



## **CORKUMNAVIGATION** **A Guide to circumnavigating Cork City**

2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Published March 2016

**Addendum: Commentary written by the late Cian Ó Sé**

### ***CORKUMNAVIGATION: Down the Lee and up the Sabhrann***

It was said that the city of Cork was built on a series of 13 islands. The channels between all these islands have all been arched over or filled-in in various ways over the centuries, so that only two remain open : the river Lee (North Channel) on the north, and the river **Sabhrann** (South Channel) on the south. It is possible to navigate both those rivers, but only in very small boats or kajaks, and even then, one has to keep a close eye on the tide. It has to be low enough to go under all the bridges, and yet high enough to clear all the weirs.

The main river derives its name from the Irish "**Laoi**", a word meaning torrent or flood. We have been recently reminded as to how appropriate the word is. Sudden flooding has always been a particular characteristic of the Lee, or "Flood River". It was only controlled in recent generations by the construction of the hydro-electric dams at **Scórnach** (lit. "the canyon") and **Carraig a'Droichid**. However, flood-control is an art - which seems to have been lost with the passing years !

Man has been trying to control the river for centuries. One of the earliest references to works on the river comes from the Popes Decretal (taxation-list) of 1199. In it is mentioned the "**Clochán**". This is derived from "cloch" meaning stone, so this refers to the stone-structure or weir <sup>⑬</sup> at the **Waterworks** , the highest point to which tides go (at present. It is a mute point as to how far upriver they will go as climate change takes hold !) The Waterworks were constructed in the 19th. century, and supplied water to the city. The buildings contains interesting examples of Victorian engineering, but there is not all that much that can be seen from the river.

The first bridge is commonly called the Wellington Bridge, although after Independence it was officially called the **Thomas Davis Bridge** <sup>⑭</sup>. On the right bank is **Inis Mór**, or Great Island, containing the university's games and athletic grounds.

The second bridge is the **Daly Bridge** <sup>⑮</sup>, colloquially called the "Shakey". It was built on the site of an ancient ferry. Where the northern pier stands was the site of an old house called "Jemappes", where United Irishmen held meetings before the 1798 rising.



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Next comes the **Sunday's Well Weir** ⑩ at the Sundays Well Lawn Tennis, Cricket and Boating Club. Hereabouts was the "shute", an inclined plane where boats were launched during the Cork Exhibition c. 1904. Many of the residences on the left bank had their own boats until boating was banned after the construction of the hydro-electric dams in the 1950's.

Cork's newest bridge, the **Mardyke Bridge** ⑨, comes next. It is overlooked by St. Vincents Church and one-time seminary, built on very steep grounds - so steep in fact that, before the initial building phase had been completed, much of it collapsed down-hill.

The left bank here had various names : "the long-miler" by the poachers, but more officially, "Reilly's" or "Gould's Marsh". Earlier, it was "**Oileán an Chonair**" or the Island of the Trackway, because here lay the main track or trail from the north. This was the most ancient crossing point of the river Lee. The series of fords here was called "**Bealach Chonglais**", a name which goes back to the time of St. Fionnbarra (6th. century) and even earlier. Traces of the ancient fords can be seen at low tide, when a double weir ⑧ is exposed. On the map it is simply called "Salmon Weir". Salmon fishing was always important on the Lee up until the establishment of the Hydro-electric Scheme. They used to be found at all seasons, probably due to the extensive gravel-beds in the upper reaches, in the **Gaortha**. Salmon-fishing was so important that some experts even suggest that the name of the river derives from the pre-Celtic Fenno-Ugric language which was spoken by the Fir Bolg. A related word in modern Finnish is "lohi", hinting at a meaning : "Salmon River"!

In many rivers, the incoming tide meeting the fresh-water current of the river, creates a large area of swirling water. This whirlpool gives a space of relatively deep water where shipping congregates. Technically it is called a "pill" and there is one here just before the next bridge, **St. Vincent's pedestrian Bridge** ⑦. On the right is the old "Lee Maltings", now part of **U.C.C.** N . These high buildings have doorways open to the river. Beneath, is a rectangular timber structure, where the lighters rested at low tide whilst being unladen. The timbers were laid down to protect the hulls from the rough stones.

Also to be seen on the right is the old **Mansion House**, now part of the **Mercy Hospital** F . This was the 18th. century official residence of the Mayor of Cork and as such, the building



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was Council property. We do not know how far back this property went - the city's records were burned (accidentally) when the Court-house was burned in the 1880's. More were burned (deliberately) by British Forces of Occupation in the 1920's. Anyhow, a defensive outfort (probably Council property) was marked on this island on the 17th. century Pacata Hibernia map, and was likely built on the same site. It would have been a logical place to control the crossings here and at "Bealach Chonglais". On the left bank was the site of Wise's Distillery.

From here on downriver, views are dominated by the quay-walls! Cork is certainly no Amsterdam or Kobenhavn. There are no architectural gems, palaces or significant defensive works to be seen. However, there is something more to be seen than mere "outfall spotting".

The North Mall once contained the monastery, church and other property of the Franciscans. It was a centre of learning of such fame that it was called the "**Mirror of Ireland**". It housed monks of both native and Norman extraction, and relations between the two groups were not always harmonious. Indeed conflict arose on one occasion which led to reports being sent to Rome. We never got the actual score, but the total number of dead amounted to 22 - maybe that was the real reason why it was called the "Mirror of Ireland"? Anyhow, it was in this monastery that Micheál Ó Cléirigh, one of the Four Masters, copied one our more important manuscripts: A Life of St. Fionnbarra, the founder of Cork.

The monastery was established here between the cliff and the river, for an ulterior motive, in the 13th. century. Before that, the main route from the north came down from **Gabhal na Spurra** (now Shandon St.), along the North Mall, Oileán an Chonair and hence the fords of Bealach Chonglais. The monastery acted as a hindrance and directed traffic more directly into the old city - over the **North Gate Bridge** ⑥.

Many bridges were built on this site, the first ones of timber. They were only built of stone after timber the timber bridge, along with its defensive stone tower on the north bank were washed away in floods in the early 17th. century.

It is nowadays hard to visualise the old "Coal Quay" (Cornmarket St.) as a navigable channel, but such was the case. It is even possible that the incoming tide diverted the fresh-water current all the way down Cornmarket St., across Daunt Square, and the Grand Parade, and on towards Cove St. This diversion of current may have been taken advantage of in



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medieval times, giving rise to the very old Cork expression: "*Ag teacht aniar aduaigh, faoi mar a thagann Taidhgín na Cuaiche ar Chorcaigh*" - "Coming from the north-west - as Taidhgín of the Cog comes to Cork". Cogs brought wine from France and were fairly deep-hulled "round vessels". Theirs reached down deep enough that the sailors (Taidhgín or the common sailor) were able to harness the incoming tide to come upriver. Once they reached the entrance to the "Coal Quay", they could utilise the diverted fresh-water current to arrive "from the north-west" at **Cove Street** for unloading.

At the Opera House bridge, or Christy Ring Bridge, **4**, a tributary of the Lee arrives from Blackpool. Different stretches of this river have different names, one of which is the Kiln River, but ultimately it is the Bride. This also was once navigable, if only as far as Corcoran's Quay (Blackpool). The river was harnessed for power as far back as the 11th. century, when the Ostmen (descendants of the Vikings) established a mill at Lower John St., now the site of Lady's Well Brewery. For many centuries, this was the main entry point to the city from the east - along such routes as the Old Youghal Road and Leirim St. (crossing **Punch's Bridge** in the 18th. century).

Overseas shipping came up to this point up to the 18th. century. The Old **Custom House** **C** was right here next to the Opera House in Emmet Square, (now part of the Crawford Gallery).

**Patrick's Bridge** **3** is a fairly new structure. Before it was built, lighters could sail up Patrick St. On an old print of 1799, we can see that the northern end of the bridge had a draw-bridge, so the shipping could continue upriver. Further down, the left bank was anciently part of **Glenn Coiteáin**, named after the little cottages that were obviously used here at one time. It seems that here along also, some ship-building was carried on. To hand is a short reference to Muiris Camshrónach Ó Conchubhair, one time poet, who is described as a "saoir loingis i Leirim i gCorcaigh" in 1769. The **Leirim**, Liath-Droim or "Grey Ridge" seems to have extended eastwards. Most of the rock is Old Red Sandstone, but a grey variety is to be seen in the cliffs near the old Ferryman.



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The next bridge is called after **Brian Boru ②**. It is made of iron and was designed as a railway bridge. Not so long since it had a huge tank and a pump cabin built in top of the girders. The tank could be filled with water, the weight causing the main structure to rise, allowing ships to pass upriver.

The bridge furthest downriver at present, is called after **Micheal Collins ①**, after which one reaches the confluence of the Lee and the Sabhrann, where the eddying currents can sometimes be tricky. The most interesting item here along is probably the **25-to-one gun**, situated on the right bank, just below the power station. This used to be fired off precisely at noon, G.M.T. (25 to one, local time) so that all the sea-captains in the port could re-set their chronometers for navigational purposes.



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### **Next instalment : Up the Sabhrann.**

The **25-to-one gun** is situated near the beginning of the Marina, a retaining wall which confined the course of the river since the 18<sup>th</sup>. century. All this area of course is at, and even under sea-level. The whole expanse, on both banks, and extending down to Blackrock Castle, was once called “na h-Uiscí Iomdha” – “the Great Waters” because high tide used to cover everything from the base of the cliffs on the north to the unseen Monaghan Road on the south. This means that all Tivoli, Páirc Uí Chaoimh, Showgrounds, Power Station, Jew Town, perhaps even as far as South Terrace, used to be covered with a sheet of water. Seals were said to rest on a piece of land jutting out from where Bórd Gáis have their HQ .(Given Climate Change, it may happen again ?)

Na h-Uiscí Iomdha was only the western arm of a salt-water lake called “an Corr-Loch” whose other arms spread down the present Lough Mahon, Douglas Estuary and around Little Island etc. It was indeed a “corr-loch” – an odd-shaped lake, but more of that in a (perhaps) later instalment dealing with the lower river and harbour.

Navigating the channels of the river here was probably always something of a challenge, particularly at low tide when the many sand-banks were exposed. As the hinterland was gradually denuded of forest cover, particularly under the English conquest from the 16<sup>th</sup>. century onwards, a great deal of silt was washed down river, so that the channels became clogged. By the mid 18<sup>th</sup>. century navigation was in something of a crisis, and gradually, series dredging took place, effectively canalising the river. This canalisation process was helped by the building of the Marina and the Tivoli Reclamation Schemes which blocked-off all navigation Channels other than the existing one.

Industry took hold on the land to the north and south : Brick-works first on the left bank, on the site now the main railway station. Further down, shipyards, where the first steamers on the Lee (indeed anywhere) were built. On the right, a race-course, industrial estates, Fords, Dunlops, Páirc Uí Caoimh etc.

It is now time to turn about, and head up the South Channel, or to be more precise, the river Sabhrann. The na comes from an ancient Indo-European root-word, meaning “to sever”. Indeed, the word may have come with the Munstermen, Celtic refugees after the Roman



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conquest of Britain. Some of them may have come from the Severn River area, bringing the name with them. The same word, Sabhrann, is used for a rock off Kinsale Harbour, now called the Sovereign Rock, which is very obviously split or severed asunder.

The river seems to have acted as a boundary between the newer Celtic incomers, who settled amongst the forests to the north, from the older inhabitants, the Ciarraí Chuirche, to the south.

In making the turn, one will keep the **old Bonded Stores A** on the right. These stores were used for a variety of purposes, amongst which was the storage of whiskey for up to 10 years whilst it matured before export. This was the reason why the stores were “bonded”, ie. kept under lock and key!

The South Jetties are not now as busy as they used to be and shipping has been further hindered from going up river by the construction of the first bridge on this branch : **the De Valera Bridge 37**. Up to the early 20<sup>th</sup>. century, ships, and particularly, the smaller sailing coasters could travel further up past this, and the next bridge, **the Clontarf Bridge 36**. This was another railway bridge, similar to the one on the North Channel. It retained its tracks for many years, which proved deadly for many a cyclist. After crossing the bridge, whilst you intended to have “zigged” , the bike often “zagged” as its wheels got caught in the tracks!

New pontoons have recently been established on the river here, which may yet prove very popular with non-commercial navigation, but that remains to be seen. On the left is **City Hall v** . This is the second such building on the site, the first having been burned by the British in 1920. After that comes another bridge, named after Parnell, Irish patriot. Straight ahead is Morrison’s Island, where boats could tie-up on its three sides. It was once possible to sail up the South Mall, and indeed, many of the leases still allow the property owners to have two boats “double-parked” outside their premises. **Parnell Bridge 35** is relatively new, replacing an iron swing bridge in the 1960’s. When my grandfather was headmaster in the Model Schools opposite City Hall (he was instrumental in establishing them as an early Gael-Scoil in the 1920’s and 30’s), many of the pupils arriving late had the perfect excuse : “The bridge was up, Sir !” Technically, it was never “up” , because it swung open to allow coasters upriver, past the



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**School of Music** U , the School of Commerce, and **Holy Trinity Church** T , all the way to **Parliament Bridge** 32.

Just at the bend of the river is a new pedestrian bridge, named after the nearby church, but here on the left bank (**George's Quay** S ) was where the last of the traditional salmon fishermen (the Flynn brothers) used to keep and repair their boats and nets.

**Parliament Bridge** 32 (and Union Quay) were two places named by act of the British parliament which ordered that places in towns and cities all over Ireland should be so named to commemorate the (unfortunate) union of the Irish and English parliaments in 1800.

Above Parliament Bridge is the first weir on the South Channel 33 (going "deiseal" or clock-wise). We do not know when this was built. As stated earlier, the city's records have been burned. However, we know that an English man-o'-war sailed up to this point in 1690 to bombard the city walls during the siege of that year. There were further batteries in the orchard of the Red Abbey and elsewhere, which eventually opened a breach near where the City Car Park is now. At low tide, English forces, including Dutch and Danes were able to wade across to Morrison's Island, then nothing more than a grass-covered marsh, to eventually take the city. The weir was probably built afterwards as Morrison's Island and the other islands of the Great East Marsh were reclaimed in the century after the Siege of Cork.

Above this weir is possibly where the oldest port of Cork lay. Sullivan's Quay is built on reclaimed land. Unseen behind the buildings lies Cove Street, not because it led ultimately to Cobh, but because it was the original "Cove of Cork". Here was the later Viking settlement, whose last mayor under the Irish king Cormac mac Cárthaigh, was Gilbert, son of Thurgarius. He had his "lang-hus" on the site of the present St. Nicholas's Church (nowadays used by the Probation Service). One of the entrances to this church still comes down to Cove Street, the one-time water's edge. Wine-carrying cogs used to come here in the middle ages, and perhaps even before, - to the Monastery of St. Fionnbarra. Whether they came up the existing South Channel, the South Mall, or from the north-west along the Grand Parade is a mute point, but they landed their cargos here on the south bank.



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The earlier Viking settlement was obviously on the island to the right, probably around Castle Street, but, as they acquired Irish wives, their descendents (the Ostmen) spread out to the south bank. By the early 10<sup>th</sup>. century, they native Irish seem to have been a minority, occupying “Olde Corke on de Hill” around **St. Fionnbarra’s Cathedral** P . Their bishop, Aillil, is described as “Easpog Trian Chorcaí”, or the bishop of the third of Cork, in 908 A.D. For many years, this term, “Trian Chorcaí”, was a mystery to me, but it eventually dawned on me that the other “dhá dtrian” or two thirds were occupied by the Hiberno-Norse Ostmen – one third on the island and the second third here around the **South Gate Bridge** 29.

This bridge is possibly the oldest in Cork. It originally connected the Viking and native Irish settlements, the two twin foundations of Cork, with boats passing underneath. This, I would suggest, is the earliest origins for the Arms of Cork, rather than the “King’s Old Castle” and the “Queen’s Old Castle”. The earliest surviving seal of Cork shows a man shooting a bow and arrow in one tower – a shooter = skyder in Danish = Skiddy, an old Cork surname traditionally connected with the Danes. In the other tower is a man “in the act of suplication”, or in other words, a monk in the act of prayer. All this hints at one foundation by the men of war, and the other by the men of peace. The two towers are connected by a bridge, with a ship passing underneath. Many of the old seals show a bird in the rigging – probably the Raven, an old Viking symbol. (They used these birds as an aid to navigation).

The earliest reference to the existence of a bridge here was an account of a young student from the Monastery on the hill, the son and heir apparent of the High-king at Tara, who was drowned after falling off the parapet of the bridge of Cork after a night’s amusement in the city. (He was possibly “langers” doing a dare after being in “The Raven”)

Speaking of “langers”, like the city’s arms, this also has a twin origin. It is actually two different words, with two different sources, one native, one possibly Skanadanavian. As to the native source, it may be work noting that, as the local Authorities succeed in their efforts to clear the waters of the river, shoals of mullet are becoming increasingly obvious in recent years. In Irish mullet are called “langairí”, and they spend their time doing nothing in particular except to follow each other around in circles, open eyed and open mouthed. Similarly, when small boys went “on de lang”, avoiding school, following each other around in circles, open



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mouthed, ogling happenings in the city and generally idling, the expression stuck to them. “langaire” → “langerah” → “langer”!!? As to the second source : the Skandanavian word for long is “lang”. The rest I leave to your imagination.

After the **South Gate Bridge** 29 is another weir 28 which helps to retain a certain depth of water above it at low tide. This must have been built in the early 19<sup>th</sup>. century as certain old prints of this area shows it a stony river at low tide, with local women doing their washing in its waters. The south bank is called French’s and Proby’s Quays, with a very interesting place-name in the middle. This is called Keyser’s Hill. Actually it should be spelled “Quay-ser’s” because it means “the way to the quays”. In a house on the left half way up, lived the last of the Flynn brothers until just a few years ago. The place name is one of only a handful of Skandanavian place-names within the city. The others being Cotteren’s Lane and the former Golden Castle, both in ar near Paradise Place (at The Raven).

Keyser’s Hill may not be much to look at today, but it once led to quays serving the old monastery. It also served as a sort of boundary between the native Irish and the Hiberno-Norse settlements within the city. Excavations did not reveal much, but overlooking the whole district looms the gaunt walls of **Elizabeth Fort – Dún Bheití na Muice** R . This fort was built to “overawe the citizens of Cork” in about 1600, and formed the main garrison of English soldiers from then until the time of Napoleon. This fort was built on the site of the church of St. Mary de Nard (Naomh Muire an Áird) otherwise known as Eaglais Croicheanach, or the Church of the Cross, because in its churchyard stood a high Celtic cross. This cross was called in old documents “Cruce de Camelare”. This was possibly derived from the Irish “cam-léire”, hinting at the fact that sailors coming up the South Mall used it as a sort of landmark. Cam-léire roughly translated means “crooked-view”. The high cross stood on the height where the fort wall is now, and it may have lined up (“sort-of”) with the round tower which stood by **St. Fionnbarra’s Cathedral** P further west. Sailors (such as Taidhgín na Cuaiche) navigating their wine-cogs up the South Mall may have looked “skea-ways” at the high cross to help find their way ?

At any rate, the high cross over-looked that area to which it gave its name : Crosses Green Q . This area was once another island, called St. Dominic’s Island. All the streams



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around the island were harnessed at different times for water-power and the earliest mills here probably supplied the student population who attended the ancient monastic school connected with St. Fionnbarra. St. Fionnbarra himself, returning from overseas, probably landed hereabouts at Proby's Quay, as navigation further up river from this point would never have been easy.

The mills functioned here for well over a 1,000 years. Amongst the last to operate here were Harte's Sawmills. One 18<sup>th</sup>. print shows several hooker-like sailing craft lying on the stones over (now closed) brewery, whilst a raft of timber meant for the sawmill floats in mid-stream.

The next Bridge is called **Clarke's Bridge** 27, possibly one of the oldest such structures still in daily use. Nearby was an old march called Oileán na Mulchan, so-called because it used to be frequented by owls. Near the turn of the river is another weir and then the new **St. Fionnbarra'a Bridge** 25. This is a very appropriate name, as it called by very far from the ancient series of fords which crossed all the rivers here before entering the old monastery – the continuation of the Bealach Chonglais to which I referred when dealing with the North Channel.

Another new bridge 23 leads in to the newly reconstructed **River Lee Hotel** O, which was built on the site of the Muskerry Tram light-railway yard. This light-railway served much of West Cork, Blarney, Coachford, Donoughmore etc., but only the two piers of the bridge taking it over to the Western Road remain to show its existence.

Just above these two stumps, is another weir, part of a pair which belonged to the Monastery of Gillabbey. The river-aspect has changed considerably here over the last two hundred years or so. On the south bank immediately above the weir stood 50ft. high limestone cliffs. Perched somewhere on top of these cliffs stood the monastery. Like all the monasteries around the city, it was confiscated after the Reformation. With the passage of time, its buildings fell into ruin, and the stone was salvaged for use elsewhere. When those stones were gone, stone continued to be excavated from the rock underneath, particularly after the siege of Cork



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in 1690. Eventually huge quarries of building stone extended for over a quarter of a mile to where the university now stands.

Amongst the casualties of all these excavations was the famous cave of Uaimh Barra, used by the saint himself for meditation purposes. The cave was described by a French visitor in 1644 as extending far in underground. They were probably water-eroded like many limestone cave and possibly contained many different formations. One of these may even have taken the form of a huge hound, which may have given rise to an ancient Irish story or Saga, called Uath Chonglais, (the Cave of the Grey Hound) now unfortunately lost. This story concerned an ancient wild hunt, originating in Bealach Chonglais (now Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow) and ending in our Bealach Chonglais (here at Cork). As proof of the older story, natives of Cork may once have pointed at the huge rock in the form of the "Grey Hound" within the cave entrance ? I suspect that the entrance to this cave lay where the next bridge **Donovan's Bridge** 21 crosses the river.

After this is a smaller bridge which leads into U.C.C. 20, after which is a pleasant stretch overlooked by the **Glucksman Gallery** M. This appears to have been built on the site of another mill, this one belonging to the Monastery of Gillabbey. Continuing, we can see more of the limestone cliffs. As less quarrying had been carried on at this point, we may get a picture of how the river looked originally, in its natural, tree-covered state.

The next bridge led to the Old Cork Gaol 19, many of whose earliest inmates were incarcerated there for no other reason than the fact that they did not understand English and consequently could not defend themselves in court.

Further along again, one comes to what is the greatest obstacle to the circum-navigation of the city in the form of two very low bridges, 17 and 18. I wonder if the Authorities could be induced to raise them – if only a little bit ? I don't have much to say about the river here except that the limestone rock takes a great deal of water. Some would say that another river Lee runs underground parallel to the visible river. Those engineers who laid the huge pipes of the Cork Main Drainage Scheme here on the south bank should have some light the cast on the problem?



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Above this point the river divides, the southern branch being the natural course of the original river Sabhrann. To the right of the confluence is the next bridge is officially called **O'Neill Crowley Bridge** ⑮, named after another patriot of the Fenian Period. However, it is more commonly known as the Victoria Bridge. This stretch of the river is artificial, in the sense that the waters which flow here were diverted from the main course of the Lee by the man-made stone-structure of the Clochán ⑬. The waters were deliberately diverted here at least from the 12<sup>th</sup>. century, if not earlier, to supply power to all the mills around St. Dominic's Island.

The Clochán, of course, has brought us back to where we started.

Cian Ó Sé,

12ú, Lúnasa, 2010.