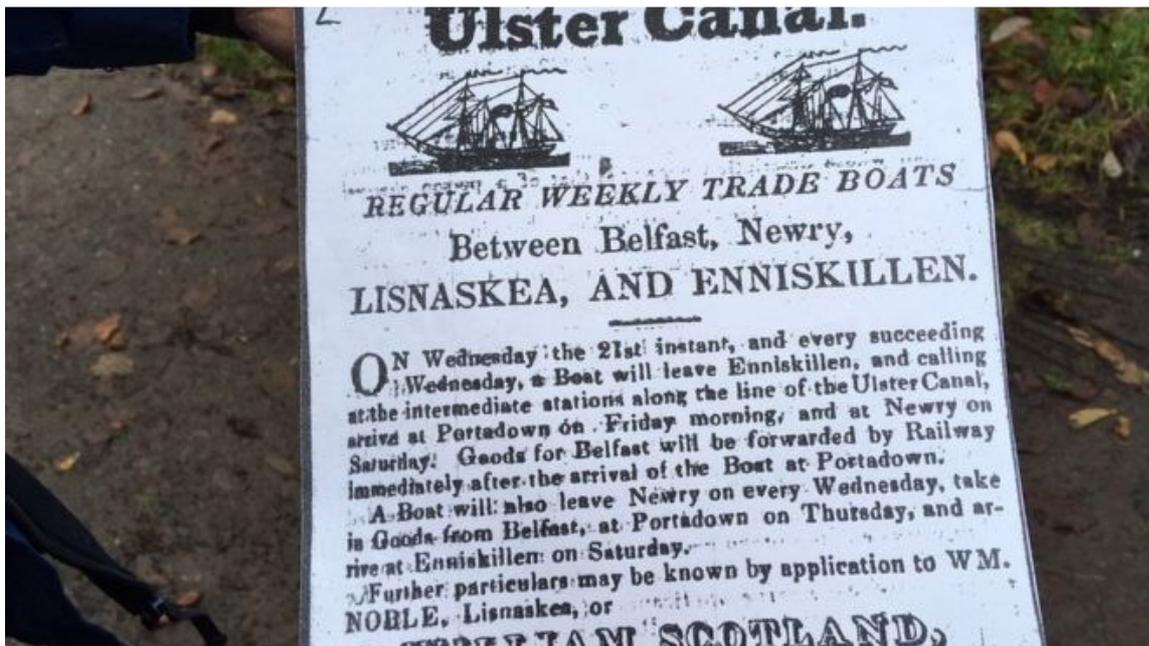


The Lough Erne steamboat that amazed in 1842

By Louise CullenBBC NI News
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The Countess of Erne was part of a fleet towing barges along the Ulster Canal from Newry of Erne was part of a fleet towing barges along the Ulster Canal from Newry

The 26th and narrowest lock on the Ulster Canal is not much to look at today, but, in 1842, it connected south-east Fermanagh with the industrial hub of Lough Neagh in a way that was previously unimaginable.

The canal was a project fraught with difficulty and mismanagement.

But, its presence enabled the dawn of the wooden steam paddler age on Lough Erne.

There were already eight steam paddlers on the Shannon and two in Lough Neagh - and it was from there, the largest lake in the British Isles, that the first steamboat came to Fermanagh.

She was the Countess of Erne.

The Countess had a chequered career - unsuccessful in Portaferry, she was sold to the legendary engineer William Dargan.



The Countess caused amazement when she arrived on Lough Erne in 1842

He was the chief contractor on the Ulster Canal project and brought the Countess to Lough Neagh to tie in with the rest of his fleet, which was towing barges from Newry.

Soon after, though, she was dismantled and delivered to Wattlebridge on Lough Erne, on the afternoon of Friday 23 December 1842 to great excitement.

Brian Osborne, of Lough Erne Heritage, has conducted a lot of research which has shed light on a long-forgotten history.

"She was launched with about 30 people on board and the Crom Infantry Band," he said.

'Like a spaceship'

"She made her way to Crom, where there was a huge celebration. Hundreds of people lined the shore.

"There was a cannon salute from the old castle, flag-waving."

If that sounds a little over the top, this was the first time anything like a wooden steam paddler had been seen in County Fermanagh.

The Countess of Erne reached Fermanagh 12 years before the railway and years before photography, and most of the local people had never seen anything like her.

They watched, agog, as she did a few circles of Crom Bay and then headed for Lisnaskea.

Osborne, from Lough Erne Heritage, is shedding new light on the Countess



Brian Osborne, from Lough Erne Heritage, is shedding new light on the Countess

"It was practically like a spaceship," said Mr Osborne.

"But she was there as a tool for the trade of the Ulster Canal, between Belfast, Newry and Enniskillen, Belleek, Lisnaskea and Belturbet."

It was the dawn of a new era. Fermanagh now had direct trading links with the Irish Sea ports - all involved were certain prosperity was just a boat ride away.

The Countess of Erne was the first of at least 19 commercial steamboats eventually working on the lough.

But, this was before the water levels on Lough Erne were managed.

Abrupt end

Even on that first journey to Lisnaskea, the level was so high the Countess of Erne veered off course and ran aground twice.

And, in the summer time, the shallow water and the topography of the lough bed caused problems.

The eel weirs at Enniskillen meant she couldn't actually moor up in the town and the 50-tonne canal boats she towed there had to be manhandled in with poles.

The Countess of Erne became a familiar sight, plying the canal to Belturbet, Lisnaskea and Enniskillen.

Sadly, her time on the lough came to an abrupt end near Belturbet in June 1846.

"The crew were actually fumigating her because of vermin," explained Mr Osbourne.

"They went on shore, but when they came back, the boat was on fire, and they had to scuttle her. So that was that."

But, Lough Erne Heritage is determined she won't be forgotten.



Lough Erne Heritage are researching areas near to Lough Erne as part of their efforts to learn about the Countess

They have plans to look for the remnants and to make Mr Osbourne's research part of an exhibition next year."Sadly, the fact that Lough Erne is actually a river, which most people forget, means the wood would have disintegrated and washed away years and years ago," he said.

"But, if there are any metal parts, they might possibly still be there."

The search will begin next year, but in the meantime, the group is commemorating that first voyage to Lisnaskea by recreating it - without running aground.

Mr Osbourne said: "Lough Erne has always been known as the highway of the west, from as far back as records began.

"Logboats, sailing boats, cots, regattas, steamboats and everything else - it's always been a busy place for trade and people and livestock going off and on the islands.

"Most of the islands were inhabited up until fairly recently.

"A lot of people don't realise the rich history of all those years ago.

