

THE "LIGHTER" SIDE OF NEWRY CANAL

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By way of introduction, I will first mention a few facts about the beginnings of this waterway, the first canal in the British Isles.

During the Cromwellian era (1640s), a survey was carried out on the possibility of digging such a canal, but nothing came of it.

In 1729, the Dublin Parliament carried out another study, this time Parliament established "The Commissioners of Inland Navigation for Ireland." This body got an Act of Parliament through, which levied duties on a wide range of luxury goods, such as carriages, dice and other gaming devices. All the revenue raised provided funds for the venture to go ahead — to establish communication between Newry and Lough Neagh. Newry at that time was one of the major seaports of Ireland.

The vision of the Dublin Parliament was, that with the waterway, the seams of coal found in the Coalisland - Dungannon area could be cheaply transported, thus breaking the monopoly of having to import coal and other commodities from England.

Official sanction was given and work began in 1731.

The digging of the Canal, the costs, the problems, etc. can all be found in Dr. McCutcheon's excellent book, suffice to say that the canal was opened for traffic on 28th March, 1742.

The *Dublin Newsletter*, March, 1742 stated "The Cope" of Lough Neagh, William Semple, Commander, came into this harbour laden with coals and being the first vessel that has come through the canal, had a flag at her masthead and fired guns as she came up the channel."

I now want to turn the clock forward to the late 1920s and focus on the social history of the Canal folks, the Lightermen, the Lock Keepers, the workforce and the colourful characters that lived along the banks at that time.

My father and mother were appointed lock-keepers at No. 9 locks by Newry Port and Harbour Trust in the year 1913.

There are 14 locks on the 18 mile stretch of the Canal.

- No. 1. Victoria Lock on the Omeath Road.
2. Reilly's, a few hundred yards north of Sands' Mill.
3. Fearon's Lock at St. Colman's College.
4. Dodds'
5. McKnight's at Carnbane.
6. Forsyth's.
7. Alec Crothers' at Goraghwood.
8. James McCreesh's, Knockararney.
9. John Waddell's at "Crack Bridge," (Gambles Bridge).
10. Paddy McVeigh's at Railway Crossing.
11. Arthur Moody's Lock at Poyntzpass
12. Campbell's Lock at Terryhoogan, Scarva.
13. No house at this Lock.
14. Moneypenny's.

As already stated, my father and mother were appointed lock-keepers in 1913. On 13th May, 1919, I first saw the light of day and we had cabbage for the dinner (so I'm told)!

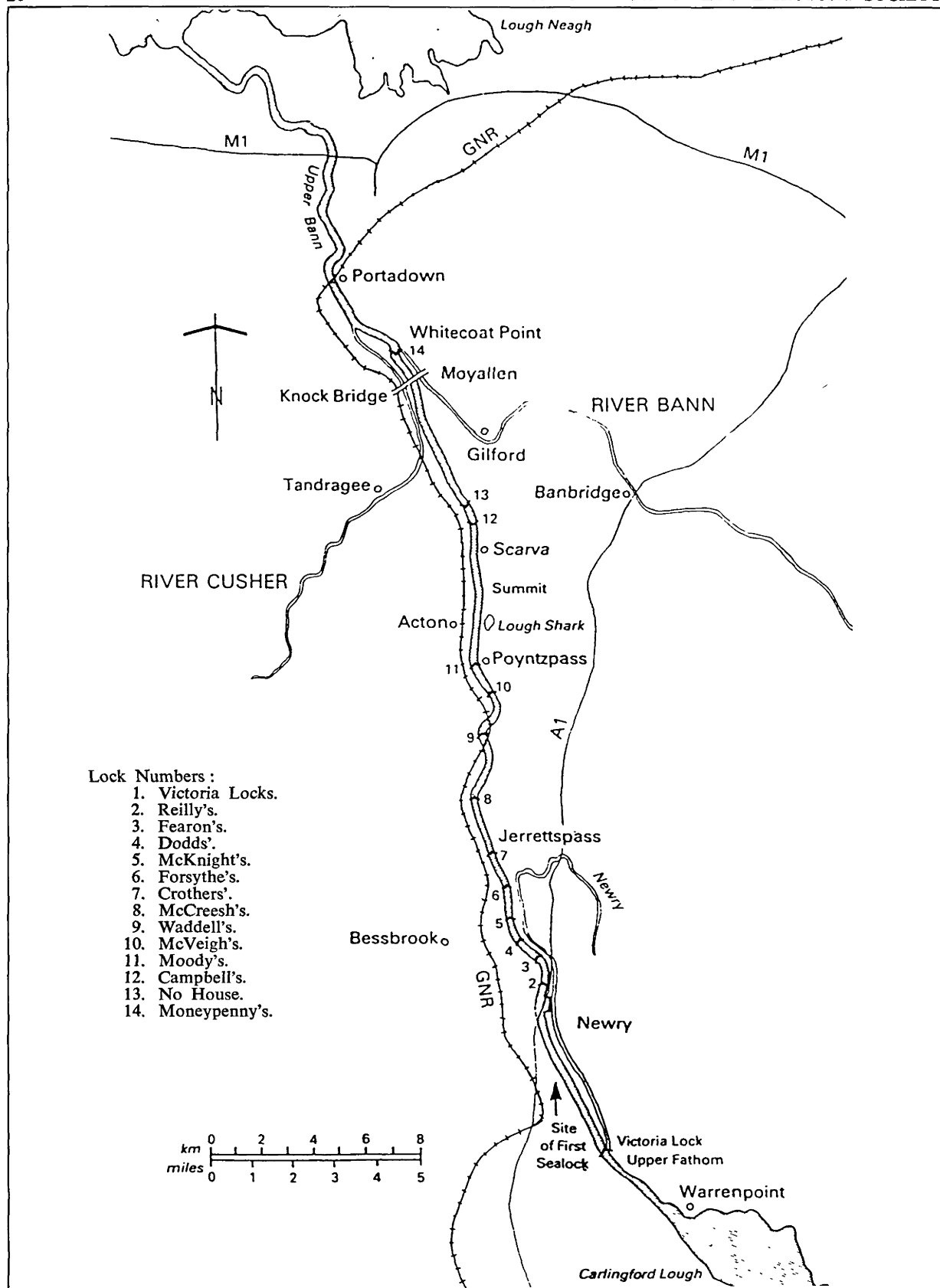
I first watched my mother operating the locks, while I was standing in a tea chest — probably playpens were unheard of in those days.

The lighters were pulled by horse along the towpath. Usually a young boy of 14 or 15 years, would walk along and lead the horse while the skipper would stand at the back of the lighter and steer with a rudder, or tiller as it was called. The boys leading the horses were poorly paid and suffered a lot of cold and wet during the winter. This occupation was known as "hauling boats."

The lighter men were mostly good humoured but as hard as nails if annoyed. Quite a few of them came from the Lough Neagh area. Lough Shore men they were called.

They nearly all had nicknames and those were the names they called each other.

The most famous name spoken about was "Hammerhead." I never remember him, but I believe his name was Davidson.



The Newry Canal showing the locks.

Poor fella, he died of exposure, drink and malnutrition. At the inquest of his death in Newry Workhouse, a witness said that probably he hadn't had his clogs off his feet for 15 years!

Another that I remember was a man whose name was Tommy McCann. He was known as "Top Coat." He wore his overcoat in Summer when others were in shirt sleeves.

Dan Skelten was known as "Heel of the Evening." John Neill was known as "Bapp" Neill. He had a very big, round face like a full moon.

Then there was "Wur the War" and "Gabby Taylor," Hughie Fox was "The Fox". A local man, Paddy Quinn was "Smokey Quinn."

I seem to think that a lot of the lightermen were very romantic. The names they had on their lighters would suggest this — i.e. the names of their wives or sweethearts. Frank Campbell's Lighter was the "Nora." Billy McCann's Lighter was the "Flora." James Neill's Lighter was the "Emma." T. McGurgan's Lighter was the "Edith."

At the beginning of this article, I stated that coal was transported from Coalisland to Dublin. This was correct, but in my memory, the coal was transported from Newry to Portadown. By now the border had come into being and also the coal deposits apparently fizzled out in the Coalisland area.

Fisher's fleet of ocean-going boats brought the coal from England and hence the about-turn in the canal distribution. I have already mentioned the names of the Lighters and again I can recall that the names of some of Fisher's boats were names of trees. There was "The Oak," "The Elm," "The Walnut," and "The Rowan." Vessels from Norway also came into Newry with cargoes of timber, some of which went by lighter to Portadown.

At some of the lock houses on the canal, there were stables, built. During winter, the lightermen would stop at a house where there was a stable. As darkness approached, the lighter would be tied up, the horse fed and the skipper and his helper would sleep in the cabin.

There was a stable at our lock and usually the men would come into our house for a night's crack. Tall yarns would be told, a game of cards or draughts would be played. Peter Campbell was a regular visitor. He brought along another man called Dan Harte. Both of them played mouth organs and great nights of music and song took place. My mother always laid on a bit of supper, mugs of tea with soda bread and country butter.

The job of a lock-keeper wasn't well paid but the house was rent free and there were "perks" to the job. At our lock there was a small hut on the "Back Line" as it was called. The back line was the bank on the other side of the canal. This small hut was about the size of a "privvy" (in case younger readers may not know, a privvy was a "wee house" at the bottom of the garden that you went to when you had to). In this hut over the back line, were kept the necessary implements for operating the sluices on the lock gates. The door of the hut was open during the day and it wasn't by accident that a large potato basket (capable of holding approx. ½ cwt.) was always lying handy and in full view of the lightermen. Most of them took the hint and filled it with the best of Whitehaven coal. So we had no fuel bills. My mother would hand over a cake of soda bread or an apple tart, a few eggs or a jug of milk. In a way, it was the "barter system," but strictly off the record.

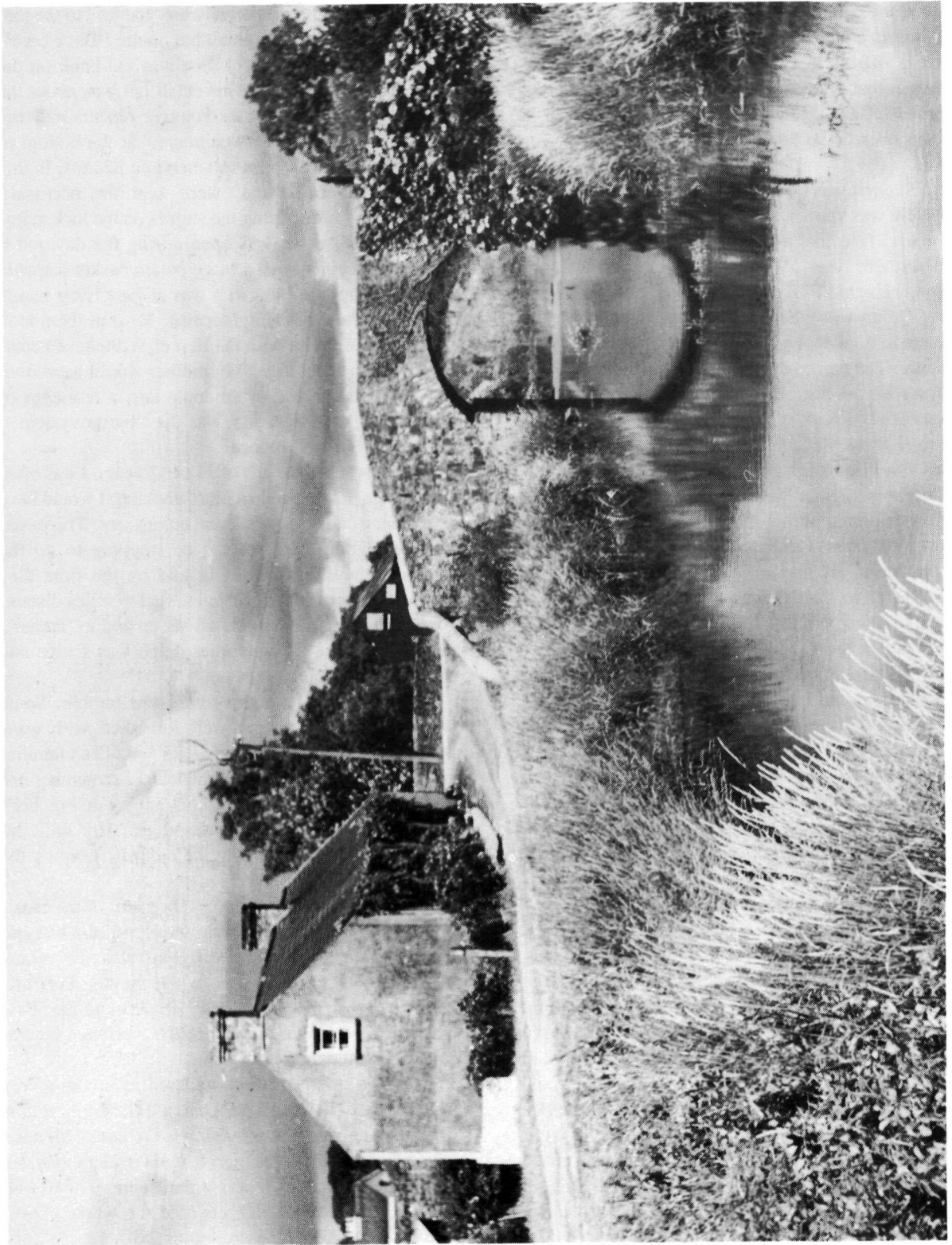
When I reached the age of 11 or 12 years, I was often asked to go down and do a bit of cooking. I would have fried bacon and eggs, steak and onions, etc. This saved time for lightermen, instead of stopping to do the cooking, they kept on going and by the time they reached the next lock (McVeigh's), 1½ miles distant, I would have had the menu all set up and a "tanner" earned for myself. Sometimes delph was scarce and the tea was taken in jam pots.

Not all the cabins were rough and tumble. Some were well equipped and well furnished with good bunks. Some skippers brought their wives and families with them during the summer months. I remember one man on a lovely summer day, having a big horn gramophone playing away on deck. His wife sat knitting away and changing the records, keeping the music going.

My father was on the maintenance staff of the canal.

Long before Larry Hagman was born, we had our own "J.R." — J. R. Monaghan was the inland inspector. To the big-wigs in the Newry Port and Harbour Trust, he was called J.R. Around the 'Pass he was called the Gaffer and to the workmen he was called "Ould Jamie."

He was a stout, broad-shouldered man with a very austere look. He wore a hard hat, a "Dickey," yellow boots and carried a stout yellow cane stick. Mention of a "Dickey," — if some younger readers may not know what it was — it was a hard white collar with a wide white front which covered the whole chest.



Moody's lock-house (No. 11) and "the far 'Pass bridge" (1940's).



Waddell's lock-house (No. 9) and locks (1940's).

Wearing a Dickey, there was no need to change a shirt every day (or every month for that matter).

When the Dickey got soiled with dust or tobacco juice, it was washed in a basin with Sunlight soap, rinsed with a solution of Robin starch and allowed 10 or 15 minutes to dry, and "hey presto," you could have gone to the Newry Bachelors' Ball!

When old Mr. J. R. died, his son Joe became Inland Inspector.

There were usually about six or seven full-time men employed on the maintenance staff of the canal. At that time they were as follows: Peter Campbell, Willie Crothers, James "Buffer" Burns, Hugh Convery, Frank Cross, Hugh Burns, John Waddell (my father) and Paddy Hanratty (casual worker).

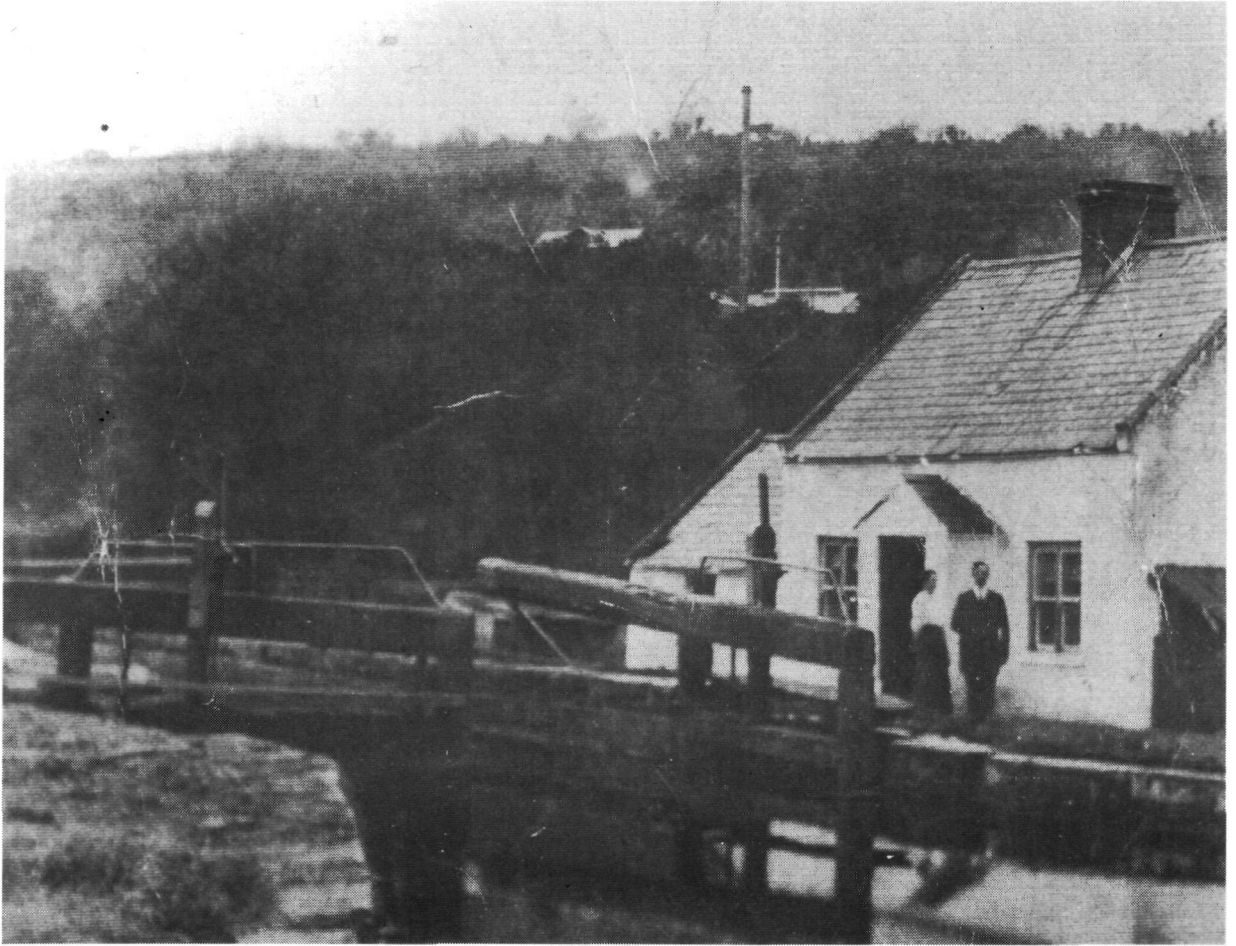
Paddy was one of the "rare ould characters" in the rare ould times. He couldn't read, write or count, but he was endowed with a ready wit. One time while working for Frank Monaghan, he was coming across the yard after forking hay all through a hot summer day. It was now around 10.30 p.m. Mr. Monaghan said to Paddy "Are you finished, Paddy?" Paddy replied "I don't know sir, but I'm quit."

Looking back to those far-off days, I became very annoyed and depressed at the environmental changes. Small holdings have disappeared, taken over by big concerns. Hedges and ditches have been levelled. The small fields of the old days each had its own name, each had its own bit of history. The habitat for wild life is fast disappearing. The cuckoo, the corncrake, the yellow hammer, the kingfisher, to name but a few, have almost gone. The rivers and waterways are polluted. Fishing in the canal was once a major tourist attraction. Visitors from Manchester, Liverpool and Bolton came on holiday each year. Guest houses around the 'Pass were booked out from year to year. One family I remember very fondly, was the Fairhurst family from Manchester. Old Mr. Fairhurst loved to fish the canal at our lock No. 9. He always came from the village early each day. Coming each year, he became very well known to ourselves and to all the neighbours.

The Crack Bridge, below our house, was the meeting place for all the local characters. Bob Whiteside, Bobby Sterritt, Frank Monaghan (of Athletic fame), "Crab" Kelly, Tom Sterritt and Johnny Minnis. Young and old



Maintenance workers pictured at Crothers' locks (No. 7) around 1935.
 From left, front : Not known; Joe Monaghan, Inland Inspector Newry Port and Harbour Trust; Hugh Convery; Peter Campbell.
 Back : James Burns; John Waddell; Willy Crothers.



Mr. and Mrs. Alec Crothers outside lock-house (No. 7) around 1935.

used to gather to fish, to play skittles or to play pitch and toss.

The one character that stands out was Johnny Minnis. Johnny had a grey donkey, I had a black donkey (some would say that was four donkeys)! Johnny worked around the country. On one occasion he was working at a house that was noted for a lack of quantity of the grub. The quality was always good but the helpings sparse.

One day after the dinner the lady asked Johnny did he enjoy his dinner. His reply was "I did Mrs. — if that was it!"

One night in Hudson's pub at closing time Johnny was in no hurry finishing his bottle of stout. The late Gerry Hudson didn't like to tell Johnny to "drink up" and go home, but he hinted at it. He looked into the fire which was nearly out and said to Johnny:— "That fire is very low." Johnny's reply was:— "If it gets any lower we're going to have to sit up with it!"

These are some of my memories of life on the canal and life along the towpath of the Newry Canal in the late 1920s and 1930s.

Since then the canal, which was so picturesque, has been allowed to fall into disrepair and has become a health hazard.

However, I would like to end on an optimistic note. The four Councils involved in the eighteen miles stretch of canal — Newry and Mourne, Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon — are now making valiant efforts to restore it to something like its original beauty and interest in the canal and its restoration is increasing all the time.

Recently a sponsored walk from Newry to Poyntzpass along the towpath attracted more than 300 participants. The experience was enjoyed by young and old alike. The potential is there to make the canal one of the greatest tourist attractions in Ireland — let's hope it is fulfilled!



Joe Monaghan supervising repairs to Crothers' locks.



Cattle and goats graze the tow-path, 1950.



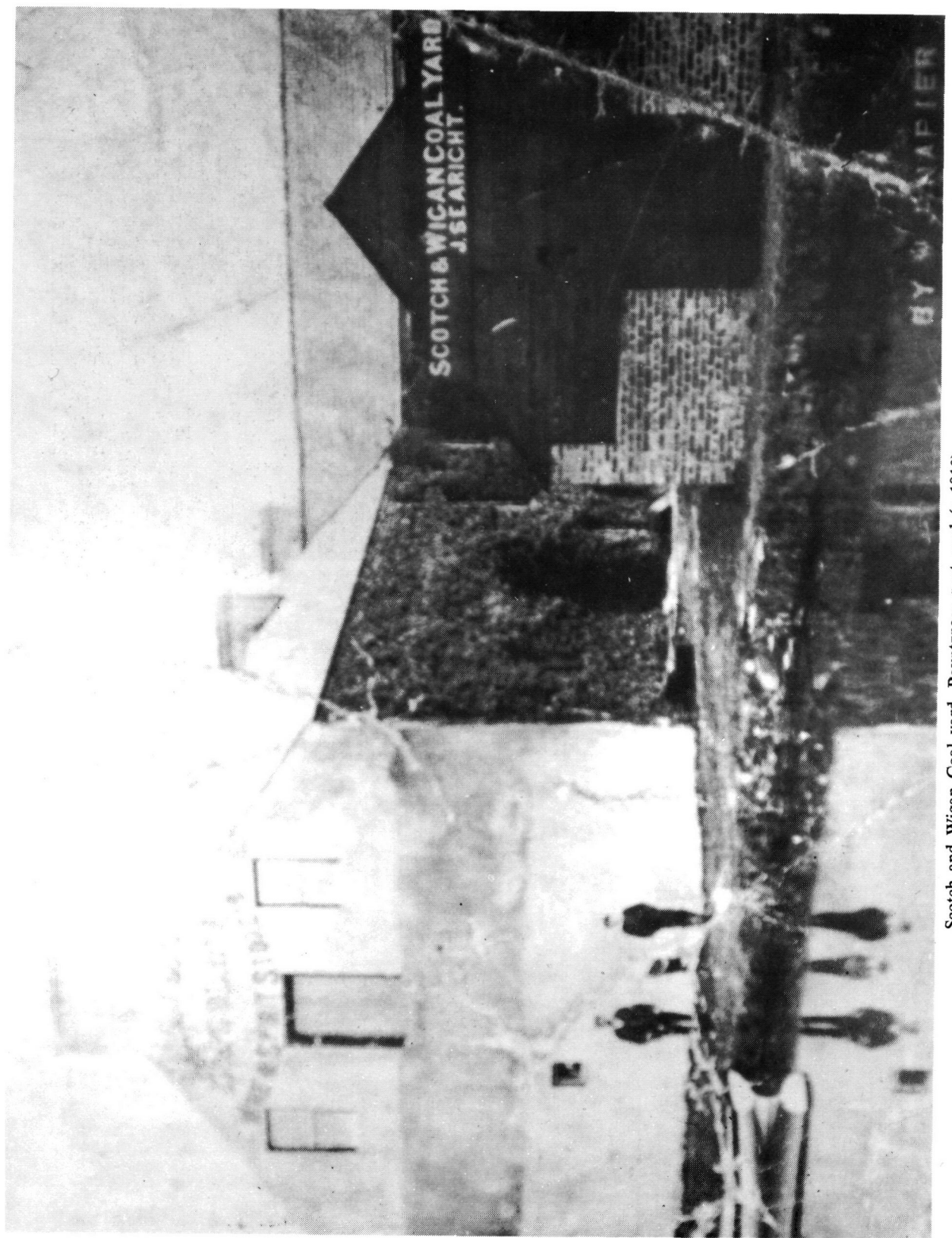
'The Harbour' Poyntzpass (post card 1910).



Workmen demolishing 'The far 'Pass bridge' 1951. In the picture is Constable Gethins.



Canal at Scarva c. 1910.



Scotch and Wigan Coal yard, Poyntzpass post card (c. 1910).



The sluice-keeper's cottage at Acton Lake (Lough Shark).

