

# Great Southern Trail

ADDRESS by Liam O'Mahony, Cathaoirleach, on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2004;  
the occasion of the official Opening of the Walkway along the former  
Newcastle West to Ardagh, Co. Limerick railway route.



**CUTTING THE TAPE: Liam O'Mahoney, Tom Finn and Mike MacDomhail at the opening.**

A cháirde uilig idir Cléir agus Tuatha ; tá failte romhaibh chun an ócáid stairiúil seo ina bhfuilimid ag chur tús oifigiúil ar an siúlóid nua atá anseo anois in áit an sean iarnróid. Ón bhlian 1867 tá usáid baint as an slí seo i seirbhís an phobal; i dtosach chun iompair earraí, ainmhí agus paisnéirí ar na traenacha agus anois chun láthair speisialta,ciúin,a chur ar fáil mar ionad chaitheamh aimsire dos na gnáth daoine.

This corridor was used by trains from 1867 until 1975 and subsequently up to the mid 1980's the tracks remained ready for re-use should the need arise. Some of us here today were active at that time in seeking the retention of the rails and the re-utilisation of the route for commuters and tourists. However, other counsel prevailed in the form of the road lobby, and

this line was sacrificed to accommodate the Rathkeale By-pass for about 1km of its length. History can make its own judgment on the wisdom of that decision.

Then in 1988 Shannon Development promoted the concept of the Great Southern Trail (GST), a novel and innovative idea. It would have included a craft centre in the old station buildings in Newcastle West; along with walkers, cyclists and horse caravans using the 53 miles of the corridor from Ballingrane to Tralee. However, by 1991 this scheme was abandoned by Shannon for reasons which have never been fully explained. It looked increasingly likely that the railway lands would be sold piecemeal to the adjoining landowners.

Thankfully a body of concerned individuals was determined to make a final effort to preserve the integrity of this public amenity ; knowing that if disposed of it would be well nigh impossible to reconnect the pieces of the jigsaw again. On 4th July, 1991 about 50 people met at the Newcastle West Parish Hall and the GST Action Group was born.

All through that summer of thirteen years ago contact was made with officialdom/politicians throughout the region. Visits were made to meetings of Listowel Urban District Council and Kerry County Council whose remit covered about half of the railway route. To the forefront in all of these endeavours was the late Paddy McCormack, Consultant Engineer and our faithful advisor and advocate. Paddy is surely smiling down on us today . The initial phase of the campaign culminated in the launch of a promotional leaflet on the 31st August, 1991 at a ceremony in the Barnagh Gardens. Jim Houlihan, Chairman, Limerick County Council and the late Jim Kemmy Mayor of Limerick were the special guests and they led almost one hundred people in a walk along the length of the Barnagh Tunnel and its approaches.

From that day to this the campaign of walking and talking has continued. It has had its ups and downs and at times the going was tough. But, as the years went by a growing awareness among the people of the benefits of rail-trails could be sensed. Its availability as a traffic free recreation route capable of safe utilisation by young and old, able and less able, was being recognised. Happily, today the GST is officially taking its place amongst the communities of World Rail -Trails and a new amenity is being made accessible to our people.

We would request that all trail users respect the privacy of adjoining landowners and not to trespass on their lands or to be anti-social in any way. For the landowners this is a new experience and one which they are entitled to be wary of. Their co-operation is greatly appreciated and for our

part we can only promise to be vigilant in ensuring that mis-conduct does not occur on the trail. We know that the Gardaí are with us in monitoring the corridor and hopefully any unsavoury incidents will be nipped in the bud.

We also thank Limerick County Council and FAS for their combined efforts in developing the entrance to the Trail. We thank the Heritage Council for the continued assistance towards works at Barnagh Tunnel, another location at which we are working. Our first state support towards developing the GST was from the Student Summer Job Scheme in the 1990's. In fact Michael Woods, when Minister for Social Welfare, walked the length of the trail at this location in 1994. The work commenced by enthusiastic students was continued by International Conservation Volunteers and brought to completion by Leens Plant Hire for whom no challenge was too daunting. These extensive works could not have been undertaken without the support of West Limerick Resources Limited. Their grant under the National Regional Development Programme which is part of the National Development Plan 2000-2006 has been invaluable. These funds were provided in part by the Irish Government and in part by the EU. We hope that there is more to follow as we are not finished yet even though about 100,000 euro has been spent on bringing us this far. We hope that it has been money well spent.

Those who have internet facilities should look up [www.southerntrail.pro.ie](http://www.southerntrail.pro.ie) To see what has been achieved in other Countries throughout the E.U., North America and Australia and New Zealand. In the U.S.A. alone over 12,000 miles of rail-trails have been developed since Shannon Development first mooted the GST.

The internet will hopefully be an incentive to overseas visitors to include West Limerick/North Kerry in their itineraries. The rail-trail is of interest to heritage, environmental and leisure tourists who want to explore quieter parts of our land. The fact that our website has clocked up 11,500 "hits" is surely indicative of the wide appeal of this amenity.

The "web" is one means of communicating our message but we have also benefited from the support of the print media who along with local and national radio as well as a number of t.v. channels, have ensured that GST has been well marketed. Media coverage has also resulted in excellent turnouts for our events whether they be nostalgic film shows of railway interest, launches of ecological studies, guided nature walks or tours to visit similar trails elsewhere in Ireland, Belgium or Germany.

Of course none of this would even have happened if CIE hadn't kept faith and steadfastly refused to dispose of their "North Kerry" Railway despite coming under very severe pressure to do so. I am sure that at times the

words "North Kerry" and "GST" brought beads of perspiration to some of the Property Management Section. The laying of the Esat telecommunications cable along the line in 1999 helped to ease the situation. This combined with a visionary decision to of the CIE Board to support the concept of walking had led to today. Therefore the presence of Tom Finn, Strategic Planning Manager, Iarnród Éireann is most appropriate and it is fitting that he is doing the honours. Tá fáilte is fiche romhat, Tom.

I have deliberately omitted naming those who have laid the groundwork for today's celebration but you can be assured that we are all most grateful for your efforts. I am particularly conscious that our campaign over the past thirteen years could never have advanced to what we are witnessing today without the dedication and commitment of a broad grouping of likeminded, dedicated people. I have already mentioned the figure of 100,000 euro spent on the material development of the walkway. However, no value can be put on the immense amount of voluntary work expended over the years. Therefore, you call all feel justifiably proud, as proud as I am, of our collective endeavours. But don't relax too much because this is only the end of Phase 1. There is a further 45 miles out there. Ná déan dearmad ar an sean-fhocal "Tosach maith, leath na h-oibre".

When the proceedings have concluded you are all invited to the grounds of the restored Newcastle West Station House for some refreshments. The owners, Don & Jan Quin -Freyberg have kindly made their property available to us. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.