

THE LAST VOYAGE OF THE ‘NORA’

A unique piece of canal memorabilia has recently gone on display on the tow-path at Poyntzpass. The anchor from the lighter ‘Nora’ is featured in an the art-work designed by Portglenone artist Billy McCaughern commissioned by Poyntzpass and District Local History Society and Poyntzpass Regeneration Committee.

The lighter Nora and the anchor were made at Portadown Foundry well over one-hundred years ago. While an anchor would not have been needed on the canal, there were times when one could have been essential on the River Bann. It is believed that the Nora was acquired around 1895 by the Campbell family, who were boatmen on Lough Neagh. Later, as well as operating the Nora on the Newry Canal, family members became the lock-keepers at Terryhoogan just north of Scarva.

The anchor was given to the Poyntzpass and District Local History Society thirty years ago by the late Jean Morris, the niece of Frank Campbell, the last lighter-man to work the Nora, and the Society members have long had the ambition to display it appropriately in the village. The Nora worked on the Newry Canal until its closure in 1936 and is believed to have been the last lighter to do so. She is certainly the last canal lighter to pass through Poyntzpass and certainly also holds the record for the longest time taken to complete the round-trip from Lough Neagh to Newry and back.

Canal-enthusiast, the late Mickey Waddell, who was born and reared in a lock-house south of Poyntzpass, remembered the Nora well. He said, “Manys-a-time, on my way home from school, I got a lift on the Nora. While we cruised along at three or so miles-an-hour, I worked my passage by frying bacon and eggs for the ‘crew’, The crew consisted of the lighter-man, Frank Campbell and the ‘trawler-man’ – that was the official title of the young fellow called Ned, who led the horse. The lighter-men often called their craft after their wives or girlfriends but I don’t know who the Nora was called after. She may have been named before the Campbells bought her.”

In the spring of 1936 the Nora travelled to Newry with a cargo of turf. Mickey recalled, “When a cargo was discharged there, the lighter-man would have to

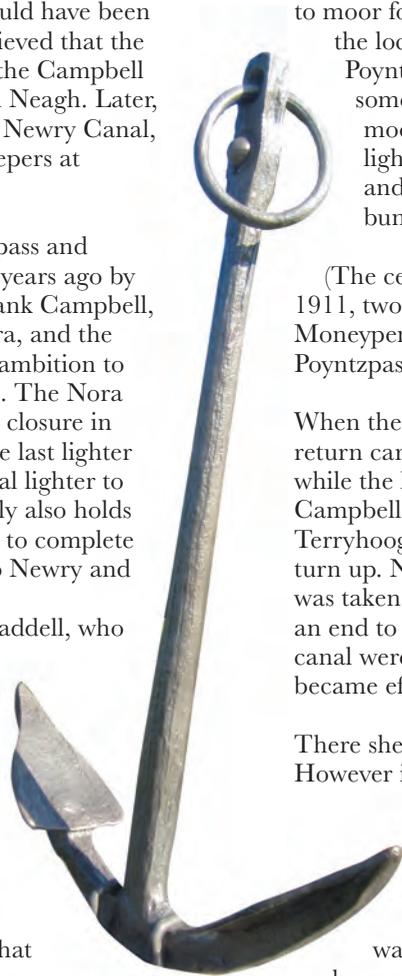
wait until he got a cargo of some sort for the return journey for there was no profit to be made out of returning empty. The trip from Lough Neagh or Portadown to Newry and back could take a couple of days for it took some time to discharge one cargo and load another for the return journey. A full cargo of coal or turf could be over thirty tons. Sometimes they got a load straight away and would be back through here in two or three days but at other times they might have to wait longer. Sometimes, if it was a bad evening or getting dark, the lighter-man would decide to moor for the night. There was stabling at some of the lock houses and a purpose built stable at Poyntzpass. There was a stable at our locks and sometimes at the edge of dark, a lighter would moor and the horse be put in the stable. The lighter-men would come in and sit at the fire and crack till bed-time and then go out to their bunks on the lighter.”

(The census returns, show that on census night in 1911, two lighters, those belonging to John Money penny and James Power, were moored at Poyntzpass)

When the Nora had discharged her cargo of turf, a return cargo wasn’t immediately forthcoming and, while the lighter lay moored at Newry, Frank Campbell, and his horse, eventually returned home to Terryhoogan, hoping that a cargo of some sort would turn up. Nothing did turn up and when the decision was taken to close the canal a few days later that put an end to any hope of a cargo. Water-levels in the canal were then allowed to drop and so the Nora became effectively marooned at Newry.

There she remained for over a quarter of a century. However in 1963 when work on the new city of Craigavon began some interested parties bought the Nora and had her transported from Newry to Lough Neagh. But she didn’t travel on the canal, which had been abandoned in 1949 and was in a derelict state. This journey was made by road on a low-loader, towed by two lorries and with a police escort. So in the spring of that year after all of twenty-seven years the Nora again passed through Poyntzpass on her way back to Lough Neagh to complete a voyage which was meant to last a day or two.

Artist, Billy McCaughern was also responsible for the frieze depicting Poyntzpass through the Ages, which was erected as part of a rural village enhancement



scheme organised by Armagh City Council. When he made preliminary visits to Poyntzpass to learn about the village and its history and to consider what form an art-work might take, Billy met representatives of several local groups to discuss the project. It was decided that the art-work would depict the growth of the village though the ages by including those elements which were important in its evolution. When he learned of the existence of the anchor, he was eager to incorporate it into the project. The Newry Canal was one of those elements and the frieze includes a depiction of the Nora. However, since it wasn't possible to include the anchor in the main work, the Local History Society supported by the Regeneration group commissioned Billy to erect it nearby.



The artist has cleverly incorporated another local feature into his work, for the anchor is supported by a replica of the gnomon of the sun-dial on Acton Parish Church.

(A gnomon is the spike or pin at the centre of a sun-dial which casts the shadow, to indicate the time.) The sun-dial was one of several made by a local schoolmaster Thomas McCreash in 1819 and was the gift to the Parish of Acton from the then Rector, the Reverend Henry Ashe.

What became of the old lighter when she reached Lough Neagh is not known at present but there is every reason to hope that the Nora is still afloat somewhere on the Lough. At any rate, the Local History Society members are delighted to have, at last, found a way of displaying the old anchor in an appropriate setting.



Frank Campbell (left) and family members at Terryhogan Lockhouse.