OUR LONG JOURNEY TO COUNTY LEITRIM

Gay Waterstone

HAVE YOU ever wondered about people who pass you on the street or stand next to you in a queue at a supermarket checkout? I started this habit when I was six years old and was living with my mother in London. When we went shopping I would look at people and make up stories about them.

It was after the second World War and we still had ration books with coupons which we exchanged for food or clothes. Rationing continued until 1953 nearly ten years after the war had ended. In those days there were no supermarkets so we had to go to five or six shops to get our groceries. Eggs were very scarce and our coupons would only buy a small amount of meat, wee shanks or some bacon or sausages. Each member of our family got an ounce of butter a week!

My maternal grandmother, Nora O'Neill was born in Co Tyrone. There were seven in the family, one went to America and the others to England. My mother, Hermione Williams was born in Hampshire and so was I. Our fathers were Naval officers. My grandfather was killed in the first World War, my father, Terence Butler was captured by the Germans and spent much of the war in prisoner of war camp. My husband, Desmond, was born in Cork but after a few years he went with his family to Kenya where his father, a civil engineer, had accepted a contract. Desmond's mother is German and his father Anglo Irish.

We decided in 1976 to move to Ireland with our daughter and baby son. We had been living in Sussex but thought that it would be a better environment for our children in Ireland. We bought a campervan and looked forward to more of an outdoor life with our children in the future.

Our first house was a newly built bungalow near Slane, Co Meath. It cost us £12,000 Salaries in those days were low and taxes were high! Our younger son was born in our County Meath. We lived there for two years. Our next move was to Dublin where Desmond had been offered a job. We lived in a beautiful old house with a stream running through the garden. The children loved it except in the winter. We had a range in the kitchen and a fire in the sitting room, but the dash to bed with the hot water bottles was frantic as we had no central heating!

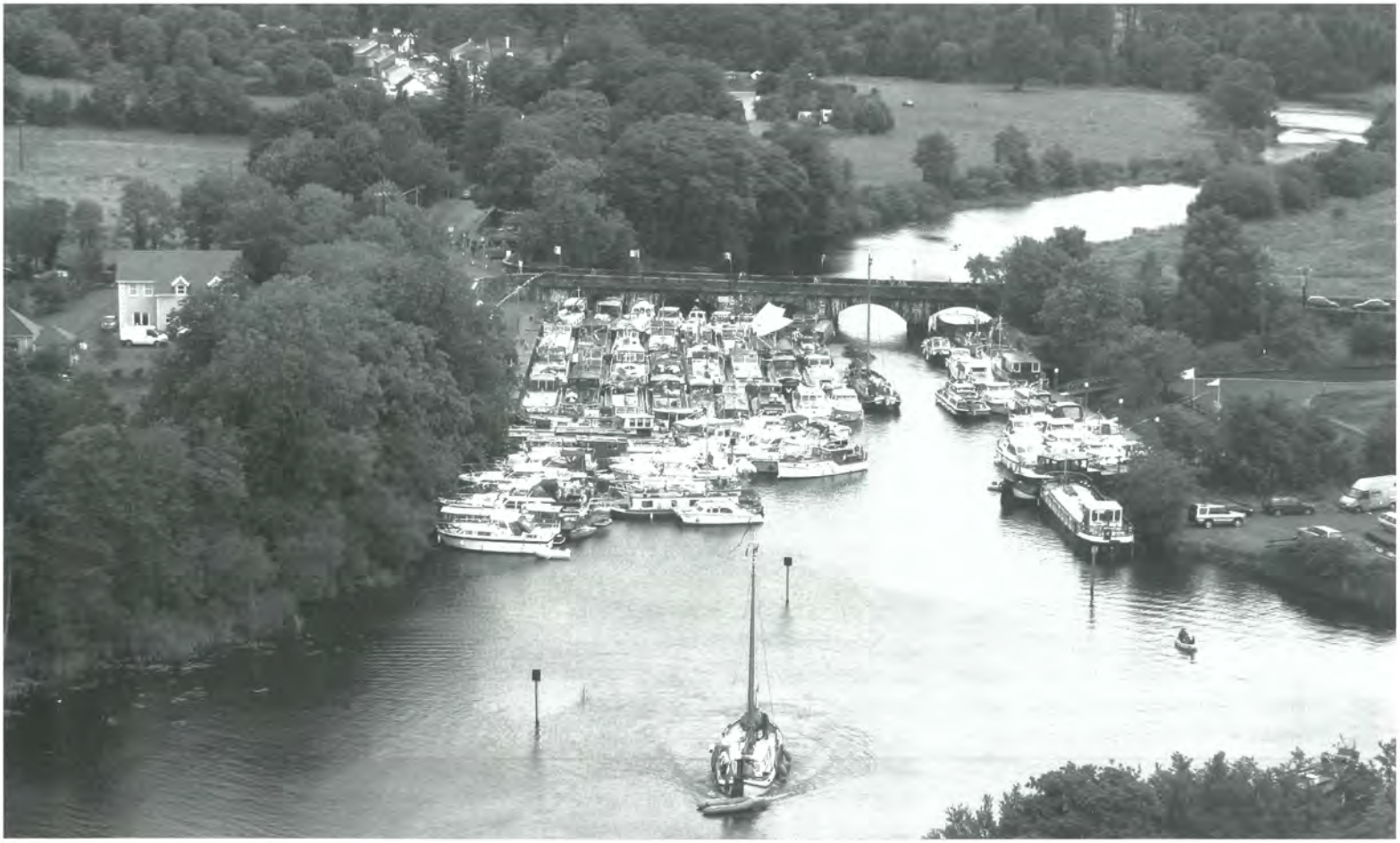
Whilst we were living in Beauparc we decided to buy a small cottage in Carlingford, Co Louth. Desmond loved sailing and climbing and the cottage was only an hours drive away. We had many happy weekends and holidays there. The children learned to sail various kinds of boats and we bought a windsurfer. Our cottage had a garden from which we could see the Carlingford Harbour and Lough and also the Mountains of Mourne and the coast of Northern Ireland. We continued to go to Carlingford even after we moved to the west of Dublin, but the long Friday night drives through traffic persuaded us to sell our cottage. We missed it very much.

We decided that we wanted to continue with our boating and to do our sailing on the River Shannon. So we bought a

Colvic cabin cruiser in Killaloe and started our explorations on Lough Derg. We encountered some rough weather but our boat was steady and sturdy and we enjoyed ourselves. Our daughter had gone to America so we sailed with the boys. They learned to tie up, leap off, rescue the dog who had fallen or been knocked off by mistake, whatever was needed—which was fun.

We took part in four Inland Waterways Rallies which were wonderful family events.We met so many interesting people on the river, some of whom we see occasionally now. Once the boys went to college or started working we used the boat less, but we started exploring more. We investigated the rivers whose waters flowed into the Shannon, or into a lough. We were able to go quite far up and then tie up to a tree. Desmond would wander off through the field or over the hill—he often found a pub or a shop. We were living in what looked like an isolated spot but people were nearby.

We enjoyed sailing up the Shannon, visiting Clonmacnoise, where we stopped at night. We never realised just how long the river Shannon was until we took our first trip up to Lough Key. Many days of twisty rivers between fields full of cattle, and night



Jamestown. Photo: Brian Farrell

stops, exploring small towns and isolated pubs.

As we sailed north and left the confinement of river banks behind we were amazed by the beauty of the lakes, some small, some very large. A lot of islands were uninhabited, some had cattle on them, others houses, but there was so much freedom and space that there was plenty of room for us too. We saw the swans nesting, the hatched cygnets, the family groups coming along side us looking for food. There were many duck families too, but unfortunately so many of them were killed by the ever increasing mink population. On summer evenings we loved to sail our boat.

One evening the whole sky turned red, the swallows were skimming the lake for insects and we were the only boat on the lake. We were so moved by the beauty all around us and decided that we wanted to move west and buy a house in Co Leitrim. We had discovered where we felt at home. Carrick-on-Shannon was a lovely place to moor and stock up on groceries. The butcher had marvellous meat which he wrapped for us in brown paper. Everything we needed was in the town and we found so many helpful people when we asked for information. On one of our short boating trips we moored at Jamestown Quay. We walked around the village, down to the weir, and visited the Arch Bar to test the beer. Then we had to test Kenoys Bar. They both met with our approval!

As we walked back to the quay we noticed an old stone wall which enclosed a very overgrown garden and a beautiful stone house at the far end of the garden. We sailed away, but saw a photograph with a For Sale notice in Liam Farrell's Estate Agency window. The house was occupied, but Liam took us to Jamestown to see the property. The garden was terribly overgrown, the grass tall and rough like an ungrazed field. It was full of potential but needed a lot of work both inside and outside.

In early 1993 we bought the Coach House and have been working hard to tame the garden since then! There is always so much to do all the year round. In summer we spend most days outside enjoying the peace and beauty of Leitrim. We have driven all round the County exploring the lakes, watching the birds and the fish by the lakes and relaxing. We have been to see the megalithic tombs near Lough Key and enjoyed visiting some of the old houses which have been restored. So much history is there for visitors and residents of County Leitrim to explore.

Our hope is that county councils will see the light and not ruin any more of the old historic villages by building large housing estates quite out of keeping in the villages. Many of the pretty old villages have already been spoiled by infill developments.

If we don't preserve our assets tourists will go elsewhere in Ireland where other counties have recognised the value of restoration and preservation.