

# Great Southern Trail - The October 2003 Newsletter

## TRAIN OF THOUGHT *by Garry McMahon*



As a native of the town of Listowel where the famous Lartigue monorail ran to Ballybunion in the earlier years of the twentieth century, and having travelled on a steam engine train myself over the years, I suppose it is only natural that I would, to this day, have an enduring interest in railways and in trains. It is indeed heartening to see the recreation of the Lartigue Railway in my home town even if only for a short distance. Though in operation only this year it has had a hugely auspicious beginning.

## Southern Trail Christmas Card 2003

As an eighteen year old student in 1955 I headed off from Listowel for the Big Smoke to commence my legal studies. The steam engine train was the mode of conveyance and there was a big family ceremony as I was accompanied to the station to see me off for my great adventure. The train pulled in right opposite the large raised tank and was filled with water to provide the steam to drive the engine and turn the wheels. The carriages consisted of self contained compartments. No access along the train was possible, so one had to ensure that bladder and bowel were emptied prior to the journey otherwise one would have an anxious time in a station along the way in case the train pulled out in the middle of ablutions.

I remember my late father telling me of an adventurous train journey he had in 1926 when he went to Dublin to see Kerry and Kildare playing in the All Ireland Football final. He recalled how himself and some other high blooded youths blackguarded a

venerable old gentleman on the train on the way down. This person, however, proved to be made of stern stuff and won them over, to such an extent, that when they reached the station in Rathkeale the young ruffians, being so full of admiration for him, shouldered him out of the station where he proceeded to give an impromptu speech from the pier of the gate. This person my father in time found out to be the late D. J. Madden of Rathkeale, a well known politician and noted orator of his time.

He also told me that on the same occasion when they were leaving Rathkeale Station they saw the glow in the Southern sky which they after learned came from the catastrophic fire in Dromcollogher Cinema in which up to thirty eight people perished.

In those days of it was always wise to sit with one's back to the engine. If the window was opened and let down a notch or two, on the big leather strap, there was a danger if you were sitting facing the engine that smuts from the fire would get into your eye, a not uncommon occurrence.

In 1961 when I came to Newcastle West to start my legal practice I travelled by steam train and vividly recall the journey through the tunnel in Barna, which was slightly unnerving for a little while until the train emerged out in to the daylight again. I remember an old resident of Templeglantine telling me of a neighbour of his in the Barna area who was going to America, a daunting journey to undertake at the time, as may considered they would never return again. Rather than boarding the train at Barna, the station nearest his home, he went back as far as Devon Road Station so that he could bid his last farewell to the length and breadth of his native Parish rather than leave from its perimeter. A touching tale indeed.

When we were still under British rule Paddy the porter at Listowel Station was under orders that if a parcel came for the Big House that he would immediately have to deliver it (one imagines in a horse and long car which conveyance I remember myself

delivering goods around the town decades later). At all events, one hot July day Paddy hit off for the Cooke household in Tanavalla outside Listowel. When he arrived he took down the big parcel from the long car and rang the bell. Mrs Cooke answered herself with two King Charles spaniels at heel. Paddy heaved in the big parcel and laid it down inside in the drawing room and was asked by the lady of the house which would he prefer whiskey or brandy. With his tongue out Paddy replied "Brandy mam". One can only imagine his chagrin when the response came "you are quite right he is much the nicer dog"!

The steam train has always evoked romantic pictures in the world of Balladry and I often think of the wonderful description in the Boston Burglar which goes –

"they put me on an East bound train, one cold December day,  
and every station I passed by you could hear the people say,

there goes the Boston Burglar in cold chains he is bound, for one  
crime or another he is bound for Charlestown"

I also recall another ballad of D.J. Allman who was shot at Headford Station near Rathmore, County of Kerry, in the War of Independence –

"who stood upon the platform bold and fired the signal gun, who  
fought and died for Ireland it was you my darling son" (who remembers the transferred epithet from the English grammar days i.e. "platform bold"?) Of course the most wonderful couplet of all occurs in the ballad The Vales of New Direen –

"and now to conclude these ill penned lines for fear I might be  
late, the morning train leaves Ardagh at twenty five past eight"

I myself have entered in the train/ballad territory with a recent composition –

"Oh the Summers were fine and the bright sun did shine, In those  
days of my youth I now fondly recall,

The songs and the stories, the hard earned glories, I gleaned with  
my trusty camán,

My dear parents' faces, the trip to the races, On the line to  
Listowel in the steam engine train, As the leaves keep on falling,  
sweet voices are calling,

Come back to Newcastle again!"

I congratulate the Great Southern Trail Group on the Herculean  
efforts to keep the memories of the railway alive and to ensure  
that future generations appreciate the history and romance of the  
line. One hopes that the amenity will continue to be provided  
and improved upon for generations yet unborn. Gura Fada Buan  
Sibh!

### **WORK IN PROGRESS.**

Since June, 2002, we have a Licence from CIE to operate 2 ½  
miles from Newcastle West to Ardagh. This section had become  
very overgrown and needed a lot of remedial work. A group of 6  
International Volunteers commenced the process by re-decking  
the bridge over the River Daar, 1 km out from Newcastle West  
Station House in July, 2002.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 2002 hedge and grass cutting began  
and the route was cleared for the Heritage Week walk.  
Subsequent work in the Autumn/Winter saw the erection of some  
security barriers as well as the resurfacing of a particularly wet  
stretch.

A large 8' x 4' sign was also erected at the Trail entrance near  
Newcastle West. In total over 5000.00 euro of GST Funds were  
used in these basic improvements. The availability of this  
walking route has enabled us to host 25 organised walks over the  
past twelve months (including walks each Wednesday evening  
from Easter to the end of August.)

The aforementioned International Volunteers again visited West Limerick in July, 2003. This year the individuals were new to the area but equally hard working. The team of five girls took on the task of rebuilding a previously demolished bridge at Tullig Wood, 5 miles to the east of Abbeyfeale, using a combination of old railway timbers and some new material. Together with some experienced local aid they had the new structure ready for an official opening on Bank Holiday Monday, August 4<sup>th</sup> which was attended by in excess of 60 people. The tape was cut by Miss Máire Ní Chearmada, Joint Treasurer GST and the bridge was blessed by Fr. Tom Hurley P.P. Tampleglantine. The result is that a further 2.5 miles walk is now readily accessible in one of the most scenic locations along the GST and was walked by groups on each Monday in August.

The third work project has been at Barnagh Tunnel, 4 miles West of Newcastle West. The 5000.00 euro grant given by the Heritage Council in 2002 enabled a comprehensive study of the flora and fauna of the tunnel and its approaches to be undertaken. Contributions by Mr. Geoff Hunt, Mr. Robert Imbusch, Mr. Conor Kelleher, Dr. Julian Reynolds and Mrs. Sylvia Reynolds were edited by Dr. John Breen of U.L. and published in a 48 page A4 report including 10 colour photographs. This report was launched on February 1<sup>st</sup> as part of the railway anniversary weekend (of which more anon) Copies are available at 5.00 euro (+ 1 euro postage) from Liam O'Mahony, 9 Bishop Street, Newcastle West, Co. Limerick.

The Heritage Council have continued their support in 2003 by allocating a further 7500.00 euro to enhance access to the tunnel and to implement conservation measures designed to encourage growth in the bat population. The award was accepted by Vice-Chairman, Denis McAuliffe at Kilkenny on July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2003. These works will be undertaken in the near future.

In all of these locations we wish to thank CIE for their approval of the improvement works. Further it is heartening to record the co-operation of the adjoining landowners with whom we hope to

work in partnership. Together we will monitor the activities along the Trail to ensure that it will be a safe and relaxing route for all users and neighbours.

## **WALKS/TOURS ETC.**

Alongside these development, the programme of walks and outings has continued apace. In 2002 we had 15 public events plus a group visit to Germany attracting a total participation of about 400 people. In 2003, to date, this has grown to 30 events plus a weekend in County Down and a further visit to Germany. These have had combined attendances of about 800 people.

The first major event of 2003 was a weekend commemoration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the withdrawal of passenger train services. It commenced with a film/slide show at Leens Hotel, Abbeyfeale on 31<sup>st</sup> January where complimentary food and music was provided. The large attendance included several former CIE employees led by Mr. Joe Geraghty the last Station Master at Abbeyfeale/Newcastle West. On 1<sup>st</sup> February there was a visit to Barnagh Tunnel followed by the launch of the Ecological report already mentioned.

Finally on Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 40 years to the day after the final regular passenger train, over fifty people braved a most inclement winter's day to walk in the path of the train from Ardagh to Newcastle West where welcome hospitality was provided at the restored Station House (courtesy of Don and Jan Quinn Freyberg) by the Newcastle West Arts Committee. A commemorative 8 page A4 booklet was also provided for the weekend.

Such was the interest that a further railway archival film show is planned for Friday 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2004 at the Devon Hotel, Templeglantine at 8.00p.m.

On the Bank Holiday weekend (3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> of May) seventeen GST supporters went by train from Charleville to Newry and transferred to Warrenpoint, Co. Down as a base. Walks in the

Silent Valley (Mourne Mountains), Castlewellan Demesne, Tanderagee-Poyntzpass (Newry Canal Towpath) and Dundrum Bay (in the tracks of the old Belfast and Co. Down Railway) were complemented by a coach tour of the Mourne area as well as Sliabh Gullion in Co. Armagh.

In West Limerick walks from Newcastle West-Ardagh line, "Dawn Chorus" with Geoff Hunt (5.00 a.m. Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> May) Barnagh Station-Devon Road (25<sup>th</sup> May) and Barnagh Tunnel-Glenquin Castle (15<sup>th</sup> June) kept people fit for the 5 night visit to Germany.

Flying from Kerry Airport to Hahn on 24<sup>th</sup> the group of 24 enjoyed brilliant weather throughout. The old 25 mile railway line, centred on our base town of Kastellaun, was walked and cycled and cruises were made on the Rhine and Mosel. Visits were made to the cities of Trier and Luxembourg and time was also available for activities as diverse as Open Air Classical Concerts and Flea Markets.

Back in Ireland a very enjoyable afternoon was spent on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> July when John Breen, Julian and Sylvia Reynolds effortlessly conducted a nature study of Barnagh Tunnel/Tullig Wood.

Heritage week events were held on Sun. 7<sup>th</sup> Sept. at Barnagh Tunnel with storyteller Eddie Lenihan and on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> Sept. when the Newcastle West-Ardagh line was explored.

The success of these events would not have been possible without the support of the various media. There was also a positive response to the featuring of the GST on the RTE 1 "Townlands" series in a programme narrated by Damien Enright entitled "Beaten Paths". It was televised on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2002 and repeated on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2003.

## **ADMINISTRATION**

Meanwhile the mundane administrative work of the group had also to be accommodated. The AGM of the Action Group was held on October 4<sup>th</sup> 2002 with the following officers being elected

Cathaoirleach – Liam O’Mahony; Rúnaí – Mike MacDomhnaill, (069) 62597; Asst. Secretary – Elsa hallinan (061) 392619; Joint Treasurers – Máire Ní Chearmada, Pádraig Ó Condúin; Environmental Officer – Jim McNamara. Web site: [www.southerntrail.pro.ie](http://www.southerntrail.pro.ie) and E-mail: [southerntrail@eircom.net](mailto:southerntrail@eircom.net). There were three other routine meetings of the Action Group on 24/1/03. 16/4/03 with the average attendance of 16.

Contact has been maintained with both Kerry and Limerick County Councils and we welcome the inclusion of the Tralee-Mount Hawk section of the GST in the draft Tralee Town Plan. We also look forward to the provision of access from the R521 to the Trail at Newcastle West by Limerick County Council and to improvements at Barnagh Lay-By.

Representatives of the GST met with officials of Kerry County Council at the launch of the “Sive” walk in Listowel on July 8<sup>th</sup> 2003. This route which was favoured by the late J.B. Keane includes about one mile of the GST on the outskirts of Listowel (near the newly opened Lartigue Railway to which we wish a very successful future).

A submission to West Limerick Resources Ltd. for grant aid on a complete resurfacing and repairs along the Newcastle West-Ardagh route has resulted in a grant of approximately 20,000.00 euro towards the project which is currently being undertaken by the contractors, Messrs. Leens of Ashford.

## **FINANCES**

The overall budget for this major refurbishment is 40,000 euro which means that the GST is actively seeking 20,000 euro!! As mentioned earlier a considerable amount of our own resources/funds has already been spent on the Newcastle West-Ardagh line and works at Templeglantine and Barnagh have also consumed scarce funds.



On top of this expenditure we have to pay a licence fee to CIE and insure the walkers along the Trail and on our Outings. Then there is the cost of printing and distributing our various Newsletters and Christmas cards. In the past the proceeds of our Church gate collections (in Co. Limerick) (3119.00 euro in 2002) together with the surplus from our tours has been sufficient but we are in need of funds on a much larger scale and so for the first time ever we are making a direct appeal to you, our supporters. We should all be delighted that the situation is so good that we need these monies. The success of these pilot schemes will encourage the further development of the rest of the GST and your positive response will enable us to approach the Local Authorities, Shannon Development and Government for increased funding because this is the norm everywhere else in the E.U. that we have visited.

While we're discussing finance we would like our Kerry Supporters to organise Church Gate collections in North Kerry so as to enable us to move forward with a couple of pilot stretches in the Kingdom. To advance this it is important that we have a representative attendance at the AGM OF THE ACTION GROUP WHICH WILL BE HELD AT HALLA INSE BÁN, TEMPLEGLANTINE ON FRIDAY, 17<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER AT 8.00 p.m. Finally, Míle buíochas for the monies collected at Co. Limerick Church Gates in 2003: Ardagh (230) Templeglantine, (392), Newcastle West (1492).

Other church gate collection will be at Abbeyfeale 4/5 October and Rathkeale 22/23 November. Remember that 2004 is an election year for Town and County Councils as well as the European Parliament. Thus it is an opportune time to ask our politicians to explain why this is the only rail-trail (that we are aware of) in the E.U. that is spearheaded by a voluntary group. We hope to invite the candidates opinions as to why Waterford County Council can purchase over twenty five miles of the old Waterford-Dungarvan railway from CIE and plan its development for walking cycling and pony-trekking while their counterparts in Limerick and Kerry sit on the fence.

## **THE LAST TRAIN FROM ARDAGH BY MARTIN BYRNES**

Saturday. February 2, 1963 was a gloomy, drizzly evening. As it should be, for we were about to say goodbye to an old friend. Four people stood on the station platform at Ardagh, peering along the lonesome track curving away towards Rathkeale. They were huddled beside the ticket hatch as a cold mist swirled. They had walked the four miles from Newcastle West just to board a train; the last scheduled passenger train from Limerick to Tralee.

The four were Mrs. Anne and her son, Liam O'Mahony of Bishop Street, Newcastle West, my father and I, from Maiden Street, Liam and I were eleven years old. I had brought our two family terriers, Barney and Titch. The two dogs were used to train travel, but more of that anon. We six, dogs included, were to be the last passengers ever to board a train at Ardagh. Saturday, February 2, 1963 was also to be the last day of Ardagh as a station. Even the goods service would no longer stop there and the sole member of staff, Kevin Magee, would be transferred. In truth, Ardagh rarely had a goods wagon off in recent times, and its passenger numbers had also been slight,

The train that evening consisted of two railcars, back-to-back in push-me-pull-you formation, a flicker of yellow through the windows as it drew to a halt before us. We said our goodbyes to Kevin Magee, boarded the almost empty carnage and the door slammed shut.

Beneath our feet the engine growled with power, and we moved away from the few lights of the station and glided under the bridge into darkness. Father smoked an Afton, and the dogs were made much of by the few other passengers on the train. A man who was traveling as far as Listowel told us that he was coming from England. Rivulets of water streaked the windows as we watched our reflections in the glass~. It took about eight minutes to go from Ardagh to Newcastle West, and the wheel-clack echoed as we slowed under the double bridge.

No bands, no fireworks. The driver left his cab and chatted with John Whelan the checker and they walked down to the other end of the little train and, as we walked down the avenue towards the town, we heard the revving of the engine. a hooter blast, and the train passed through the Kerry eye of the bridge and away. It was a sad and gloomy end, and somehow almost appropriate.

I had been fascinated from my earliest recollection. Just as I had lain in bed as a youngster and had listened to the airliners of the world drone overhead in the night, linking two great continents through Shannon, and had known that the world was larger than the humdrum reach of my tricycle, so too the train was exotic and those twin arches of the bridge fanned out to a wide world. Our school was right beside the railway station, and engine-chuffing and steam whistles and clang-shunting punctuated our classes. Most of my dealings with trains were happy ones - being taken to see Santa at Todds, steam and smoke billowing outside as at the pictures, with a slap -up lunch at the Savoy; a school tour to Dublin and the Zoo; a day of confused excitement of sights and smells and sounds at Listowel races. We did not associate the station, as so many did, as a point of departure to seek one's fortune in a different land.

And then there was the fact that we kept a small sweet shop which closed on Wednesday afternoons. If the day was dry, parents, dogs and I, liked taking a walk on Wednesdays, and school finished in enough time for us to walk 'out' to Ardagh and, as a treat, take the train home. Aboard, Mother 'took the weight off her feet'. Usually, we were the only passengers. Maybe a dozen times a year, we would do it. for the few years that it lasted. and we didn't really object when the adult fare was increased from 4d to 7d. and the child fare to 4d. the dogs traveled free.

I was an impatient child and, as soon as I got my first proper bicycle, all the surrounding towns and sights immediately came within my compass. My involvement with the station also grew in stages. initially through collecting cartons of cigarettes and of

Lemon's sweets from Davy Greaney's goods store and bringing them home through the streets on the handlebars of my bike. After that school pal Liam and I progressed to riding in the guards van as it was shunted vigorously so that a goods train could be rebuilt to face the other way for departure: thence to traveling on the plate to cross with an up-train and, finally, to going hands-on to the great controls themselves during shunted sometimes even without the driver in attendance.

- Many thanks to Martin Byrnes, Deputy Editor of the Limerick Leader for his memories of the Ardagh Passenger trains.

The G.S.T. is commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the closure of Ardagh, Barnagh, Devon Road and Kilmorna Stations with the following events:-

\* Fri. 31st. Jan. at 9.00p.m.: **Leen's Hotel, Abbeyfeale**, for a sharing of Railway Memories to which former Railway Personnel and their families are especially invited.

\* Sat. 1st. Feb. at 2.30p.m.: **Barnagh Tunnel Visit**: Assemble at lay-by N21, 4 miles west of Newcastle West.

\* Sat. 1st. Feb. at 4.00p.m.: **Devon Inn Hotel, Templeglantine**, where we will launch an Ecological Study of Barnagh Tunnel Habitats (edited by Dr. John Breen, Life Science Dept., U.L. and grant aided by the Heritage Council)

\* Sun. 2nd. Feb. at 2.30p.m.: **Ardagh Railway Station**, where 40 years to the day after the last regular passenger train, we will retrace the railway path by walking to Newcastle West station (1 hour).

All are welcome to these events which are free of charge.

\* A 'Percy French' Concert is also planned for Newcastle West on the same weekend.

- Our trips abroad have proven to be hugely enjoyable. In 2003 we will be returning to Kastellaun, Germany for 4 or 5 nights during the period 20th. - 30th. June, 2003. (D.V.) The cost of €400 approx will include direct flights Shannon-Hahn with B&B, 3\* Hotels. A deposit of €150 is necessary to secure a place. It is hoped to visit Warrenpoint, Co. Down for the May Bank Holiday weekend.

Contact: Elsa Hallinan at (061) 392619 (*Evenings*).

- G.S.T. **T-Shirts** at €7.00 from Pat Condon/Máire Ni Chearmada.
- Visit the G.S.T. website at **[www.southerntrail.net](http://www.southerntrail.net)**
- Cover Photograph: The Railway Bridge over the Old Barnagh Road in Winter.