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IWAI Observation Relating to Case Reference: PL01.322059

Waterways Ireland (Applicant) – For Maintenance and Repair works to the Barrow Navigation

Below please find the IWAI's Observations relating to the Appeals against Waterways Ireland's Planning Application: 2460026 (Carlow County Council). IWAI fully supports the application for maintenance and repair works along the Barrow Navigation Channel. We note that all three Councils of Kildare, Carlow and Laois have rightly approved these essential maintenance works. We see no difference between these maintenance works and the standard maintenance tasks which Waterways Ireland undertakes regularly throughout the Inland Waterways as they endeavour to maintain the waterways to a safe, navigable standard and condition. These works will ensure the continuation of the Navigational Rights of Way, which have existed along the Barrow Navigation for more than two hundred and forty years, and for centuries before that by smaller shallower draft vessels.

1. Introduction & IWAI History

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) was established in 1954. It has 24 branches across the thirty-two counties of Ireland. It has 2000 members. It represents a wide range of members interests regarding Ireland's inland waterways, from use and activities, to, community interests, navigation issues, tourism development, preservation and conservation all in relation to the socio and economic benefits of the waterways. Our members are not just boat owners but waterways lovers of all types. *We are recognised as The Voice of the Inland Waterways!*

IWAI have a long history of working with statutory agencies, funding groups, and community interests with regards to promoting access to the waterways. In recent years this has taken the form of working with Waterways Ireland – the navigation authority, Government Departments in relation to legislative reform regarding byelaws on boating use on the Canals and Barrow sections of the waterways and undertaking large infrastructural refurbishment projects such as the regeneration of the Boyne Canal in Co. Meath.

IWAI also supports Special Interest Groups such as the Charts Special Interest Group or C-SIG which has undertaken a digital national mapping and charting project of much of the Shannon, Erne, Royal Canal, Grand Canal and Barrow Navigation. In late 2018, as a response to the severe difficulties encountered by boating users of the Grand Canal and Royal Canal, which collectively along with a partial route on the River Shannon form the **Green and Silver Route**, a special interest Nav-Watch¹ Group was established within the Canal branches of IWAI. The purpose of this group is to constructively contribute to the knowledge base regarding access to waterways, their navigational maintenance, development and use from a boating perspective. Sharing this information with the relevant agencies for the betterment of these navigations so they can be enjoyed by all who venture their way.

2. Protecting and Continuing the Navigational Right of Way

In Irish Law, Navigation Channels hold similar Rights of Way to other transport routes, such as Roads. The Barrow River has held a navigation channel for several hundred years prior to the Navigation Board's improvements which began in the 1750's².

¹ Nav-Watch – comprising expert members of Canals & Barrow branches of the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland from the Royal Canal, Kildare, Dublin, North Barrow, Barrow, Offaly, and Shannon Harbour IWAI areas.

² 'Guide to the Barrow Navigation of Ireland' 1998, by Dúchas The Heritage Service.

The existence of a Common Law Right to Navigate the Barrow is supported by the presence of monastic settlements at St Mullins and Monasterevin dating back to the 5th Century. Monasteries were sited close to rivers or lakes as these provided ready access.

This ancient common law right is recognised by the establishment of Waterways Ireland under the Good Friday /Belfast agreement wherein responsibility for the Management, Maintenance, Development and Restoration of inland "navigable waterways " was vested in Waterways Ireland. The Barrow is specifically included in this vesting.

The construction of the Grand Canal and it's Barrow Line further extended the Navigation Channel in the late 1700's, opening up a transport route between Waterford, Dublin and the Shannon. '**The Barrow Navigation**' refers to the stretch of river between Athy and St. Mullins. '**The Barrow Line**' refers to the canal section which links the Grand Canal (at Lowtown) to the Barrow River at Athy. So, the navigation channel runs the length of the Barrow Line, continuing onward through the Barrow River and on further below St. Mullins, where the river is tidal, and the navigation channel extends onward south to New Ross and Hook Head.

From St. Mullins north up to Leighlinbridge the Navigation Channel is on the east side of the river. At Leighlinbridge the channel switches to the western side of the river and remains to the west up as far as Carlow. At Carlow it then switches back to the east side and remains there all the way to Athy. The Towpath/Trackway is immediately alongside the navigation channel and follows the same route.

3. Navigation Channel Within the SAC

The SAC refers only to the River Barrow, it makes no reference to the Barrow Navigation Channel (which comprises of the Towpath/Trackway together with the Navigation Channel). It is reasonable then to assume that the SAC does not actually apply to the Navigation Channel, this would seem to respect the rights of way of the Navigation Channel as a transport route and it's requirement for maintenance.

4. Maintenance and the Importance of the Towpath/Trackway

The Towpath is an integral part of the Navigation Channel, since it provides access for maintenance crews and their machinery. On the Barrow Navigation the Towpath is locally known as the 'Trackway', but it's function is no different than that of the Barrow Line's towpath. It's original designed purpose was as a Towing Path which was built and maintained for use by horses towing barges up the river and along the canal line. It is not a natural feature, comparison with the opposite 'wild' side of the river will show the very obvious differences. It is a man-made structure, built up to provide a stable base for horses drawing barges, and so it did from the time of it's creation until the introduction of diesel type engines in the early 19th century. In the days of towing it would have been a well-trodden muddy path for much of the year. The grassy banks we are blessed with today are a snapshot in time. Gone are the heavy horses which tore up the ground, gone also are the large teams of workers who strove to maintain this vital artery by hand. The machine age arrived and reduced the need for manpower, machines in a short while could do the work which took men months to do. The Towpath was created

to serve the Navigation. It was and always has been incidental to the river which it serves. It cannot now be severed from the navigation, which would result in the eventual destruction and loss of the navigation channel, and elevated to a legal standing which it was never intended to have and has never enjoyed.

The Barrow has always suffered from lower levels in summer, since the navigation was improved in the 1700's, the navigation channel has required periodical dredging to maintain the navigation channel to an acceptable depth for barges and other vessels. Significant locations are prone to accumulate heavy deposits of silt and gravel rendering those sections impassible until maintenance deals with any blockage. The navigation channel is a section of deeper water running along one side of the Barrow River, the river can be considerably wider in places though shallower and dangerous to navigate outside of the navigation channel. The navigation channel is generally close to the bank on whichever side of the river it follows. For that reason, the riverbank on the navigation side can be sheer, as a relatively level surface is maintained on the towpath/trackway to ensure safe access by maintenance crews and their machines, as necessary. The banks can be prone to erosion and bank slides can occur. Management, repair and reinforcement needs to be done, as required. The river is naturally more erosive in winter months as it scurries to flush excesses of winter rain southward to the sea. Thus continues the constant battle between maintenance crews and the erosive power of the river. Failing to maintain this navigation channel correctly will create obstructions which will soon close the navigation permanently.

Any resemblance between the towpath and a manicured garden lawn should be warmly appreciated but understood. This is a works access route, well kept by WI, users should be aware that crews and machines will and do inhabit this space, it is a shared space. The towpath is wholly owned by WI and while access there by the public is allowed, we cannot rightly dictate conditions. A photo submitted by one objector to this planning featured a level grassy bank with the imprint of tyre tracks from a wide wheelbase tractor. These are nothing more than the signs of basic works being done and a familiar sight to those of us who travel the waterside Greenways of Ireland. They are, like the waterways, a shared space. Maintained and shared with us by WI, allowing us all to explore deeper into the Irish countryside. It should also be noted that in the picture there was ample space to walk between the tracks. We would question the objector's motives and apparent lack of understanding of the industrial heritage and function of the environment in which they found themselves. It is important at this point to emphasize that, had the Blueway/Greenway not been objected to there would be a safe firm surface here which WI could use without marking grassy surfaces and all sections of the population could come to explore the beauty of the Barrow SAC.

5. Exposing Misinformation



1. The picture above purports to show a supposed Before & After image of a Waterways Ireland installation of rock armour along a section of the Barrow.

Pic 1. This badly photo-edited image appeared on Facebook during the planning submission stage of WI's application for maintenance works. It deliberately exaggerates the height and visibility of rock armour which WI have stated: *"Once operational, the proposed rock armour will be partially visible but will not impact the view. In accordance with methodology the magnitude of change will be medium to low during construction, and negligible once operational."*

It is IWA's intention to present a clear, factual case for supporting WI's maintenance plan. It is disappointing to see faked pictures such as the example above, posted online or anywhere in an attempt to sway public opinion towards objecting to WI's planned maintenance. The confusion continues as the image was posted by a group claiming to want to 'Save the Barrow Track'. In reality, only Waterways Ireland can Save the Barrow Track, by continuing to maintain it. Blocking WI's planning would in time effectively Destroy the Barrow Track. It would quickly close the ancient navigation channel and obstruct the right of way. Erosion and flooding would take its toll together with overgrowth, making the towpath as we know it inaccessible to all, including the objectors.

One of the appeals to WI's planning criticized minor factual details in their reports, but then followed up with suggestions that there might 'likely be Kingfishers nesting, and suggests there might be more otters nesting than were identified in the ECIA report. These reasonings are vague and cannot be seriously considered as cause for a ban on WI's works. It must be recognised that Maintenance over centuries has created habitats in which many species now thrive along the Barrow. Planned maintenance works are carried out by WI during Maintenance Season precisely so not to upset nesting birds and mammals. The greater threat to otters and kingfishers is bank erosion which when unchecked will undermine banks causing them to collapse into the navigation channel. The proof of WI's professionalism and experience in maintaining the inland waterways is the abundance of wildlife we see as we cruise the waterways. Both otters and kingfishers are elusive creatures, but when you know what you're looking for and what time of day to look, they are well represented throughout the waterways.

The historical context, heritage and purpose of the towpath/trackway has been overlooked by the objectors. Its original and ongoing purpose as ancillary to and a means of serving an ancient navigation has been omitted so as to support the proposition that the towpath now remain untouched, for the specific benefit of a small few. Tyre tracks on soft ground in a maintenance area cannot be classified as 'damage'. The tyre tracks shown left ample space for people to walk between them, they did not obstruct passage. WI carries out its maintenance between the months of November-February during a time known as 'Maintenance Season' and not winter time. This period has long been the busy season for maintenance crews throughout the inland waterways, long before the establishment of the SAC. It recognises the importance of the nesting season for wildfowl, fisheries, mammals and a myriad of species dependant upon the waterways for habitat. It exemplifies Waterways Ireland's commitment and duty of care to the environment.

6. Understanding Waterways Ireland

Waterways Ireland is an underfunded organization doing excellent work on a veritable shoestring. Their annual budget still falls short of pre 2008 levels, their Capital budget has been halved in the current year. It is devastating to see them having to spend in excess of €200,000 on this planning to secure the right to carry out basic maintenance tasks. Objectors to these works should be made aware that this wasted revenue will have a certain knock-on effect elsewhere on the inland waterways. Weedcutting on canals may be cut back, allowing invasive weeds to explode and consume the habitat of native plants. Fish suffer loss of habitat, fishermen cannot fish in dense weed, boats are unable to travel and tourism tendrils may wither. There are a myriad of important tasks which may fall foul to this unfortunate waste of revenue.

7. Skilled Craftsmen & Maintenance Crews

Pic 2. Depicts vessels from the Heritage Boat Association of Ireland (HBA) and the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) moored in Monasterevin Harbour very recently. For many years this would not have been possible due to silting and bank/wall collapses. Over the winter of 2023/24 Waterways Ireland carried out extensive dredging of the harbour and restoration of quay walls, where original walls had collapsed and many quaystones were missing. During the works, lost features of the original line of the canal were uncovered and sensitively highlighted to aid understanding of the structures for future generations. On completion of the works, the HBA together with IWAI set to planning a major Barrow cruise to visit and approve these works. It was expected that the Barrow maintenance plan would also be well under way, making the journey further south possible. Now, that expected summer long cruise has become a “wait and see how far we get” experience. This could well become the last flotilla to cruise the Barrow if maintenance is allowed to be suspended.



2. Heritage boats at Monasterevin (Barrow Line, March 2025), currently journeying their way down the Barrow, or as far as they can get. These barges once carried cargo on this navigation but now most are converted as private cruising vessels.

Pics 3 & 4. Depict the extensive works which WI carried out in the restoration of Monasterevin Harbour. When a section of waterway has to be completely drained before repair, WI inform the Dept. of Fisheries who carefully remove all fish from the waterway first. The scope of these works clearly underlines; the unique skills which WI crews possess, their commitment to the care and continuation of these national treasures, and their own passion for the waterways.



3. Monasterevin Harbour on the Barrow Line. Restored by Waterways Ireland in winter 2023/24. Deep silting was removed which had rendered side harbours inaccessible to larger vessels. Collapsed walls were rebuilt and new quaystones were installed where originals had been lost or stolen.



4. Monasterevin Harbour. Refilling the harbour slowly. Restoration exposed the original line of a branch of the canal, the bend now highlights the entrance to the old line. This clue was previously completely obscured by infill.



5. Heritage boats at Vicarstown (Barrow Line, March 2025) on the Barrow.

8. The Barrow Blueway

Giving credence to those who shout loudly, just because they shout, is dangerous and no substitute for knowledge and understanding of the environment in question. Minorities shouting loudly for what they wish, without listening, is simply NIMBYism and should be exposed as such. This approach has already had significant success and is the reason why this towpath is not a thriving Blueway/Greenway today. If you're wheelchair bound, if you're a family pushing a pram, if you're a cyclist, if you're elderly or need assistance walking, this towpath is inaccessible to you.

We have developed a hugely successful network of Greenways and Blueways throughout the country, but not here where the SAC has been used to prevent large sectors of the population from enjoying this wonderful environment. Was the SAC not established to protect that area, highlighting it's outstanding natural beauty for All to see?

9. Conclusion

The IWAI would urge An Bord Pleanála to approve Waterways Ireland's planning application for maintenance on the Barrow. These essential works are extremely urgent and should proceed in the forthcoming maintenance season. The Navigational Right of Way should be upheld and its continuation ensured. Doing this will protect the rich heritage of the Barrow and allow the living history of this waterway to continue.