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Words from the Editor

In these pages you will find a medley of information pertaining to the "Great Southern Trail and its hinterland. A short history of the Railway era in West Limerick/North Kerry by Dr. Pat O'Connor is complemented with selection of photographs previously unpublished.

A concise gazetteer of the towns and villages en route together with accompanying maps will hopefully whet the reader's appetite to savour the trail. A report on the Environmental Potential of the Trail has been prepared by the eminent Botanist, Gordon D'Arcy and gives particular emphasis to Tullig Wood (near Devon Road) and the Listowel areas.

An overview of the Greenways in Britain, Europe and elsewhere is provided by the experts in the field of Cycle / Walkway design and construction, Sustrans of Bristol.

A summary of the campaign by the Great Southern Trail Action Group to date is included along with an analysis of a survey carried out in summer 1993 in Abbeyfeale, Newcastle West and Rathkeale. This shows great public interest in the development of the Trail.

The Gazetteer, maps and survey have been the work of three most diligent and motivated third-level students: Lorraine Curtin, Michael McCoy and Emer O'Regan who were employed under the Student Summer Jobs scheme in 1993. Thanks are also due to the Department of Social Welfare for sanctioning their employment.

It is the fervent wish of the Action group to be in the position of providing work on the physical development of the Trail in the summer of 1994. To achieve this the support of C.I.E. as well as Limerick and Kerry Councils is essential. The assistance of you, the reader, is also of crucial importance. Help can be given by lobbying politicians, promoting the Trail in the media or by becoming a "Friend of the Great Southern Trail". Contact can be made through Jim McNamara, Lios An Uisce, Newcastle West, Tel: (069) 83114 or Mick Mac Domhnaill, Gort Bui, Newcastle West, Tel: (069) 62597.

The support of our friends in the Galway Leisure Cyclists Group (25 Loughnane Terrace, Mervue, Galway) is much appreciated and we wish them every success in their endeavours. Thanks are also due to Aughinish Alumina for sponsoring the environmental Report and to our other advertisers. Among the photographers are Jonathan Allen, Mike Pierse and the late Frank Tierney. A final word of thanks is due to Denis Buicke of D.B. Printers for his patience and dedication.

Ta suil again to mbainfidh sibhse, na leitheoiri, taitneamh as na leathanaigh seo agus go mbeidh sibh in eineacht linn in ar saothar. Please support our endeavours to provide the Mid-West with a wonderful tranquil amenity, which will benefit all and militate against none.

Liam O'Mahony Editor – May 1994

FOREWORD by Gordon D'Arcy

The notion of a Great Southern Trail is as unique as it is ambitious: there is surely not another 53 miles of ready-made undeveloped amenity elsewhere in the entire country. This linear resource represents an irresistible opportunity for the north Munster region (being less distinguished than much of this richly endowed province). Visitors tend to be attracted to the pretty towns on the main routes or else pass on to enjoy the attributes of the fine coastline nearby. Consequently some of the country's best historical sites such as Rattoo round tower are often bypassed. While Rattoo is some distance away from the Trail there are other historical sites which are not, for example Ardagh, where one of Ireland's most important artefacts was discovered.

Environmental locations of interest like Tullig wood in Limerick and Listowel 'loop' in Kerry are also adjacent to and easily accessed from the Trail. It is this linkage aspect that epitomises the Trail's potential. Nowadays when emphasis is being placed on closer links between E.U. states, between Britain and Ireland, between north and south it is encouraging to see parallels at county and regional level too. Unlike so many rural undertakings, confined as they often are to the enthusiasm and endeavour of separate communities here is a project, which reaches out to an unseen neighbour in a gesture of mutual trust and generosity. The promise of increased prosperity through tourism and related enterprises is not confined to one locality or another but spread via the Trail from the heart of one county into that of the other.

For me, however it is the educational potential of the project that brings it to the fore. I can easily envisage future generations of the youth of Munster utilising this facility both for recreation – on foot, cycling, perhaps even on horseback – and for learning. Already we have seen the beginnings in the inventory of heritage sites compiled in the summer of 1993 by students employed in a research and development scheme (the results are contained within this report). Soon we will be seeing others – scouts, girl guides, youth groups, students from primary to tertiary level, utilising the facility and undertaking myriad research projects yet to be announced.



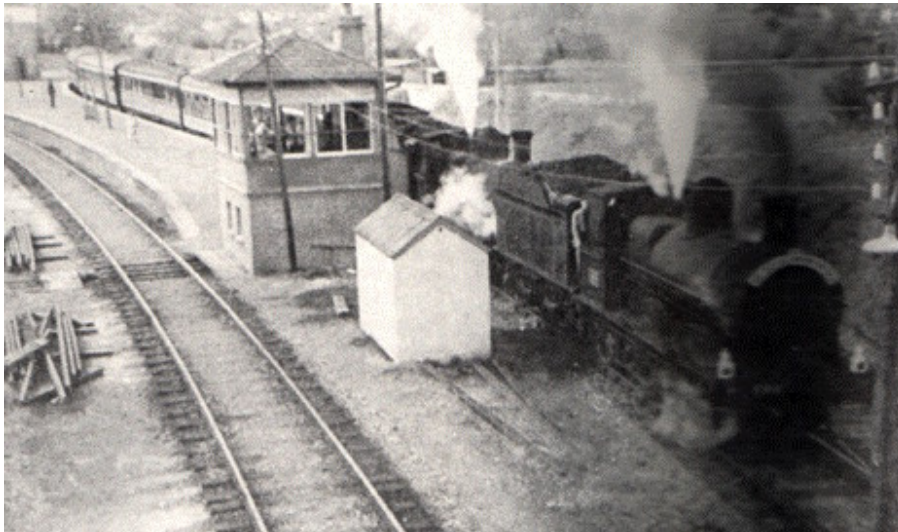
R.T.E. Broadcaster Donncha O Dulaing on the Trail in Ardagh
Sept 1993

The projects already in 'train' for 1994 indicate that the programmed to set on 'track' the development of this great Trail is rapidly gaining in momentum. It is my earnest hope that before any celebrations are underway to mark the end of the present decade, the Great Southern Trail, its various phases of development completed, will be 'up and running' and ready to transport all of us into the new millennium.

Historical Background

The Railway Age

After Limerick city had been connected to the Irish railway system in 1848, the onward link to Tralee was forged in three stages in the period 1858-80. Firstly, in 1858 the Limerick and Foynes Railway commenced operations via Ballingrane. This was followed some three years later by the formation of a company known as the Rathkeale and Newcastle Junction Railway (R. & N.J.R.), which sought to join Newcastle with the Foynes line at Ballingrane. Progress proved slow due in large measure to an insufficiency of financial backing by the English controlled company, and in a belated attempt to expedite the project; a 'completion fund' was launched in November 1865. In less than two months the bulk of the £5,000 necessary for completion was raised locally. Even before its inception therefore, local and regional interests had identified positively with a new railway in the making, and the 10-mile stretch from Ballingrane to Newcastle West was opened for traffic on January 1 1867.



Double Headed Steam Train departs Newcastle West heading for Tralee June 1964. (F. Tierney)

Newcastle remained the terminal station for several years thereafter during which schemes to link Limerick with Tralee via either Foynes or Newcastle were discussed. Eventually, a proposal of 1865 which had been shelved was activated as the Limerick and Kerry Railway (L. & K.R.) and in the closing years of the 1870's the 43 mile section from Newcastle to Tralee via Barnagh was built. It was opened on December 20th. 1880. Among the three companies involved in running and maintaining the line a pattern of divided proprietorship continued through to the new century. Finally, in 1902 the R.& N.J.R. and the L. & K.R. were absorbed into the Great Southern and Western Railway (G.S. & W.R.)

In this century sufficient evidence may be adduced of the capacity of the Limerick – Tralee Railway to serve the needs of the West Limerick /North Kerry region. For example, arising out of the Newcastle West August fair of 1916 over 90 wagons of cattle and sheep were transported to onward destinations by the G.S. & W.R., and at peak four passenger trains and one goods train operated daily to and from Limerick.

However, the early impetus failed to be maintained. Following on the ‘Emergency’ (1939 – 45), operations were scaled down to such an extent that, as we embarked upon the expansive decade of the 1960’s prospects for the railway appeared paradoxically bleak.

Closure & its Aftermath

A decisive blow to viability was struck in 1963 when, apart from occasional specials, passenger services were withdrawn. Further retrenchment followed. In 1972 goods trains ceased running through to Tralee as once again Newcastle reverted to its former role as terminus. After that, closure came in two stages. On October 31st. 1975 the last revenue generating train entered Newcastle with one wagon of cement for a local firm. On January 10th 1977 freight services were withdrawn on the Listowel-Tralee section of the line.

The Post Railway Scene

From until 1987 the line remained in place but unused. Despite the campaign 1977 waged by the Limerick & Kerry Railway Society (founded in 1986) for its continued retention the axe finally fell in November 1987 with the issuing of an Abandonment order by the Board of C.I.E. Lifting of the track commenced in January 1988 and as the lifting progressed interest began to increase in the re-use of the track – bed as a walkway and caravan trail.

Shannon Development undertook research on the feasibility of such an idea and commissioned a major study from Sustrans of Bristol, England. The study recommended the construction of the Great Southern Trail. All appeared to be going well when suddenly in the late spring of 1991 Shannon Development unexpectedly dropped a bombshell – they hadn’t the resources required to continue with the lead role in the project. Their supporting bodies, Limerick and Kerry County Councils were unwilling to take on the leadership role and so a vacuum ensued.

In July of 1991 at a public meeting in Newcastle West the Great Southern Trail Action Group was formed and immediately set to work in highlighting the benefits to the West Limerick/North Kerry communities of the Trail. That year a cycle from Listowel to Rathkeale and back was organised in addition to walks at Listowel and Rathkeale. Cllr. Jim Houlihan, Chairman of Limerick Co. Co. launched an information pamphlet at the Barnagh Gardens in the presence of the Mayor of Limerick, Jim Kemmy.

As 1991 gave way to 1992 the campaign continued with the issuing of an updated report suggesting a more cost effective trail. In effect the trail wouldn't be used by horse drawn caravans as had been planned in 1988. A study of the Flora and Fauna of the Trail was carried out by Mr. Gordon D'Arcy and is published in this journal. However, despite the increased levels of public support and awareness along with the involvement of West Limerick Resources it was still not possible to commence work on rehabilitating the track-bed.

A "Catch 22" situation had arisen. At a meeting attended by the Action Group, Limerick & Kerry Co. Development Officers and Shannon Development the Action Group were advised to develop a pilot stretch of about 1 mile to prove the worth of the project. The County Councils were unwilling to purchase any of the land needed for this pilot stretch although they had bought other stretches of the line for road widening schemes.

Determined to prove their serious intent the Action Group approached C.I.E. and offered to buy not one but eight miles of the line. Here the plot thickened! C.I.E. responded by stating that while they wished the project every success they would not sell to any Community group. (Rathkeale Community Council had a similar reply to an offer of purchase which they have made.) C.I.E. wished to sell to the County Councils and the Councils appeared to be reluctant purchasers. This 1992 scenario is the one still pertaining today.

As 1993 came into view the Action Group still continued the campaign. A stand was taken at the West Limerick Trade Fair in Newcastle West in June. Interest was very high and throughout 1993 several hundred 'Friends of the Trail' enrolled. Hundreds also participated in two separate walks. The first, in August, from Tullig Wood (Templeglantine) to Abbeyfeale was led by Limerick's Mayor Jan O'Sullivan and Abbeyfeale's Cllr. Sean Broderick. The second, in late September from Ardagh to Newcastle West (and back via the Old Mill) was started by Donncha O Dulaing.

This huge increase in public participation in Trail events was mirrored in the responses to a survey carried out in West Limerick by the Action Group. A brief analysis of the survey is to be found further on in these pages.

The present situation is that the Limerick Co. Manager, Mr Micheal Deigan, is in contact with C.I.E. to investigate the possibility of transferring ownership to Community Groups. Should C.I.E. give favourable consideration to the matter then the way would be clear to see work begin. The Action Group has already submitted detailed costings for the project and has applied for 'Leader' funding. For less than the cost of one mile of National Primary Road the Trail could be 'Up and Running'.

Hopefully 1994 will see continued support and increasing interest in this great endeavour.

The Great Southern Trail

BALLINGRANE

STONEVILLE HOUSE:

An early eighteenth century building with courtyard, originally built as a hunting lodge. Features of the house worth seeing are a rare bog oak fireplace and the stony man.

STONY MAN:

A life-sized statue of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire, carved during the late eighteenth century. It is set in the gable end of a building at Stoneville House, and is thought to have decorated the workshop of a silversmith, in association with local mines.

NANTINAN CHURCH:

A nineteenth century Church of Ireland building, in the style of English country parish churches of the Norman period.

ST. JAMES' WELL:

A possible Pre-Christian well, whose waters have been credited with the power to cure certain ailments.

NANTINAN FAIR GREEN:

A Common ground located beside St. James' Well., It has been the site of fairs and occasional faction fights, bloody arguments which sprung up between rival clans or groups.

METHODIST CHURCH:

The Embury Heck Memorial Church. This Church is so named after the two local families, who were a force in establishing American Methodism.

NANTINAN HOUSE:

An old landlord's house, with a nineteenth century main building, and impressive eighteenth century gateway.

RATHKEALE

ST. MARY'S PRIORY:

(Ruins) An Augustinian Priory founded in the thirteenth century and allegedly the site of the working of several miracles by St. Mary the virgin in the fifteenth century.

CASTLEMATRIX:

A fifteenth century tower house with machicoulis and line coursing, lived in at one stage by Walter Raleigh, and visited by the poet Edmund Spenser. It is currently home to the owners' unique collection of antique weaponry.

THE CHINAMAN:

A statue of one Mr. Wongyil, Captain of a Chinese ship, who donated money to the towns people for helping him fight off pirates.

PALATINE CENTRE:

The Rathkeale station house is the display centre of the crafts and culture of the old Palatines. The Palatines were mainly German speaking, Protestant refugees who settled in this area. They occupied small farm houses, developed gardens and orchards, grew flax for spinning and specialised in mixed farming.

RIDDLESTOWN PARK:

Eighteenth Century Landlord's House and Estate.



One of the last Trains in Rathkeale - September 1975

ARDAGH

ARDAGH/REERASTA RINGFORT:

At the edge of the village is the remains of a large and impressive ringfort within which the Ardagh hoard was found.

THE ARDAGH CHALICE:

Part of a hoard of valuable objects discovered in the above fort. It is regarded as the greatest example of metal working of the first millennium A.D.

CAHERMOYLE HOUSE:

A large nineteenth century house built for a member of the Smith O'Brien's a local landowning family. The stonework is particularly worth noting, as it was crafted by the father of the Republican here, Padraig Pearse. Another politician associated with the house was one of its residents, William Smith O'Brien, an avid campaigner for the rights of the Irish people, later deported for rebellion.

RATHRONAN CHURCH & GRAVEYARD:

A Church of Ireland Cemetery and Church. William Smith O'Brien is buried here, in the family vault.

RATHGONAN HOUSE:

Once the home of Colonel Cripps, a land agent for the Smith O'Brien family. It is currently a clubhouse for the newly developed golf course.

DUNGANVILLE RINGFORT:

A double – banked (biavallate) ringfort. It has a wet fosse and souterrains, and is in an excellent state of preservation, located on the edge of a gorge, one mile from Ardagh Village.

BLACKHILL FORT:

The Ballylin Hilltop Fort. The largest hilltop fort known in Ireland, dating from the late Bronze Age. It has double ramparts enclosing over fifty acres of ground, and is 797 feet above sea level.

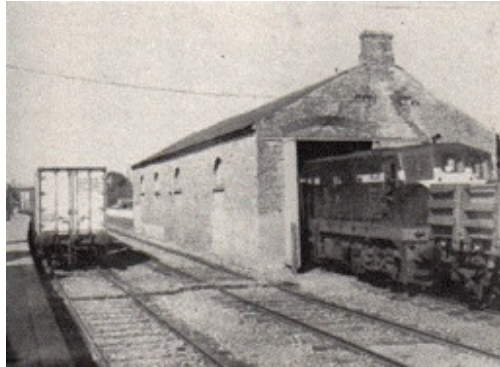
KILSCANNELL CHURCH & GRAVEYARD:

A disused nineteenth century Church of Ireland building and Cemetery near Elm Hill, a ruined house said to be haunted.

SHANAGOLDEN

SHANID CASTLE:

(Ruins) A twelfth century Geraldine castle of unique design, built on an artificial hill and highly regarded by local people. It is reputedly haunted by the last Earl's harper, who betrayed his lord and was hanged from the battlements by the enemy.



Shunting in Newcastle West - 1975

NEWCASTLE WEST

FULLER'S FOLLY:

A nineteenth century castellated building on a bank of the River Arra. It was built by a local tradesman, William Fuller Hartnett, in an attempt to compete with the castle in terms of size and importance.

FAMINE GRAVEYARD:

Victims of the famine were laid to rest in this communal grave. A local artist, Cliodhna Cussen has designed commemorative gates which have been put at the entrance.

THE WORKHOUSE: Now a nursing home, but one the only refuge for many victims of the famine and of poverty.

CARNEGIE LIBRARY:

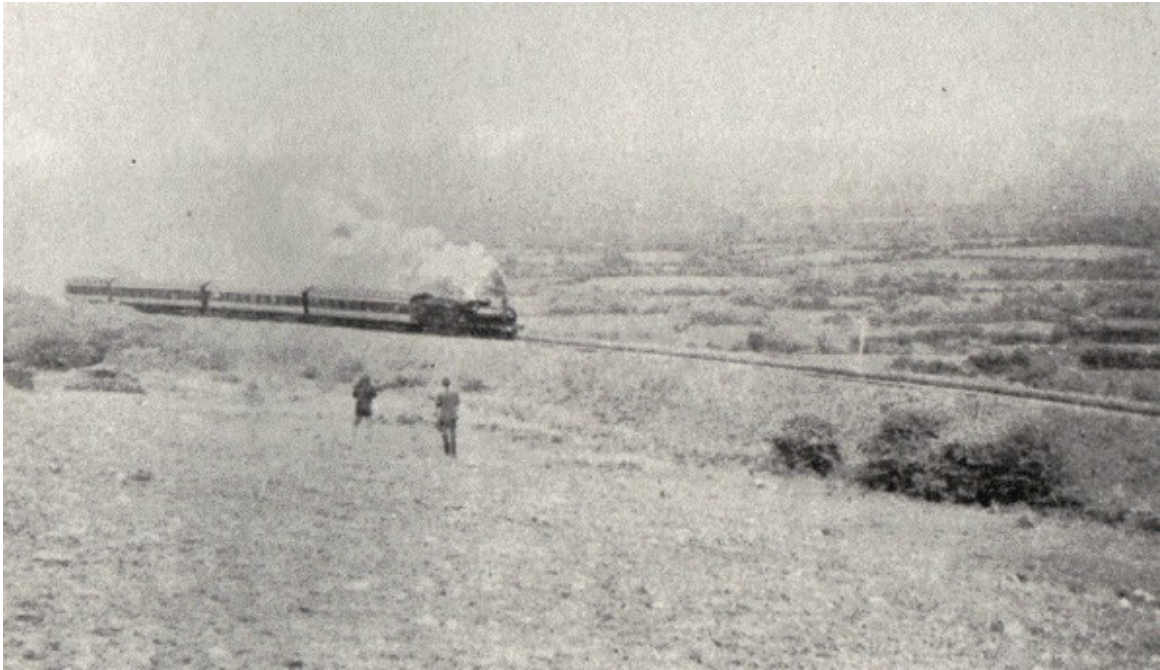
Originally a free library serving the community, before being donated to house a boys secondary school, who have since moved out. The first Sinn Fein court in the country was held in an upstairs room of the building.

DESMOND CASTLE:

A large banqueting hall is what remains of what was once a great estate, the former which is under restoration, and is the focal point of the square. The foundations in front of the hall belong to an old Protestant Church.

THE DEMESNE:

Once the grounds of the Desmond Castle, now a public park with a Community Centre, playing pitches and wooded walks.



The very last Steam Train approaches Barnagh Tunnel in June 1972 - Photographed from the site of Barnagh Gardens

BARNAGH

BARNAGH POINT:

At 538 feet above sea level, this is the highest point of the Irish Railway system, reached through the Barnagh tunnel.

ABBEYFEALE

PURT CASTLE:

(Ruins) A strongly built fourteenth century tower-house on the River Feale. The castle was confiscated from its Norman owner as punishment for marrying an Irish girl, the daughter of a tenant.

WELLESLY BRIDGE:

A large bridge outside the town spanning the Feale.

FR. CASEY'S MONUMENT:

A memorial to Fr. Casey, a formidable figure who lived at the end of the last century. He led his parishioners to fight landlordism, helped to establish the land league, and was later President of Limerick G.A.A. This statue was founded by those he helped in his lifetime.



Fine Stonework in Newcastle West Railway bridge; branch left for Kerry, right for Limerick

Sustrans Builds Roads to Freedom

Habitat destruction, quarrying, global warming and air pollution, oil wars, road casualties – our love affair with the car is for most of us our single most destructive and shameful behaviour. But in Britain Sustrans is building paths for walkers, cyclists and wheelchair users all over the country...

It came as quite a surprise, even after a dozen years of working for cyclists and pedestrians, when in the course of design work for the National Cycle Route we spoke to one of the ferry operators about cycle tourists coming to Britain. "Dutch people", they told us, "often ride the first mile down the main road, realise there **are** no cycle paths, get straight back on the boat and go home."

They would, wouldn't they? Almost one journey in three in The Netherlands is made by bike (although the Dutch Government fears that car traffic is still growing too fast, and plans to increase cycle use by a further 30%) and you can get almost anywhere by safe, car-free routes. Whole schools arrive by bike: it's the normal way to go shopping or get to work.

In Denmark, the Government recently opened a 3,000 km cycle path network. Even in car-crazed Germany, more than four times as many people cycle as here, and many towns, with full scale cycle path networks, have up to 50% of journeys by bike. This is not just less dangerous, quieter and better for the environment: people who regularly cycle or walk are fitter, healthier better workers and have better mental health. How about that?

In Britain, cycle route construction, as so many other areas of work, is left to the voluntary sector. Sustrans, formed in 1979 by civil engineer John Grimshaw, picked up the challenge. And some challenge: building, to date, over 450 kilometres of paths (and to design and promote 50 more) has meant raising millions in sponsorship and grants, finding thousands of volunteers, and entering into literally hundreds of leases and licences with landowners, utilities and local authorities.

The present may be bleak, but Sustrans sees a positive future. There is now a queue of local authorities seeking advice and guidance on how cycle facilities can help solve their ever-worsening traffic problems. Path construction is underway in Devon, Avon, Sussex, Wiltshire, Essex, Derbyshire, Yorkshire, Cumbria, Tyneside, Lothian and Strathclyde, with a number of other projects due to begin next year. Perhaps more important, individuals and groups right across the country are campaigning hard for local projects, and for a balanced, less destructive transport policy, while our contacts with Government have seen a relaxation in Department of Transport funding criteria, and new town planning guidelines from the Department of the Environment, which should produce an improvement in local cycling facilities.

Sustrans is also active abroad, providing technical assistance for projects getting underway across Spain and supplying information for people working to develop cycle routes in Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, USA, France and Belgium. If the Great Southern Trail isn't built soon, Ireland will be lagging behind even England. Is that possible? Surely not.

So don't chuck out the old bike just yet. Join us, lobby national and local politicians, pump up your tyres and leave your car at home...

For more information about Sustrans contact Philip Insall at 35 King Street, Bristol, BS1 4DZ. Please send a donation if you can to cover the cost.



Loco '186' taking water at Newcastle West en route to Tralee –1972

LISTOWEL

MEDIEVAL CASTLE:

The front of the castle faces onto the square. The entire structure once extended to the river but the rear has since been demolished. Two square towers facing the front are connected by an arch. A stone projects from the wall bearing a sculptured face.

LARTIGUE MONORAIL:

This unusual rail system had its starting point in Listowel, running for nine miles to Ballybunion, transporting goods, cattle and more infrequently, passengers.

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH:

Built in the later English style with a square tower and spire, this structure stands in the middle of the square. It has been converted to a small theatre and tourist office.

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH:

This church has a cruciform structure with portico, whilst the interior has an attractive altar piece.

STONE BRIDGE:

A five arched structure spanning the river Feale.

FINUGE

TEACH SIAMSA:

A rural folk theatre workshop, with shows regularly staged by those who study at the centre. Traditional customs of the area are explored and explained through music, dance, poetry and various other media.

LIXNAW

AGRICULTURAL MUSEUM

The museum houses and exhibition covering a wide agricultural history of farming in North Kerry. The collection contains a unique range of farm implements from past generations.

CASTLE OF LIXNAW(Ruins) A castellated mansion built by an Earl of Kerry.

CHURCH

An ordinary Parish Chapel with an extraordinary altar painting of the crucifixion.

MAUSOLEUM

Located near the castle, this vault also belonged to the Earls of Kerry. It is a circular monument on a square base, terminating in a dome.

BALLYDUFF

RATTOO ROUND TOWER & ABBEY

The abbey is in a ruined state, but the tower has its own prominence as it is in excellent repair and clothed with ivy.

ABBEYDORNEY

CISTERCIAN ABBEY:

(Ruins) An old Abbey founded in the 12th Century.

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH:

Built in 1826 in the later English style, there is on the exterior, a handsome edifice fronted with stone. The interior is spacious with an attractive altar piece and painting.

ARDFERT

ARDFERT ABBEY:

A wide-eaved mansion, once the home of the family of a Bishop, Dr. J. Crosbie. The house was destroyed during the reign of Cromwell by the Irish, and was rebuilt and modernised in 1720 by the then owner. It now houses a large private library and a collection of portraits.

FRANCISAN ABBEY:

(Ruins) Once cruciform in shape, with a nave, tower, choir, a chapel refectory and a cloister running alongside the latter. The choir was lit by nine lancet windows. The chapel, with its large window, was connected to the nave by three pointed arches resting on massive circular columns.

ARDFERT CATHEDRAL:

(Ruins) Currently under restoration. This 13th Century Cathedral was dedicated to St. Brendan, a statue of whom stands in a niche. The fragmentary Hiberno-Romanesque front once contained an arcade of five bays, of which the central bay is the doorway. The Choir is also lit by nine lancet window, and has a small chapel leading off of it. Destroyed in the war of 1641, the fifteenth century transept was repaired for the purpose of housing ceremonies of Divine service.

ARDFERT MONASTERY:

A sixteenth century monastery founded by St. Brendan, it was finally demolished in the twelfth century after constant destruction. The cathedral was built on this site, where it was believed miracles were performed.

Report on the Environmental Potential of the Great Southern Trail, CO'S. Limerick and Kerry

INTRODUCTION

The function of this report is to assess the viability of the environmental aspects of the Great Southern Trail which runs for some 53 miles (80 km) from Ballingarrane junction in County Limerick approximately westwards to Tralee in County Kerry. In view of the brevity of the period of investigation (three days), it has been necessary to make some generalized comments. The recommendations, though perhaps relevant over other sections of the Trail, apply specifically to the stretches visited (a) in the vicinity of Newcastle West (Limerick) and (b) Listowel (Kerry). The reasons for highlighting and

concentrating investigation there was both as a consequence of the attractive of the localities and of the enthusiasm of their local advocates. It should be stated, however, that neither locality is listed in the Areas of Scientific Interest Inventory first compiled by An Foras Forbatha (1972) or the latest update by the Wildlife Service, O.P.W. (1989).

(a) Limerick Sites

Several stretches of the Trail were investigated between Abbeyfeale and Rathkeale. In three instances, a reasonable length (a mile or more) of the disused railway was walked and an inventory of the flora and fauna noted en route. Due to the time of the year (mid-May) and the favourable weather conditions experienced, it was possible to compile a realistic assessment of the degree of importance of the ecology in each case. Each of the stretches inspected had commendable (if unremarkable) ecological diversity: Barnagh Gap, for instance, with its fifty foot high embankments, tunnel and undisturbed habitats was interesting for ferns and other damp-habitat flora, for probable breeding ravens and for hibernating bats (2nd hand information). In addition, the old railway building had nestling swallows and jackdaws. More than a dozen species of birds and thirty plants were observed in this stretch of the Trail which is also broadly interesting due to its unusual form. It had detrimental aspects though mainly as a result of being completely blocked by the infill for the new road at Barnagh. Also it is difficult of access due to accumulated rainfall.

A stretch of approximately a mile in length was walked from the town of Newcastle West, northwards on the afternoon of May 16th along with a group of interested participants. This stretch was environmentally attractive in a number of respects: the entrance avenue with its planted cork oaks; the abandoned railway station occupied by summer birds such as swifts; the whitethorn hedgerows on either side of the railway which supported a rich insect fauna and ground flora of attractive wild plants; the stream over which the Trail passed about a mile from the town (unfortunately somewhat polluted – runoff from adjacent farmland?).

Despite the obvious environmental potential of both of the aforementioned stretches of the Trail, the mile-long portion containing Tullig wood, some eight miles to the south west of Newcastle West, is considered to have the most potential of the three. This, combined with the delightful ambience of wood with nearby river, renders it worthy of detailed consideration. There cannot be many such attractive natural corridors along the length of the Trail: those that exist deserve conservation and sensitive amenity development.

Tullig wood

Tullig wood is not particularly extensive (area 10 acres?) but the canopy of mature oaks, beech and ash with occasional elms is mature and with well developed understorey and ground layer. Some of the larger trees may be more than one hundred years old. Unfortunately, the woodland has been depleted in recent years by random felling: it is vital if the environmental potential is to be realized that such reduction of the woodland

ceases. On the positive side, natural regeneration of the main canopy species was noted during the course of the field investigation.

The understorey comprises mainly whitethorn, blackthorn, bramble and willow in the wetter patches. The ground storey (herb layer) includes woodrush, bracken, bluebells and wood sage – plants that would point to the ancientness of the woodland in that location – before the invasion of planted species such as beech and sycamore. In places, particularly along the wood's steep bank to the river, the shrub layer is non-existent thus providing fine open views of carpets of bluebells, etc.

The Carboniferous limestone of the ballast of the old line provides a linear habitat for lime-loving species such as Slender St. John's wort, Hart's tongue fern, Herb Robert and others. No species of particular rarity was noted, but the diversity, both of plant associations and of species in general, suggested an interesting flora. The inventory of some fifty of the more obvious plants noted represents only a fraction – perhaps a third – of the flora present.

The same might be said of the fauna. The nineteen bird species listed are probably breeding in the locality; added to migrants and winter visitors, the habitat could be expected to contain forty or fifty species if regularly watched.

The winter birdlife would be radically different from that of the summer and would, undoubtedly, include such visitors as redwings, fieldfares and woodcock. The station buildings at the south-western end of the stretch under consideration have a charm which complements that of the wood itself. The adjacent open countryside with its fine open view of the meandering river supply an extra dimension to the overall potential. Indeed, the disused station buildings, a few hundred yards from the prominent road junction at Devon Filling Station on the main road, would be the ideal starting (and advertising) point for this segment of the trail.

Other local considerations

In the event of the future development of the entire Trail, it would be necessary to incorporate aspects of environmental interest such as wildlife habitats and other places of heritage interest (archaeological sites) into the Trail itinerary. These 'special' features need not lie directly adjacent to the Trail: they would, however, need to be within reasonable walking distance (two miles?) of the Trail to be reasonably worthy of consideration. Such features would be signposted at intervals along the Trail with essential interpretative details available either in the form of material on site or in printed handouts. Two such sites were visited on Saturday, May 16th: (i) an extensive area of blanket bog between Barnagh Gap and Newcastle West and (ii) an archaeological site at Ardagh. Though requiring a fair expenditure of energy to explore this bogland, presently being utilized both for turbarry and for forestry plantation, its inclusion on the Trail's itinerary would undoubtedly prove useful to a minority of Trail users – particularly overseas visitors. The site at which the famous Ardagh chalice was found some one hundred and fifty years ago is, unfortunately, of little value now and represents a lost

opportunity. The present-day paucity of site information, the destruction of the site's ring fort and the unsightly juxtaposition of a large concrete water tank, effectively destroy the site's potential.

In order that the existing potential of wildlife and heritage features be maximized, it would be necessary to draw up a map and list indicating the significance and proximity of all such sites in regard to the entire Trail. Non-inclusion in state lists of, for instance, areas of scientific interest of County archaeological inventories, should not preclude them from being listed as feature of the Trail. Topographical features, such as small lakes, fens, rock outcrops, quarries and disused mills, old stone outbuildings, etc., may be worthy of consideration.

(b) Kerry sites

A stretch of the Great Southern Trail at Listowel, Co. Kerry was investigated on May 19th. Beginning at the disused railway station at the northern side of the town, the Trail was followed eastwards for more than 1 and a half miles. Access was abandoned where the railway cutting continued beneath the main Listowel-Abbeyfeale road (water had accumulated on the route making passage difficult) but was regained at a point some ½ mile further on, adjacent to the property of Mr. D. Stack near Bolton's Cross.

The initial stretch contained an interesting mixture of both flora and fauna and was a pleasant walk, but was no more important than other segments visited. The housing development along a sizeable part of the open land to the south of the Trail did not obtrude due to the shield provided by the thick hedging. The environmental attributes increase considerable with the proximity of the woodland on its southern side. Though the trail itself is on 'the flat', the woodland mantles the slopes of a high embankment – obviously the water-eroded bank of the much larger, post-glacial River Feale. This woodland widens out to an area of some 30 acres (12 ha.) between the Trail and the River opposite the Ballinruddery estate providing a most significant environmental feature in the neighbourhood. Indeed, the combination of both the eastward running Trail and the westward running River provide the basic elements for a most attractive walking 'loop' which begins and ends at Listowel.

This loop, particularly that of the return section, passes through rich floral and faunal habitats: both woodland and river are of high environmental potential.

The woodland structure is typical of mixed hardwoods elsewhere in the region with stands of mature oak, ash and some elm – probably representative of the original woodland cover before the establishment of the demesnes. However, the abundant beech, sycamore and exotic conifers are relatively recent invaders – probably from the adjacent Ballinruddery estate. Understorey shrubs comprised whitethorn, blackthorn, holly, elder, and several others. The herb layer was dominated by an assemblage which included wild garlic, wood rush, pignut and relatives. Bluebells were dominant in a few places also.

Many species of birds were noted including a singing blackcap, a scarce warbler in the west of Ireland. The song bird community was, in general, impressive with warblers, finches, thrushes and tits all holding territory throughout the wood.

Forage marks on the woodland floor and animal 'trackways' indicated that the woods were occupied by both foxes and badgers. (Undoubtedly by a number of other mammals besides).

The riverside walk which links with the Trail alongside the gully formed by a small stream is both picturesque and environmentally interesting. The mature hardwoods of the main woodland give way to alders, birch and willows along the banks of the Feale. These trees in their riverside location support a rich flora of lichens – particularly foliose (*Parmelia* spp.) and fruticose (*Usnea*, *Evernia* spp.), clear indicators of the unpolluted aerial conditions prevalent. The flora of the riverbank is attractive. It comprises such colourful flowers as red campion, bugle, bluebells, meadowsweet, etc.

Only seven species of butterflies were noted but, judging from the abundance and diversity of hoverflies, bees, damsel flies, there are bound to be considerably more – perhaps twice that number.

The riverside birdlife was mainly comprised of insect-eaters; swallows, warblers, wagtails. Seed-eaters included, predictably, the reed-bunting. Though true river birds, the heron, the dipper, the kingfisher, the grey wagtail were not seen on the day, there can be little doubt that the river supports them.

Mammals such as the otter and the mink are obvious inhabitants of a fish-gilled river like the Feale (mink droppings were found during the course of the investigation).

Summary and conclusions

The environmental aspects relating to the potential development of the Great Southern Trail appear to have a largely local emphasis. For much of its route, the trail passes through pleasant Munster countryside which is generally of limited environmental significance. However, the continuous, luxuriantly verdant hedgerows with accompanying wildlife, a sheltered 'microclimate' for much of the Trail, provides an environmental immediacy – once prevalent in many Irish bohoreens: now a rapidly diminishing resource. It is, nevertheless, the landscape irregularities or anomalies which provide most of the natural history interest along the Trail. Primary habitats are provided by the rare situations in which mature woodland either flanks or adjoins the route: these are normally the richest and most precious environmental conditions. Scrubland is of much less significance, most of the species occurring interspersed throughout the flanking hedgerows.

Wetlands in the form of fens and marshes appear to be unusually scarce along the Trail, reflecting, perhaps, the long period of concentrated agricultural development in north Kerry and Limerick. There are one or two small lakes but their interest would appear to

be peripheral (on the basis of the limited period of fieldwork). It may be possible to include them as signposted features worthy of a visit for Trail users, but they would need to be further investigated in this context. Certainly, the larger areas of blanket or raised bogland could be utilized thus – as large multi-use resources provided they are reasonably accessible from the Trail. As suggested earlier in the text, heritage sites in general should be incorporated into the overall scheme. Often, in fact, archaeological sites are also interesting for their natural history: owls and other birds of prey habitually nest in old castles, badgers and bats utilize souterrains, and so on. It is necessary in these instances to sensitively interpret the sites for visitors. Succinct on site documentation is probably the best way of achieving this: alternatively, it should be at least mentioned in a brochure relating to the socio-historical aspects of such places.

Recommendations

It is recommended that two pilot schemes be undertaken with a view to highlighting the environmental potential of the Great Southern Trail: one, approximately 1 and a half miles long, the Tullig wood section in County Limerick; the other, the Listowel section, an approximate three mile loop in County Kerry. Both schemes could (should?) be undertaken simultaneously in order to demonstrate the environmental potentiality of the entirety. This would have the effect of highlighting the cross-country cooperation. The success of these widely separated enterprises would augur well for grant and sponsorship efforts necessary for the development of the remainder of the Trail.

The Tullig wood section would require, in reality, minimal development – the basics are already extant. It would be necessary to define the section at start and finish with a logo (perhaps an oak leaf motif on a plaque or a post). In addition, some uncomplicated form of interpretation would be desirable. It might be possible to produce this inexpensively on a handout leaflet to be obtained from the reconstituted ruined station building at the section's western end. Obviously, the practicality of such a scheme would depend on local cooperation. Some simple advertising would be necessary – perhaps at the Devon Filling Station on the main road: perhaps also a discrete wooden signpost at the roadside.

The labour required would be of such a minor nature that it would probably be undertaken by voluntary enterprise. Otherwise a FAS scheme. Local recognition might be obtained through sponsored walking and cycling events involving this section of the Trail which might have the effect of helping with costs.

Schools in the vicinity of Newcastle West should be encouraged to use the section for educational outings. Children of National School age are particularly responsive to nature and the Trail with its interpretative material would provide a valuable resource in this regard. School projects might be devised which would prove not only beneficial to the children but also the Trail section itself in that they would act as year by year monitors of the 'state of health' of the wood and its hinterland.

The second pilot scheme at Listowel would, due to its larger scale, require more comprehensive developmental work for its establishment. Its potential, however, due to

its proximity to the town of Listowel, is considerably greater than the County Limerick project. Due to the fact that it begins and ends in widely separated parts of Listowel, its two-way potential is maximized – both the Trail itself and the river walk have attractive starting points. At present, there is no defined connection between the Trail and the riverside walk though the muddy path alongside the stream gully suggests its use for this purpose. Assuming landowner cooperation and no Right of Way prohibition, it would be necessary to construct a proper gravelled path from the Trail, through the wood and along the entire length of the riverbank to the entrance/exit point near Gurtenard. This path should be at least 1 metre wide; made of angular stone chippings (3/4" down to dust), blinded and rolled in situ. The path itself should be contoured through the wood so that gradients are nowhere steeper than 1 : 4. It will be necessary to provide piped drainage beneath this pathway at strategic points to protect the surface from runoff. This constructional work could be carried out under a supervised FAS scheme and might employ a dozen youths over a period of some weeks. Materials could be transported along the Trail itself for dispersal along the route; this would minimize damage and disturbance. Normal contract costs would be irrelevant in this case. Overall costings would be possible only after consultation with FAS and account had been taken of possible sponsorship and available grants.

As in the case of the County Limerick section, an interpretative pamphlet or handout would be necessary to itemize the natural features of the walk. This could be divided into three sections: the open Trail; the woodland; the riverside walk. The characteristic flora and fauna should be listed in each case. There is the possibility that the disused railway station at the start of the Trail could be developed into a heritage centre covering not only the historical aspects of the railway but also the natural history of the circuit. This should be considered as a future, second phase development to the circuit. This should be considered as a future, second phase development to the circuit construction itself.

The Listowel project, situated at it is on the town's edge would have considerable tourist ramifications besides being important for the local community. It might, for instance, be utilized by participants on the Listowel's writers week and other events on the town's social calendar.

As in the case of the County Limerick project, it would become an important educational resource for local schools. The circuit configuration would render the loop accessible to schools from both within and outside the town. The diversity of habitat represented would suggest greater involvement from secondary schools might be the case at Tullig wood, but the same general benefits, both to the pupils and to the resource itself, should accrue.

Such heavy usage would warrant frequent waste disposal facilities, adequately interpreted stopping points, picnic tables and other amenities so that the high environmental quality might be maintained.

Gordon D'Arcy June '92

SURVEY ON RECREATION

Carried out on a random sample in Abbeyfeale/Newcastle West/Rathkeale during August 1993

285 people were surveyed

1. A Do you consider walking, cycling, running or Horse riding pleasurable pastimes?

Yes _____ No _____

1. B If yes which do you prefer

A. WALKING B. CYCLING C. RUNNING D. RIDING Answer: _____

(If the answer to question 1 is YES continue with questions, if No go to question 6.)

2.A Do you regularly exercise in this area? YES _____ NO _____

2.B If YES do you take part

A. ALONE B. WITH FAMILY C. WITH FRIENDS _____

2.C How often do you Walk/Cycle/Run/Ride

A. DAILY B. WEEKLY C. LESS FREQUENTLY

3. Is the route you take located in the

A. TOWN B. COUNTRY C. BOTH

4. Is it in your opinion safe all year round YES _____ NO _____

5. On you (Walk/Cycle/Run/Riding) what features do you consider most important?

A. REST FACILITIES B. LANDSCAPE C. CLEAN AIR D. TRANQUILITY

6. If there were a safe & scenic route available to you for walking, cycling, running etc. would you avail of it? YES _____ NO _____

7. Would you consider an Activity Holiday? YES _____ NO _____

8. Do you think there is enough being done by local authorities to promote the Tourism

Industry in this region? YES _____ NO _____

9. Have you heard of the Great Southern Trail? YES _____ NO _____

If yes what are your views?

TOTAL RESULTS

OF GREAT SOUTHERN TRAIL SURVEY

Total Surveyed – 285 The following are what we consider the most important statistics gained from our survey.

- 1. Of those surveyed 92% considered Walking, Cycling, Running and Horse riding worthwhile activities. Of the above WALKING was by far the most popular.**
- 2. 59% of those surveyed exercise regularly. Most of those (51%) prefer to exercise with others.**
- 3. Country Routes were by far the most popular (39%). With an additional (19%) combining town and country routes.**
- 4. Of those surveyed 51% considered the route they take safe.**
- 5. Clean Air and Tranquility were the most important features of a recreational route.**
- 6. When offered the choice of a safe and scenic route for exercise 91% said they would avail of such a facility.**
- 7. 69% said they would consider an activity holiday.**
- 8. Of those surveyed 85% did not think there is enough being done for tourism in the Limerick Area.**
- 9. The Great Southern Trail was familiar to 50% of those surveyed.**

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