TRAFFIC AND COMMERCE

When built in the 1700s, it was envisaged that the Lagan Waterway would be a conduit for the export of commodities from mid-Ulster to Belfast and beyond. However, as the toll books from the 1830s up to 1950s indicate, there was considerably more traffic up it from Belfast than down it.

Traffic

Even after the Coalisland and Ulster canals came under the sole ownership of the Lagan Navigation Company in 1880s, the Lagan waterway remained the busiest of its operations. By 1900, traffic had built up to over 150,000 tons, netting annual profits of c.£5000 (well over £½ million in today's terms). It was these profits that sustained the other two loss-making enterprises.

The lower section of the waterway, between Belfast and the summit level was particularly busy, accounting for up to two-thirds of all traffic. The reasons for this are two-fold.

Firstly, by 1900, all the main towns in Ulster had been linked by railway to Belfast and it was usually more convenient for those situated a distance from Belfast or away from the canal to use it in preference.

Whereas Coalisland was 44 miles from Belfast by rail and 45 miles by canal, Portadown was 45 miles by canal, but only 25 by rail.

Secondly, although the Ulster Railway had opened between Belfast and Lisburn as early as 1839, its impact upon the waterway was not so great. Many linen mills were already established along the Lagan prior to the railway to avail of its free water power to drive their machinery. Because they were also very convenient to the Navigation, coal could easily be imported along it to power steam engines which enabled the mills to increase productivity irrespective of their water supply. Such was their dependence on the canal, that larger factories such as Barbours of Hilden ran their own fleet of lighters.

Cargoes

Coal was the predominant cargo carried up the Lagan, Upper Bann and Coalisland Canal. It was used on an industrial scale to power mills and also domestically to heat people's homes. Other cargoes from Belfast included fertilizer and manure, general merchandise, grain, and timber.

It is somewhat ironic that coal was being brought up the Coalisland Canal as it had been built specifically to take coal down it from the Dungannon collieries to Dublin! A case of 'coals to Newcastle' if ever there was one!

Commodities dispatched to Belfast were mainly agricultural produce such as baled hay, meal and flour, and potatoes. Sand and fireclay products (bricks, pipes, pottery and tiles) were also send down the Coalisland Canal, and peat from Maghery at the Lough Neagh end of the Blackwater.

It was not uncommon for a lighter to return to Belfast empty ("going light") if it had only being going part-way up to make, say, a coal delivery.

Emptying a hold was heavy manual work and could take upwards of a day or so depending on the type of cargo. Loose material such as coal and sand were shovelled

into tubs which were then lifted out using a hoist suspended from wooden sheer-legs over the hold.

Tolls

Lighters paid a toll to use a canal on entering it at Stranmillis (lock 1) and Ellis' Gut (lock 27). The lighterman received a chit which he then showed to the lock keepers when passing through.

The toll was based on how far the lighter was going and the weight of cargo being carried. The distance determined the number of locks which would have to be worked, but the actual type of cargo was immaterial.

In 1925, the rate per ton from the Belfast end to Edenderry was 8d; it was 1s.3d to Lambeg , 1s.4½d to Lisburn, and 1s.8d to Portadown. So the journey made by the *Industry* to Edenderry loaded with 72 tons of coal on 13 March of that year cost £4.8s.0d (72 tons x 8d/ton = 576d).

Unsurprisingly, the toll increased over time. In 1910 it was 7d per ton between Belfast and Lambeg, 7½ d in 1916, but had doubled to 15d by 1920 thanks to post-war inflation. However, it was down to 12d in 1934, presumably due to poor economic conditions.

The weight of the cargo in a lighter was determined by how far its hull sank below the waterline. Its depth was read off on a calibrated mark painted up on the hull. This was done at the start of its journey, and also when it passed through the Union Locks. On average, a lighter sank by approximately half an inch for every ton of added load.

If the vessel sat lower than expected for its declared load, it was either leaking or its owner was trying to pull a fast one by declaring a light cargo. Another ruse was to paint the depth mark higher up the hull than it should have been, resulting in a lighter reading. A fine was imposed by the LNC on anyone caught out.

The guaranteed depth of water on the Lagan and Upper Bann as far as Portadown was 5ft 6in and c.100 tons was the absolute maximum which could be carried (depending on the vessel). On the Coalisland Canal, the nominal depth was only 5ft 0in and c.85 tons was the limit, even though the hold could carry more. During the summer, even these depths could not always be maintained by the LNC.

Tolls were not the only costs incurred by the lighters' owners. With horse-drawn barges, a hauler had to be hired; with motorised barges, fuel had to be bought. Apart from the cost of the lighterman himself, additional manpower might also be needed when loading and unloading, and there were also the vessel's maintenance and repair costs. The services of a tugboat also had to be paid for if the lighter was towed across Lough Neagh, and also a tidesman if assistance was needed on the tidal stretch of the Lagan.

Demise and closure

Whereas traffic had been reasonably buoyant in the early 1900s, the scarcity of coal during the first world war (1914-18) caused a considerable downturn in traffic along the waterways.

The Ulster Canal was never a success and its viability was further undermined by the creation of the Border with the Irish Free State in 1922. It was last used in 1929 and officially abandoned in 1931.

By contrast, the Coalisland Canal was moderately successful and commercial traffic continued until 1946. Although not officially abandoned until 1954, the resultant drop-off in traffic obviously exacerbated the Lagan's decline.

By the early 1940s, traffic on the Lagan, traffic had dropped to under 30,000 tons – less than one-fifth of what it had been in 1900. Only a Government subsidy kept it going. By now, there was the added competition of motorised road transport. Delivery lorries had a big advantage over barges in that they could deliver door-to-door to customers not on the canal, and much faster as well.

By 1947, traffic on the Lisburn - Lough Neagh section had dwindled to nothing, although it was not until 1954 that the Canal was officially abandoned.

Only the Navigation between Belfast and Lisburn now remained operational. Most of its traffic comprised John Kelly's coal boats. In 1948, for example, his boats were serving the Lambeg Bleaching & Dyeing Co and the Island Spinning Mill at Lisburn. Other operators at that time included H. Craig making deliveries of coal to Lisburn Gasworks, and Messrs Newforge Ltd who ran their own lighter between their Newforge factory and Belfast.

By early 1954, traffic had dwindled to almost nothing on the Navigation. The first entry for that year is on 17 Feb 1954 when 72 tons of coal were conveyed on J. Kelly's *Ruby* to William Barbour's mill at Hilden.

The next entry is 12 March 1954 when the motor launch *North Star*, skippered by J. Patterson, journeyed empty from Lambeg to the first level (above Lock 1). This is the last entry in the last of the LNC's toll books.

The LNC was dissolved in 1954 and its assets taken over by the Government. Four years later, in 1958, the Navigation was officially abandoned.

In the 1960s, the Sprucefield – Moira section of the Canal was obliterated to make way for the M1 motorway; the aqueduct over the Lagan was also demolished. However, the rest of the waterway has been maintained in a non-operational state for drainage and amenity purposes by the Government.