

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ETERNAL OPTIMIST

Dear Sir,

I'll try to keep the view of the eternal optimist, things can only get better on the Royal! But how bad are they going to get first? From a boater's point of view, closure is about as bad as you could imagine.

By definition a canal is an artificial waterway constructed to allow the passage of boats or ships inland or to convey water for irrigation.

Well, by that definition the Royal Canal sadly ceased to be a canal this year, temporarily I hope. This may well be the necessary result of ongoing improvements by Waterways Ireland and if it is, I am right behind them. The greater problem is a total lack of communication between WI and the few boaters who call the Royal their home base. We would love to grow that number and encourage others to venture along its tranquil winding route, but currently that's just not feasible.

Early this summer I met a man at Moyvalley on the Royal and discovered he is a Norwegian who keeps a boat on the

Shannon and spends several weeks aboard exploring our waterways each year. What he told me stopped me in my tracks. 'I arrived here a week ago but now they (WI) tell me I can't go any further until October.' This was early July. When I investigated further I found the summit level, a 24km section, had a severely depleted water level. A local farmer told me it was the lowest level he had seen since the re-watering of the canal. It was so low he could have driven a four-wheel drive through it from side to side. At this time WI were pumping water backwards from lower levels up to the summit level or it might conceivably have run dry.

We have always had the problem of insufficient water sources on the Royal. During the years of closure Westmeath CoCo diverted much of the water source to supply a growing Mullingar. There are plans to provide a replacement supply but that's going to take time. Until then there is a need for careful water management. Recently we have seen low summer levels replenish as the rains of autumn set in, only to find water being raked off to lower levels again. If there is a good reason, we

would love to know. That brings me back to my Norwegian colleague, in the past week I have made regular visits to his boat which I noticed was aground and listing. I managed to get it partially afloat so he might get it moving when he returned. When I contacted him, he said he was in touch with WI and was dropping everything to fly back to Ireland and move the boat.

In September, a dam was placed across the canal at Ballinea Harbour; to facilitate access for construction traffic involved in the Greenway towpath works. It's great to see the Greenway progressing so well, however this was at a time when levels were starting to recover and it further delayed boaters waiting to travel east towards Mullingar.

There have been no Marine Notices to inform users of any of these closures or restrictions on the Royal throughout this year.

The good will and hard work of many canal-side communities contributed greatly towards the restoration of the canal which WI have inherited control of. There is still a wealth of goodwill and enthusiasm waiting to be tapped by a forward thinking WI who is prepared to meet them on an equal footing.

Yours etc.

Denis Baker, Hazelnut

WHY CAN'T THEY TELL US?

Dear Sir,

I hate to complain, the services rendered by WI may not be great, but the amount of people they send to help us along the canals are surely costing several times the amount we pay for a year of combined mooring and passage of locks.

That said, here are the worst parts of our story this year so far:

We were supposed to arrive in Grand Canal Dock after a long day of negotiating locks from the Lucan Road Bridge. The first lock keepers on the way were not too eager to speed things up if they found locals to chat to. We were left in the unopened locks for long periods with nothing to do but wait. They eventually told us we were moving too slow to reach GCD in a day, the reason also being an overwhelming amount of weeds in the canal. So we were told to stay overnight at a jetty on Mespil Road. We moored there, but were soon chased away by restaurant barges that 'owned' the space. We found a grassy bank and used that instead.

Early next morning we were contacted by a Waterways Patroller who offered to let us in to the GCD if we could move within five minutes. So we did.

Arriving in GCD we found an empty mooring at the end of the longest jetty. Great, we thought, we'll moor here and wait to cross the Liffey and enter the Royal. But alas! There was a lady with a barge who had been mooring in that spot for the last four years, she 'owned' it, she was just away for a few days and we were told to move somewhere else. Being foreigners not wanting any trouble, we found the Harbour Master and moved after his advice.

Eventually the day for opening the infamous Newcomen Railway Bridge arrived. They do not normally open the bridge unless there are at least two boats queuing to get through. At the only opening date in June, it was only us, but they made an exception and let us through.

We asked why there were no other boats traveling on the Royal this spring and the WI people told us they did not know of any obstacles or reasons why there were no other boats. We were soon to learn this was not quite true.

They assisted us nearly all the way to the 12th Lock, great service.

A couple of days later we approached the harbour of Maynooth. The weeds here were so dense, we had to put ropes ashore and have people on both banks to pull us through, as all three propellers (we have two electric ones in addition to the main one) were totally blocked by the weeds. Cleaning the weeds off did not help as it took only seconds for the propellers to be blocked again. We met a few barges along the way who confirmed our experience, they had tried to pass Maynooth, but had given up.

After us struggling for hours, a farmer passed us by in his lorry. He saw the trouble we were in and pulled us through the weeds most of the way from Fern's to Enfield. Nice fellow.

After Enfield, it went well for a while, and we stopped at Furey's in Moyvalley. There we met a Waterways Patroller who told us that the summit level around Mullingar was so low they could not even get in with their own harvesters or dinghies.

The level at Mullingar had been critically low since last winter, but nobody told us. A Marine Notice in May said to be careful if you were to navigate here, it did not say it was not navigable, even for their own vessels.

We were advised to either proceed to Thomastown and stop there, or stay at Moyvalley until the water level came back up in October. This was early July. As our boat would have the same sort of being looked after by the staff at Furey's in Moyvalley, we decided to leave it there and wait for the Mullingar level to get back up. The level on the long stretch at Moyvalley was never an issue then.

Now it turns out that the level at Mullingar was up in September, three weeks ago, but nobody told us. As the rain stopped it is now down again. Even worse, for maintenance reasons, they have also lowered the level on the long stretch at Moyvalley, so we are now stranded here, hoping for help to dig us out into the middle of the canal to carefully navigate to Thomastown in hardly any water. Why can't they tell us? They have every opportunity, we have written and sent our plans to them and spoken to them on the phone in the summer and all autumn, so they knew our situation.

We still hope for the best, we do not give up before we have to.

Yours etc

Kåre Bye, Henrik Ibsen

In the end Kåre did give up. We understand that he has since arranged to have the boat lifted out and transported back to the Shannon