fed cows and sheep with their lambs.



At Ballina we found a very good slipway, and the surrounding trees were full of birds singing, so it was a pleasant place to rig and launch in the sunshine. We left the car and trailer across the bridge in a Killaloe parking area by the river and then visited St. Flannan's Cathedral, simple and attractive inside, fairly dark with narrow slit windows, and with a couple of fine Romanesque doorways.

Once launched into the Shannon we had a short sail down river to Parteen Villa Weir – not much wind but lovely in the sunshine, returning to the pontoon by Killaloe bridge for the night – a popular place for school children, chattering and splashing, in competition with the very noisy rooks in the trees across the river! All went quiet as the cool of the evening arrived and we visited the nearby Flannigan's Guinness Bar to get into the Irish mood!



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The next morning our first of many mast-lowering exercises was to get under Killaloe bridge, and we started off northwards on our trip up the Shannon into the huge Lough Derg (26 miles by 3-4 miles); not with the prevailing south westerly wind we had hoped for, but with a chilly wind from the north. We had a very pleasant sail tacking through the brown peaty water, with hills either side patchworked with vivid green fields and woods with swathes of yellow gorse, steeper blue/grey hills rose behind in the distance. We saw many ducks with fluffy baby ducklings and heard our first cuckoo (of many). Our first stop was at Holy Island – a calm, peaceful place with a lot of history in its ruined stone buildings and its graveyard. Lovely clumps of narcissi growing wild amongst the grass and buttercups: swallows swooping everywhere.



We sailed half way up the Lough to Dromineer, the home of the Shannon One Design dinghies. This was a significant stop as it was here that we met Blue, a very fine basset hound, and taking him for his walk was Tom Bailey, Vice-



Commodore of Lough Erne Yacht Club. We invited him on board for a drink and quickly became friends. The significance was that two days later our engine, which had been troublesome since we started our trip, finally gave up as we limped into Athlone Marina. On hearing of our plight, Tom travelled down from his home town of Enniskillen, a 2½ hour drive away, to bring us his engine, which was the same make as ours. The generous loan of this engine enabled us to continue with the rest of our three-week trip in Ireland.

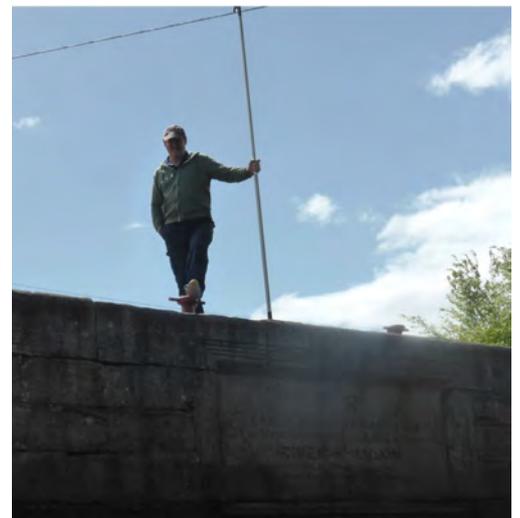
From Lough Derg we continued up the Shannon, with reeds lining the flat green water meadows around. The weather was amazingly fickle – one minute blue sky,

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puffy white clouds; the next dark black clouds and torrential rain: green sunny views changing to grey and wet and back again. We had come prepared for wet weather, but had not expected it to be so cold. At many places along the whole trip we came across the remains of ancient holy sites. Chlonmacnoise Monastery, situated almost in the middle of Ireland, was one of the largest. Its influence spread far across Europe. It became the first international university where the lowercase alphabet was created.



We moved steadily on, negotiating low bridges and through locks. The lock-keepers, all very pleasant and cheery, have a good system of collecting the boat's ropes, using a long pole with a hook on the end which avoids the tiresome and often unsuccessful job of throwing the ropes up. The towns and villages we stopped at all had well-maintained pontoons and good loos and showers. These were operated by Smart Cards that could be purchased from Waterways Ireland and local shops.



Our next large lough was Lough Ree where we had an unpleasant sail in a Force 6/7, with very violent 7+ squalls coming through. After 4 hours we had reached the top of the lough and were very relieved to get into the calm of Lanesborough Harbour. A couple of days later we left the River Shannon and entered the 40-mile long Shannon-Erne Navigation at Leitrim. Here we had to derig the boat, getting the mast down onto the crutch and the spars and sails strapped onto it in order to negotiate the 12 very low bridges. There were 16 locks which we had to operate ourselves using an efficient console and our Smart Card.



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The countryside became less flat: green hillocks with many trees, populated by inquisitive cows in the buttercup filled meadows, and horses. The bushes, grasses and yellow flags crowded down to the water's edge and we saw the flashing blue of six or seven kingfishers.

The Navigation led us on to the River Erne in Northern Ireland near Belturbet. Here we rigged the boat again and sailed towards Enniskillen through the Upper Erne Lough, peppered with islands big and small: some covered with trees, some pastureland grazed by cattle and sheep. The channel marks were interesting, painted red and white (keep to this side) with an identification number printed on the white side. Each mark was shown on the chart.

Tom Bailey came to greet us at Enniskillen, giving us local information and lending us charts that were invaluable for finding our way through the islands of the Lower Lough Erne. On our arrival at Lough Erne Yacht Club, Tom was there to welcome us and settle us on to a pontoon, and show us around the clubhouse. The site had been a Second World War base for Catalina flying boats. One of these located the Bismark in 1941. The original hangar is now used for storing dinghies with their masts up, and home to two dilapidated but beautiful Fairy Yachts. The RNLI have a base there, which Tom helps to organise.

We spent the next few days exploring Lower Lough Erne with its 154 islands! We reached Belleek, the westernmost point of the Lough and 240 miles from our starting point at Killaloe. We landed on White Island and discovered an



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interesting set of sculptures set in an ancient wall. We motored up a wooded river which took us up to Kesh, a little village at the top of the navigation channel.

On returning to LEYC we revised our plans for the remaining four days of our Irish trip. We had to return the engine to Tom before leaving Lough Erne, which meant that we had to collect the car and trailer from Killaloe. This took a whole day. We still intended to visit the River Barrow, which runs out at Waterford. Again Tom was very helpful getting us started on our trip at Enniskillen, which allowed us time to explore the Castle and visit Waterways Ireland in their impressive Head Office. This held a fascinating archive room of technical drawings showing the early days of the planning and setting up of the waterways.

Our journey south was not without incident as the torsion bar of the trailer started to fail causing the boat to list to one side. When it had reached an angle of 30 degrees, we had to stop. We were in a tiny village miles from anywhere (in the pouring rain!), but our luck held, and a passing tractor directed us to a local welder in a ramshackle, dilapidated shed, who did an amazing job repairing the trailer. His name was Jerry, so the Tom and Jerry duo has a special significance for us! An added bonus was that we had to spend the night at a local hotel while he did the job – a welcome break from living on board for 4 weeks.

The following day we reached Graiguemanagh on the very beautiful River Barrow and found a clear parking area with a magnificent view out over the river and the countryside for miles around. Just the right spot for us to settle for the night. Heavy dark clouds cleared away and the sun came out bathing our amazing view in golden light. In the morning we managed to hire bicycles and set off to explore the river along the tow path to St. Mullins monastery, another very holy place.



After two days exploring this beautiful river we set off on our return journey crossing from Rosslare. Our visit to Ireland had been a truly remarkable experience and has left us with memories of incredibly friendly and helpful people, living in a beautiful, green country.

**Gillie and Robin Whittle – *Bumble Chugger* (124)**