

The Industrial Revolution



This drawing by Nicola Gill, based on an old photograph, shows the railway line at Belleek Pottery. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.

The Industrial Revolution: Inland Waterways and Railways

Visionary ideas of the 18th and 19th centuries swept across to the west of Ireland on the tide of the industrial revolution. A canal-building boom in the mid 1700s pulled Ulster into the mainstream of industrialisation in England. Canals were to be the super highways of the day – a route between the coalfields, which fuelled the engine house of this industrial revolution, and the factory, and between the factory and the ports, from where manufactured goods were shipped to destinations in Europe and the Empire.

Ulster's coalfield was in the heart of Tyrone and thus it was Lough Neagh which became the nucleus of the canal network.

Belfast city warmed to the glow of the industrial revolution, whilst Dublin clung to its elevated cultural status as the second city of the empire. But, Fermanagh remained largely immune to the clarion call of the factory and industry.

Nevertheless, a canal was dug between Lough Neagh and the southern reaches of Lough Erne, connecting Fermanagh with Belfast, and, in 1860, the Erne-Shannon link was secured by the Ballinamore/ Ballyconnell canal. So, Fermanagh was joined to Dublin on the umbilical cord of the Shannon navigation. However, there was virtually one-way traffic on these canals – agricultural produce carried from Fermanagh to feed the growing workers' population in the cities of the eastern seaboard.

Fermanagh did witness the birth of an industry which made its mark in the heartland of nineteenth century Europe and the new world – America, Canada and Australia – and even reached Queen Victoria's parlour. The Belleek Pottery was the brainchild of the plantation aristocrat, John Caldwell Bloomfield of castle Caldwell, who prospected for and found seams of industrial quality clay near Belleek. His zeal was matched by an investment of £40,000 from David Birney, a wealthy Dublin merchant and the financial and artistic acumen of Robert Williams Armstrong, the Pottery's first manager. Together, in 1857, they launched Belleek Pottery onto the international market place where, in a



John Caldwell Bloomfield and Lord James Butler. J.C. Bloomfield was born in 1823 and inherited Castle Caldwell Estate in 1849. In 1857 he established a pottery for porcelain manufacture at Belleek. Bloomfield was a prominent Unionist politician and landlord. He died in 1897. Copyright of Fermanagh County Museum.

little over ten years, it gained a firm foothold. Belleek Pottery did not travel to its city markets along the canals. It was taken by steamer, the Erne Packet, along the length of Lower Lough Erne to a railhead at Enniskillen.

The advent of the railways quickly hastened the demise of the canals. Legend has it that the Erne-Shannon link was graced by only eight boats in its short and troubled operating life. The Pottery's kilns had an insatiable appetite for coal. The coal might have been carried from the Arigna mines in Leitrim along the Ballinamore/ Ballyconnell canal, or from the Tyrone coalfields along the canal from Lough Neagh. But, when the Great Northern Railway was driven through Belleek to an Atlantic railhead at the port of Bundoran, where huge supplies of coal were landed, it inaugurated a fast, reliable transport highway taking coal to the factory gate and Belleek Pottery to the World.

For over a century, the railway remained Fermanagh's artery to the world. During that time, and to this day, Fermanagh's principal exports were agricultural produce and its people.

In 1941 the Clogher Valley Railway closed and in 1957 Fermanagh lost its surviving rail links to Belfast and Dublin. However, the canals are making a comeback – the Ballinamore/ Ballyconnell canal has been re-opened joining the Erne and the Shannon to create one of Europe's largest inland waterways.

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