

# SUMMER CRUISE 2016

by

Ivan Nelson



Swagman alongside at Riverside Marina

All my life I have been a ‘salt water’ sailor. I learnt to sail on a ‘plank on edge’ cutter in the early 1950s and have had more than 60 years racing and cruising. As a historian with an interest in Irish history I have always had a desire to explore the rivers, lakes and canals of Ireland. As an oarsman I have raced on the Lagan, the Liffey, Shannon and Barrow, the Suir, the Bann, Boyne, Foyle, Newry canal, and Loughs Corrib and Erne. My grandfather farmed on the shores of Lough Derg so all these experiences have whetted my appetite for more. But I kept putting it off until age caused a rethink. I have never wanted to be one of those elderly gentlemen looking after a sailing cruiser which is obviously too much for them. A motor cruiser on Lough Erne seemed to be the answer.

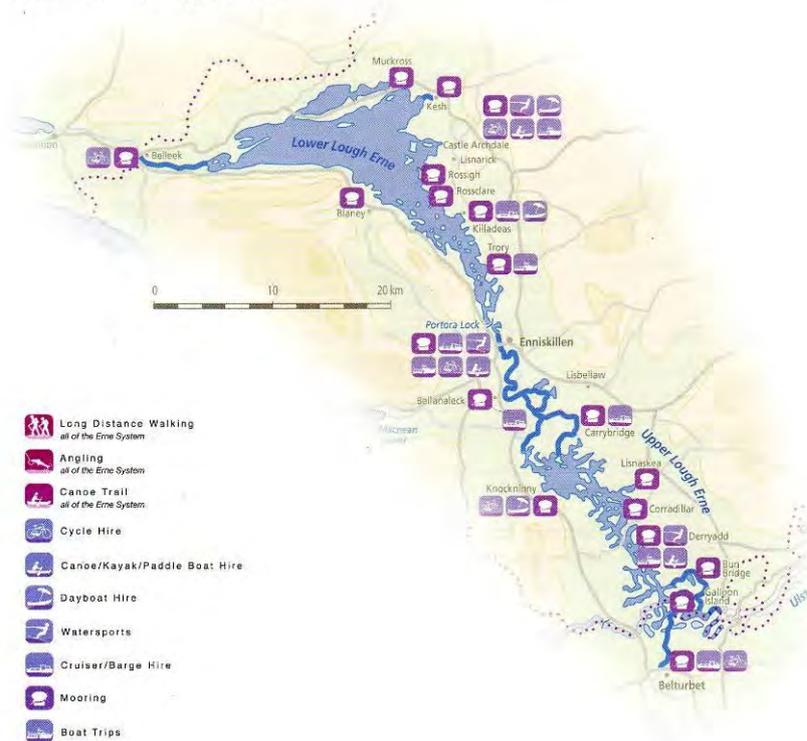
In 2014 my wife and I took the plunge and bought a Seamaster 8 meter motor cruiser in Athlone and brought her up the Shannon, and through the Shannon – Erne canal to Riverside Marina which lies on the Sillees River, just south of Enniskillen near the Killyhevlin bend on the River Erne.

We renamed our boat ‘Swagman’ as my wife has spent most of her life in Australia although she was born in Bessbrook. The Seamaster has four berths in two cabins, centre cockpit and a Thorneycroft 2.5 litre engine. She had been somewhat neglected and not used for about three years when we got her. Boats whether sail or power need constant maintenance and it is unfortunate that many owners do not appreciate this. In addition, boats get dirtier in a fresh water environment than they do in a salt. We brought ‘Swagman’ north in September 2014 and by June 2015 we were

ready for our first summer cruise. This we did and went to many places on Lough Erne between Bulturbet in the south east and Belleek in the north west. In the summer of 2016 we thought to visit the part of the lower lake we missed the previous year, and then to go back through the Shannon-Erne waterway to the River Shannon, Lough Key, and the town of Boyle which we knew had a famous abbey.

## The Erne System

The spacious island-dotted expanses of Upper and Lower Lough Erne delight visitors with a unique blend of unspoilt scenic tranquillity and diverse recreational opportunities.



The Erne system is divided into two parts with the island town of Enniskillen sitting more or less at the centre. The Upper lake is really like a river delta with numerous islands with navigable water between them, from Belturbet in Co Cavan to Enniskillen, a distance of about 25 miles, but much more depending on the route selected. The lower lake, the 'Broad Lough' from Enniskillen to Belleek is another 27 miles long, and is three miles at its widest. This lake is really like an inland sea and has the reputation of being very dangerous in strong winds from the west, which create short steep very confused seas.

We launched Swagman in May, but didn't get much boating until July – there are all sorts of events in June which make it difficult to get away. We returned to Riverside Marina on 4 July where the first job was to fit a new VHF radio. It's not





Inishmacsaint

It rained during the night but the following day, 6 July, dawned grey and damp. We cast off at 1100 and navigated along the south shore of the Broad Lough heading for Tully Castle, stopping for lunch at Duncrow East. The wind was from the south west so this was a very sheltered pontoon. The day continued miserable so after lunch we cast off and a mile later made fast on the pontoons at Tully.



Pontoons at Tully Castle

Shelter here is excellent in any wind with south in it and the strong southwesterly continued. We wanted to cross the lough to Castlearchdale and did try but turned back as it was extremely rough and unpleasant. We went to the castle which is still locked up as was the Visitors' Centre. They were also locked up in 2015. Not only that, there was a 'physic garden' at Tully and this had been removed when the grass was cut. I cannot express how annoying this is. Tully is a popular place with



Tully Castle, burnt 1642. Physic garden was in foreground.

cruising folk and also with land based tourists, and no-one can- see anything. We did gather blackcurrants at the cottage and back on the boat Kristin made delicious blackcurrant jam! And of course we did our washing which was rinsed more that once in the drying process!

On 9 July the wind had moderated somewhat so we made a rough, squally passage across the lough to Castlearchdale and made fast on the public pontoon. The south eastern part of the Broad Lough is like a funnel with its lip from Tully to Castlearchdale, narrowing to the lock at Portora. It is studded with islands and has much shelter. It was a rough passage but tolerable.



Pontoons, Castlearchdale

Castlearchdale has become a huge camping and leisure facility based on the wartime seaplane base. RAF Castlearchdale was operational from 1941 to 1957 and it was from here that seaplanes headed out over Ballyshannon to hunt for U-boats in the north Atlantic. Now the huge concrete aprons house caravans and mobile homes.

There is a huge camping area and a childrens' play park. Not our scene at all but although the 'big house' has been demolished the 18<sup>th</sup> century courtyard still exists and is well worth a visit.



Courtyard from site of the house

The weather remained unsettled and very windy. We replenished water, had great showers and explored. We also started a backgammon competition between Kristin and myself. In explaining the rules I won the first 10 games but then Kristin improved.....

On 12 July the wind appeared to have moderated but visibility was very poor. We cast off at 0930 and navigated the short distance to White Island where we spent



The statues on White Island

the rest of the day. White Island is notable for ancient statues set into an interior wall in the ruined church. These statues were recovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the level of the lough was lowered for drainage purposes.

The following day we decided that we were going no further on the Broad Lough as the weather was too unsettled and very windy. We cast off and motored around the islands in this south eastern corner of the Broad Lough and then headed in the direction of Tully on the sheltered shore. It was calm in the shelter of the islands but when we left shelter we hit the full force of the wind which had not moderated at all! Swagman has a flat bottom and corkscrews in very rough water. Navigation was almost impossible so I set a compass course for Tully and followed it. Not only was visibility poor but Tully is hard to distinguish against the trees on the shoreline. We arrived safely and spent the rest of the day there. On 14 July we made our way to Enniskillen's Erneside Marina where we did a 'big shop' in Asda.



Upper Lough Erne, Knockninny

Next day, 15 July we cast off at 1345 and navigated from Enniskillen to Knockninny. It was not a great day, rain delayed our departure and the wind was still west F5-6. We like Knockninny, there is a hotel, water on the pontoons and hot showers in the amenities building. It is 2 hours from Enniskillen. We spent the next day there, the weather changed so we sat in the hot sunshine.....Ominously the backgammon was now 11 games to 7....



Knockninny Hotel. Four boats used to run here from Belturbet

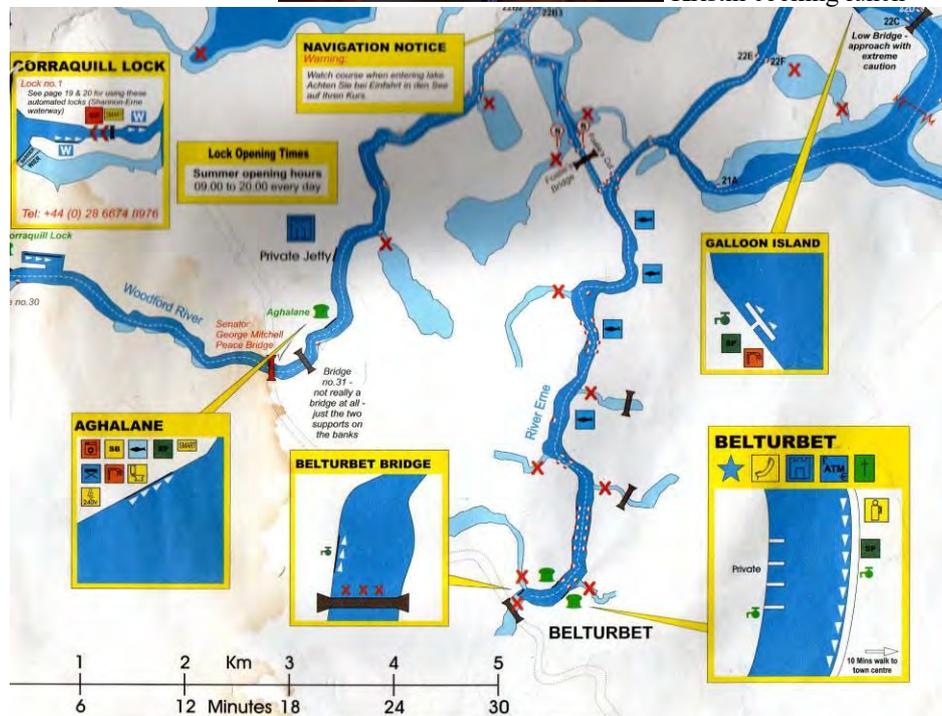
We went back to Riverside and home on 17 July and returned on 22 July when we did some much needed maintenance. On 24 July we set off for Crom via

Knockninny. This is another favourite place. It is the home of the Earl of Erne (who had died earlier in the year) and he had given the estate grounds to the National Trust, all 2,000 acres of it. The NT has developed the grounds for leisure and relaxing. There is a shop, cottages for hire, camping ground, glamping pods, (simple B & B self catering), and great walks in terrific scenery. The weather remained poor with a lot of rain. We got some bedding wet but the NT have a drying room which we could use (I am a member). Backgammon 14-10.....

On 29 July we set off from Crom towards the Woodford River and the Shannon – Erne Waterway. The first lock is at Corraquill and is the only lock – there are 16 altogether – actually in Northern Ireland. It and lock 16 in Leitrim are the only ones that are manned, all the rest are automated and ‘patrollers’ look after groups of them. These guys are generally very helpful and well used to idiot skippers! We spent the night alongside in the town of Ballyconnell. We went for a walk in the town which has one wide main street which allows parking on both sides (a characteristic of ‘estate’ towns throughout Ireland such as Castlewellan or Cookstown for example) But in Ballyconnell heavy goods lorries use the street making crossing a somewhat hairy exercise.



Kristin cooking lunch



Crom is just above the confluence of the Rivers Erne and Woodford



Alongside in Ballyconnell

This was our second transit of the canal. Ideally the best way to work the automated locks is to have one person on shore to take lines and work the controls, and a person on the bows to control the bow line and another person on the stern doing the same with the stern lines. There were only two of us so Kristin worked the controls ashore and I had to control the bow and stern lines from the centre cockpit. Not ideal as some of the locks are very deep, particularly on the stretch from Keshcarrigan to Leitrim. We had two good long lines though and this is essential. We became pretty expert and could transit a lock in about 15 minutes – provided there wasn't a vessel already in the lock or other hold-ups such as a fishing rod right across the lock entrance which the owner didn't want to move! (Castlefore, lock 8)

The following day, 30 July, was wet but we have good offshore oilies and pressed on. At lock 3, Skelan, the lock failed to open so we had to call out the Patroller who was friendly and very helpful. We spent the night at Haughton's Shore, a very pleasant stopping place just before Lough Garadice. This was delightful, picturesque, calm and quiet despite the children of a Lithuanian family busy fishing and camping on the lake shore. Later a fleet of Seamaster 30s came in and had a barbecue.





Entering Skelan Lock



Haughton's Shore

On 31 July we reached Keshcarrigan, the half way point. There are good pontoons here and it is a well used overnight halt for cruisers transitting the canal. We went for a walk. This should be a thriving village but it is a most depressing place. There are lots of unfinished and unsold houses, the village shop is closed, there is no filling station, no doctor, no chemist, no school, no church, and many of the houses appear to be 'jerry built'. Apart from 'Gerties Canal Stop', a pub that also sells bread and milk there is nothing. The canal has not brought expected prosperity. We did meet an interesting couple restoring a Seamaster 30 and the backgammon had reached the interesting score of 15-14!



Sunset at Keshcarrigan

Keshcarrigan is roughly half way through the canal and is immediately followed by Lough Scur. Then before we left, a charter vessel pulled in beside us which had a French skipper in a large raincoat and a ‘duncher’ (the northern Irish yachting cap) with a German and French crew. They disappeared off to Gerties but went swimming in the rain at 0815 the following morning! We cast off at on 2 August at 1045, the rain having declined to showers. All the locks hereon were very deep except the last one at Leitrim, no.16. Here we met Gerry McCabe the lock-keeper who was a mine of information. He told us that there had been a rock slide at bridges 10/11, just after Keshcarrigan where the canal passes through a cutting, and that the canal was closed. At 1715 we made fast to the pontoons in Leitrim.



The view from the bridge in Leitrim

We were stormbound again on 3 August so we explored the town, which is really a small village. Here again were the unhealthy signs of depression, The last grocery shop had closed, as had the filling station. There was a post office and some pubs and restaurants and empty houses and flats. However, we were now on the Shannon!



Hire barges, fuel berth on left

We arrived in Carrick-on-Shannon on 4 August and made fast to a marina pontoon after eventually getting the crew of a motor cruiser to move their dinghy which was blocking access. The rain had stopped. We had hardly made fast when we got an offer of a lift to and from Tesco and as a result had our shopping done by 1300! In the afternoon we organised diesel at the Carrick Craft pontoon for the next day.



Carrick-on-Shannon

We explored Carrick on the afternoon of the 4th. We went to St George's Church to see about the history of the town and the collection of rowing cups, good examples of early Victorian silver. Carrick is a prosperous and thriving town, its situation on the Shannon and as a road and rail hub is a main reason. All the hire boat

firms have a major base here. We had an excellent lunch in the Victoria hall behind the rowing club.



Boyle Marina

On 6 August we were at the diesel pontoon at 0900 and 98 Euro later we had a full tank! Then we headed downstream for Lough Eidin and the Boyle River. This wends its way through beautiful countryside to Knockvicar and Clarendon Lock, the only lock on the river with a rise of about four feet. It was but a short distance to Lough Key. The lake is spectacular and there is a huge Forest and Activity park on the south shore, a bit like Castle Archdale. We avoided it and made our way across the lake to the continuation of the river and the canal that led to the marina. This marina was obviously not designed by someone who knew boats. Instead of pontoons there are concrete fingers which have no protection on them and could easily damage topsides especially in strong winds and rain – which we then had.



Boyle Abbey



Boyle Abbey gatehouse



Boyle Abbey transepts

The following day it was overcast and showery but we walked the two kilometres to Boyle town and first of all visited the abbey. It was really worth while as this had been one of the greatest Cistercian abbeys of Ireland and there is lots to see. After a morning there we went in to town and to the King House. This house, built in the 1760s had been the home of the King family (Lords Kingston and Kingsborough). After becoming almost a ruin it has been extremely well restored and now houses the regimental museum of the Connaught Rangers, one of the most famous regiments in the British Army in its day, and who were known as the 'Devil's Own'. The museum is impressive and has been done without fear or favour. Then we walked around the town which is very attractive though perhaps not thriving as it should. We got thoroughly wet on our way back to the boat.



The King house, Boyle



The main street, Boyle

On 9 August we made our way back to Leitrim. There had been no let up in the weather and it was cold, wet and windy. There is a range of apartments opposite the pontoon. We walked around them, and had a good look after dark. There were 52 of them of which 3 were currently occupied, and another 4 or 5 looked as if they had owners. The rest appeared to be empty. They were obviously marketed as 2 – 3 bed apartments overlooking the Shannon and with a marina berth. The latter is almost empty and is deteriorating due to a total lack of maintenance.

We carried on through the canal to Keshcarrigan where we had an electrical failure. As it happened, Brian Wylie, the engineer who maintains our engine, was in Roosky (near Lough Ree) and the following day he came over to us and got our lights going again – the splitter had broken. It had been a dismal dark day, made worse by

the backgammon which now stood at 16-17! On 12 August we made our way back to Haughton's Shore where we determined to stay for a couple of days



The empty apartments at Leitrim



Haughton's Shore and 'The Sub'

Next day we walked to the attractive village of Newtowngore where we shopped in a well run Mace and were given a lift back to the boat afterwards. People were very kind, on our cruise we had lots of offers of lifts. This village did not have any signs of depression, or empty half finished houses! Later that evening a barge painted bright yellow named 'The Sub' from Riversdale Barge Co came in and we helped with the berthing. They were very friendly, the skipper was from Munich but the crew were from Newry. We really enjoyed this stop and can see why Haughton's Shore is such a popular stopping place.

We cleared the last of the locks on 14 August, and berthed at Aghalane, another popular stopping place on the Woodford River. Part of this popularity is due



Aghalane

to the fact there is electricity on the pontoon! On 15 August we left the Woodford River and made our way back to Crom, in glorious sunshine. It was very relaxing not to have to think of any more locks! But we had done well, and are now pretty experienced at transitting them and to date we have done some fifty!



Gad Island, Crom Estate

From Crom we went to Belturbet where we berthed astern of another Seamaster 8m! There was not a cloud in the sky of course. Belturbet is only about an hour from Crom which is convenient. We did some shopping and then made out way to the pontoons at Galloon Island, a place we had not been to before. The pontoons are new as is the amenities block, all in all a lovely spot. There is an ancient graveyard here with the stumps of two high crosses right beside the pontoons which made it easy to explore.



Belturbet

Then back to Crom for lunch and then on to Knockninny for the night. It was pouring with rain so we had dinner in the hotel to raise morale. Then back to Riverside marina so ending our summer cruise for 2016, although not our use of the boat. We had done some 70 engine hours and had covered some 280 miles. The cruise was interesting and enjoyable despite some pretty awful weather. This has made us determined to overhaul the central heating for 2017! We were always dry except for the soaking we had at Boyle, but prolonged poor weather makes everything damp. We saw a part of Ireland that had long been on the 'wish list' and it did not disappoint, Ireland is scenically beautiful. This was our second season on the Erne and I have to say you never grow tired of it.



Graveyard, Galloon Island

There is a downside of course, especially for one who has a long history of salt water sailing. Boats get dirtier more quickly than in salt water and the standard of



Pontoons, Galloon Island

seamanship is deplorably low. I think that the briefings given to novice charter skippers by the hire companies are sketchy and inadequate, particularly with regard to speed, wash, and mooring. Many think a spring is a season following winter, not a method of mooring a boat!



Ivan and Kristin in Boyle

Dr Ivan Nelson  
22 January 2017