



Strabane bridges to cross



Bridges to the Future

Acknowledgements

This project came from a suggestion by the late Councillor Ivan Barr at a previous meeting of Strabane 2000, before his untimely death. It is hoped this will do justice to his perception of the study, and will represent a small tribute to his interest in all things local.

Thanks are due to John McCormack for his advice and Professor Paul Dunlop of the University of Ulster at Coleraine. Thanks are also due to the members of the River Agency at

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Lastly sincere thanks to Heather Torrens of Strabane 2000 who led the project from beginning to end and was most patient when advice and direction was required.



View of Strabane, in the County of Tyrone, February 1794. An artist's impression of the town and the River Mourne, spanned by the bridge. This scene is taken from J. Fisher's Scenery of Ireland (London & Dublin 1795)



C. 1910 scene of Strabane bridge, showing father and son crossing from Bridgend towards the town side. Note the low lying street which was very prone to flooding.

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*‘A bridge which spans the river
A river famed in song,
Where boys yet go a-fishing
When the water’s running strong’*

Memories

by John McCrossan

A detailed account of river crossings over the River Mourne from the earliest times. Historical references are used to chronicle the development of the town, the importance of the river and the need for adequate and appropriate crossing points for armies and merchants, for townsfolk and travellers.



A map of the Strabane area, showing Lough Foyle flowing north towards the north Atlantic coast, the rivers Foyle, Mourne, Finn and Strule.

Strabane Crest



The crest of Strabane depicts three castles, the river with a boatman, and, in some images and drawings, that of a fish.

The three castles represent three different periods in history during which Strabane had a settled community with a castle as a fortification. However, on each occasion these were destroyed. Each was believed to have stood within easy reach of the River Mourne. One castle stood on high ground, the O'Neill Castle at Upper Main Street; another Plantation

Castle was built on low land at Castle Street which obviously lends its name to the street. A third, a post Plantation castle, was built somewhere between Butcher street and Bowling Green.

Fishing rights have always been of the utmost importance in this area, hence the waters of the Mourne on the crest. The boat man depicts the significance of the river ferry across the Mourne. In summer months local people could have crossed at the shallowest points which were generally at Townsend

Street and the McGirr area. It is known that trees were felled and laid across the river at its lowest point to provide a timber causeway for travellers to cross. When the waters rose, boats were used to ferry people, livestock and goods across. The earliest images showed a drawing in the shape of a logboat, similar to those found in recent years at the Point of Finn but it is possible that a large raft with ropes was also used from time to time. The ferry reputedly came into operation in 1629.

The River Mourne



A view of Strabane, the River Mourne, Strabane Bridge and Lifford from the Graveyard.

The name Strabane is derived from Srath Ban which comes directly from the reference to the River Mourne, meaning the White Strand or Fair Holm.

Lough Foyle empties into the North Atlantic at Shrove in Co. Donegal after a long journey from the hills of Counties Tyrone, Donegal and Derry. If the water could tell its story it would speak of a journey from mossy peaks, over rocky crags, in summer as a trickle, and in winter as a torrent.

The rivers Drumragh and Strule rise high above Omagh in the Sperrins and meet the Mourne at Newtownstewart and the Derg about one mile above Victoria Bridge. As the Mourne meanders down the valley through the fine fishing waters of Sion Mills and around the bends at Drumnabuoy, Beldoo and the Holms, it passes through Strabane to the Point of Finn. There it meets the Donegal waters which rise in the Blue Stacks beyond Barnes Gap to begin a journey down the Finn Valley through Ballybofey, Stranorlar, Killygordon, Castlefinn and Clady.

At Lifford Bridge the confluence of Finn and Mourne make up the waters of the Foyle.

At Lisahally the Faughan, which gathers water from as far off as Glenshane, enters the Foyle and, lower down, the Roe, brings its waters to Lough Foyle. The tributaries of the Foyle flow through some of the most beautiful countryside in Ireland; the water gives life to the flowers and fauna along the rivers and carry some of the best fish stock in the British Isles. It gives a different meaning to the Irish expression 'uisce baca' or water of life.

Ferries & Bridges



1950s view of the river, looking west, showing the bridge and town centre from the graveyard. The bridge was adequate to allow people to commute. Compare this scene to the populated areas of Bridgend, Melvin, Carleton Drive, Lisnafin and Ballycolman areas of the present day and the need for pedestrian bridges is obvious.

The first reference to a river crossing was in 1607 when a Mr. John Browne received the patent to establish a ferry over the river to Lifford. It is not clear from whom he won the patent, or the business details of the arrangement. The first official ferry over the Mourne to join the town to the south side came 20 years later in 1629.

In 1614 it is recorded that a boat called 'The Gift of God', belonging to the Earl of Abercorn, sailed from Derry to Strabane. It was used by the Hamiltons and other prominent merchants.

In 1633 five parishes were fined £40 for not contributing to the building of a bridge over the Douglas Burn on the

King's Highway from Strabane to Newtown Stewart. With difficult roads to the south of Strabane most people travelling from Omagh to and from Derry would have crossed the Finn at Clady Ford and travelled through east Donegal. Those wishing to cross the Foyle would have used the ferries at Strabane-Lifford, Dunalong-Mongevlin or the Waterside-Derry City. These ferries were flat-bottomed boats called 'cots'. In the upper Foyle, Finn and Mourne people and animals would customarily have waded across the rivers when water levels were low enough to cross, though sometimes with disastrous consequences. A bridge over the Foyle at Lifford was built in 1730. The stone bridge over the Mourne was built in 1788 and it was widened in 1823.

The first rail bridge spanned the Mourne on the opening of the Strabane to Omagh section of the Londonderry & Enniskillen Railway in 1852. In 1863 the Finn Valley Railway joined Stranorlar to Strabane. The rail bridge existing in use was used as a double track system until 1883 when a second rail bridge was built over the Mourne.

In 1871 a foot bridge was built over the Mourne at Bearney to facilitate the mill workers going to work at Sion. In 1930 this was replaced by a suspension bridge after the old bridge had been washed away in the big flood of 1929. The bridge was again washed away in the big flood of 1987 and was replaced soon afterwards.

Geological features of the Mourne



Part of the Bodley map of 1609 showing the Barony of Strabane, bounded by the Rivers Mourne, Finn and Lough Foyle.

The higher ground is predominantly peat and bog so its uses are quite limited. But the valley of the Mourne is a fertile stretch of land, entrenched into the ancient folded structure (which means pushed up from the earth) of pre-Cambrian, Dalradian rock (from the Proterozoic Age, dating approximately 545 million years), largely schists (rock formed from heated clay) with quartz veins (from granite, resulting in white material).

This area of Strabane in the north west region of Ireland is dominated by the mountains of the Sperrins and is guarded by the hill of Knockavoe. The Mourne is part of the river valley of the Strule which starts in the Sperrins, and the Derg, which flows from the Blue Stacks in Donegal.

The Sperrins is an area of metamorphic rock overlain with deposits resulting from the melting of the glaciers at the end of the last ice-age, approximately 10,000 years ago.

The glacio-fluvial deposits would have choked most of the valleys which were carved out by ice. With climate change the melting ice caused steep-sided valleys, and gorges being formed by the melting water. This can be seen in the valley of the Strule and in the lower Cavanalee River before it flows into the Mourne. There are also some drumlin-like hills of gravel and sand which account for the number of quarries in the area.

This is the reason for a predominance of white sand and fine gravel on the bed of the river which suggests the name Srath Ban, translated as The White Sands or Fair Holms. The material washed down from the Sperrins and the Derg, and the effect of the tidal wash from the Foyle, combine to make this channel of water one of the most picturesque in the country, and one of the best rivers for fishing in the country.

Slater's Directory of 1846 described the environs of Strabane as "replete with interest and beauty, the hills and the mountains, the valleys and the streams contending for the palm of the picturesque. The Mourne River that leaves the town, and with the Finn, forms at Lifford the Foyle is one of the most beautiful rivers in Ireland and the valleys of these rivers vie with one another in luxuriance and loveliness".

The 'Need to Cross' Rivers from 3000 B.C.

Dating around 3000 B.C. Prehistoric implements of stone and of bronze, have been found which our prehistoric ancestors had dropped into the water at fording places. Travel took place along the sea routes and the river ways. Overland travellers would have sought out gravel ridges and high ground where they could command a view of the surrounding countryside. They avoided the bogs and woodlands where possible. Rivers were crossed on a needs-only basis. A network of routes quickly grew up between east and west Ulster, marked by tombs. The country was thinly populated as there were approximately 500,000 people in the 12th century and most travellers went by foot. Journeys were hazardous and difficult, and river crossings were treacherous. They confronted wild beasts and robbers and outlaws and most

travelled without protection. The Aes Dana (poets) travelled with protection, as did monks and craftsmen.

By 1000 B.C. many lived on crannogs which were formalised lake dwellings. But the early settlers who had arrived from the Atlantic coast of France began to colonise large tracts of countryside for farming, using stone tools to clear the land to cultivate and till the ground. As is evidenced from the archaeological finds at Mount Sandel in the Coleraine area, and other sites which date from 3000 B.C., indications are that early settlers lived by hunting, fishing and collecting berries, roots, shellfish, leaves and nuts. The lithros (standing stone) in the graveyard in Patrick Street indicates that people lived in this area from that date. A Stone Age axe head and polished

flint knife were discovered in the bed of the River Deele by local man, the late Mickey Joe Doherty while he was searching for pearls and freshwater clams. Later Irish society became predominantly pastoral, breeding cows for food, growing crops to supplement a diet of bread, porridge and salt.

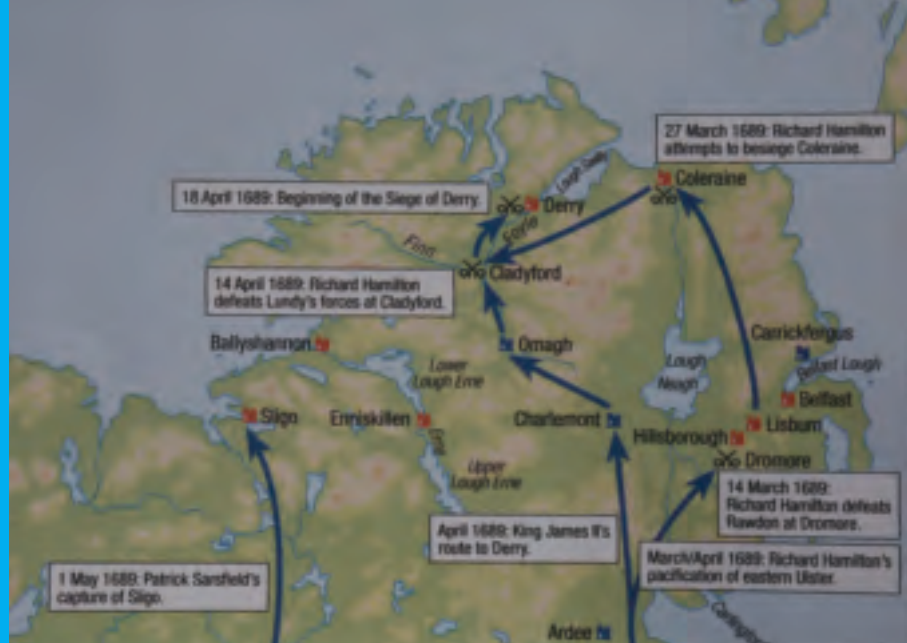
It is recorded that St. Patrick and his retinue of 20 clerics, helpers, and travellers crossed the Deele at Tyle Ford near Ballindrait on their way to Grianan Aileach. These travellers included smiths, stonemasons and carvers who stayed in localities long enough to supply the needs of the community. Evidence shows that religious settlements were located close to river crossings at Ardstraw, Urney, Camus and Strabane. These were locations in which spiritual and secular works continued



illustration of new pedestrian/cycle bridge



C 1950 shows the town of Strabane, mainly on the west bank of the river. The bridge across the Mourne was just above the old fording position where the ferry crossing was located.



Cladyford, near the village of Clady, was on the River Finn, approximately 4 miles above Strabane. This point was a pivotal crossing for the armies advancing towards Derry in 1689

and the rivers at Strabane were vital for food and water. Evidence exists in the Annals to show that groups travelling north stayed at Ardstraw, Camus and Urney on their way to Derry.

Evidence of this is provided in Curtis 'A history of medieval Ireland from 1086 to 1513' in which he describes a journey in 1397 from Armagh to Derry by Archbishop Colton of Armagh. Arriving from Cappagh at Ardstraw the vicar and erenaghs had to provide for his men and horses.

The following day he set off for Urney where similar provision had to be made.'

In mid March 1689 the Rev. George Walker advanced to Derry from Dungannon with five regiments of soldiers. He crossed the Finn by the bridge at Clady and gave orders that the bridge should be destroyed. The reason for this became apparent as King James followed the same route in mid April and led his army across the Finn at Clady.

By 20 April 1689 James decided to return to Dublin and followed the same route, staying that night in Cavanacor House outside Lifford. Some of his troops crossed the river, as the Church in Strabane was used as a hospital. By 30 July King James' army retreated from Derry using both sides of the Foyle to travel southwards and those who had travelled along the east bank rested at Strabane.



Proposed location for new bridge



This aerial photograph from Lifford shows the Point of Finn, looking east up the valley of the Mourne towards Strabane. The new Lifford Bridge is in the foreground.

Logboats



The oldest recording of the use of log boats in Ireland is from the River Quoile in Downpatrick. The wood timbers are dated from 4,500 years ago.

On 25th December 1991, after high floods in the local rivers, a short lightweight log boat surfaced at the Point of Finn and was discovered by local men, Liam Carlin and Barry McNally. The body of the boat was incomplete. Several features included evidence of rowlocks, which were described as ornate and delicate, and other interesting integral carved features. With the use of scientific research by a team from Queen's University, Belfast, the pattern of tree rings on the

wood indicated, that this log boat was 1400 years old, thus tracing the boat back to the 5th century A.D. It is currently on display in the Tower Museum in Derry.

Again in 2003 local fisherman Pat McGlinchey was fishing at Lifford Bridge and uncovered a long dugout similar to the one discovered in 1991. This had also been disturbed by flood water and this logboat was dated from the 15th century.

These logboats were navigable vessels, hollowed out trunks of oak, of a size which indicated that they were used for transporting people and goods across the Mourne, Finn

and Foyle. Scientists remarked however, that they were unlikely to have been used for the transportation of live stock, which had been the case with finds in other areas.

This provides us with evidence of the mode of transport used on the Rivers Finn, Mourne and Foyle many years ago. It also points out that these were important crossing points for travellers and for the people who had settled in the Valley of the White Holms. Crossing points were at Clady, Lifford (Liffer) and at McGirr in Strabane.



The Mourne/Finn Logboat discovered by Liam Carlin and Barry McNally on December 25th 1991

Bridge Timbers

In the summer of 2001 the Strabane and Lifford Angling Club commissioned a firm to carry out work on the River Mourne in order to improve the fishing resources. A dredger was working near the Strabane Bridge, removing gravel to deepen one of the pools. In the words of club member, Kevin McCrory, up popped several large timber frames. On close examination by scientific experts from Queen's University, Belfast, they were discovered to be carved timber parts of a wooden structure. The experts declared that several were prehistoric and some could be accurately dated to the 17th century. Indeed dates between 1650 and 1695 were given and these dates are significant as this was an extremely busy period with the military movement to and from Derry and the south.

Clearly these timbers had joints and joists, with no evidence of nails or screws. The experts estimated that they were from a series of jetties or bridges. Scorch and burn marks were discovered on the wood which may indicate that the bridge or bridges were burned. Folklore tells of the burning of bridges by the forces of King James II on his return from the Siege of Derry in 1690.

On 26 July 2001 the Palaeoecology Centre at Queen's University at Belfast took samples from 13 timbers found in the Mourne. Their report revealed that the timbers belonged to 2 groups. 8 timbers were pale in colour and showed evidence of some woodworking details.

They displayed evidence of written notations on the wood. The remaining 5 were black in colour, rounded and had no wood working details. Some damage was in evidence. When the team carried out tree-ringing measurement tests they found that some timbers were prehistoric in origin, while others dated back 400 years. The 5 black timbers were described as prehistoric river gravel timbers which means that they had been growing on the river bank in mineral soils and had been washed into the Mourne and deposited at the location at which they were discovered. The estimate date was given at approximately 4700 B.C.



The group of 8 pale coloured logs was divided into 3 groups and could be dated to c. 1692-1694. Two timbers appeared to be part of a construction and dated from 1650-1660. The 3rd group of 2 samples was late 16th to early 17th century and were also part of a construction phase. These showed markings of heavy truncated woodworking and were part of a 17th century structure. Scientists speculated that these were most probably part of a bridge or jetty.



Councillor Ivan Barr with Heather Torrens of Strabane 2000 and Kevin McCrory of Strabane Lifford Anglers, examining the timbers found in the bed of the river at Strabane Bridge in 2001. Above shows a close up of the beams with the carved timbers

Transport

The River Mourne is the oldest way through Strabane. Penetration inland was first made up the Foyle by boat, then as far as the Finn, Mourne, Derg and Strule. Military lines were maintained along these river basins, and early records indicate that journeys were made from one religious settlement to another.

Rivers were the main routes of communications in the early decades of the 17th century. Ships carrying up to two hundred (200) tonnes of cargo were sailing as far as Dunalong. However 3 miles further up, the river became shallow with islands and was fordable in many places. Smaller barks up to 20 tonnes made their way as far as Lifford and Castlefinn, on high tides.

As a result of these difficulties in navigation the Strabane Canal was opened in 1796. Barges travelled the four miles from the centre of Strabane to the Foyle at Ballydonaghey, and onwards to the Port of Derry. The barges carried a variety of goods and merchandise, including sand, stone, coal and timbers. It was not uncommon for a sand boat to leave Strabane for places like Greenock in Scotland under the captaincy of Archie McCauley or Pat Crampsie who skippered the 'Shamrock'.

The only port records to have survived cover the period 1612-15. A ship called 'The Gift of God' of Strabane, under the captaincy of Master Robert Lindsee, was used by the Earl of Abercorn for both imports and exports to and from Renfrew, not far from his family's

home at Paisley. Records show this ship was also used by Sir George Hamilton, and other local merchants, John Birsbean, William and John Hamilton. This trade with Scotland flourished, developed by an active Scottish merchant community living in Strabane.

Public transport was developed from the 1750s in Tyrone when mail coaches were established on the routes from Derry to Belfast and Dublin. Coaches travelled at a speed of approximately 5 m.p.h. But the condition of the roads was very poor. Local people were responsible for the upkeep of road surfaces and had to devote up to six days work as personal labour. In the 1760s the Dublin Government levied a tax for road building and maintenance in place of compulsory labour.



Pat McGlinchey demonstrates how the logboat would have been suitable for one person.

On the right is a photo of the demolition of the old Lifford Bridge

A charge of 6/- per cwt. was levied on the transport of goods from Strabane to Dublin in winter. Due to the drier conditions in summer the charge was reduced to 5/-

The road to Strabane was via Ardstraw Bridge and the Half Mile Hollow or travellers could remain on the east side of the river and travel via Douglas Bridge. To ease the passage across the river the Moyle Bridge and the Old Bridge at Newtownstewart were both built.



Clady Bridge, above, was a fording place for early travellers and armies. Below is a scene from Strabane Canal, built in 1796, showing a barge unloading its cargo.



Lifford Bridge had been completed in 1730, but the Mourne Bridge was not completed until 1788. It is recorded that in 1824 the large sum of £20,000 was made available by the Dublin Government for repairs to roads and bridges in the Strabane area.

A History of Bridges over the Mourne



Strabane Bridge post 1990, with the high flood walls on both sides of the river and the concrete feet supporting the arches.

The earliest record of a bridge construction in this area was over the Foyle from Strabane to Lifford in 1743. A bridge was built over the Mourne in 1788 which was an indication of the development of the town. This replaced the ferry service over the river and marked the opening of the permanent route of communications to the south of the town. The bridge had to be widened in 1823 due to the increase in commercial traffic and the improvement in transport. By this time the population of the town had grown to 3,500 people.

The bridge was built of solid stone in contemporary style, prevalent of the industrial revolution era. The piers were solid with in-fill rubble and would have been shuttered to form the support for the arches

until the key stone was set in. In 1788 this work would have been carried out in the summer season without foundation structure. The east and west piers on the approach to the bridge had to be built up to form a ramp to prevent these structures gradually sagging towards the river under the stress of commuter transport. Bridges are normally built with an odd number of arches for aesthetical reasons – there are 7 in the case of the Strabane bridge. Each arch is semi-circular in shape, built of heavy stone with no re-enforcement.

More recently iron rods have had to be inserted across the span, two in each pier to strengthen the structure. This was partly due to the widening of the bridge in 1823, and more recently, due to age and

weakening through heavy traffic. The original piers were pointed in a prism style to form an aqua dynamic break in the water flow. More recently concrete feet have been set around the base of each pier. Although the range wall on the bridge is quite close to the arches, sufficient space has been provided to run services such as gas, electricity, and water mains across the under carriage of the bridge.

In 1852 with the advent of the railways a metal bridge had to be built over the Mourne, west of the town, to carry the trains out of Strabane station on their way south to Enniskillen, Omagh, Belfast and Dublin. In 1863 when the Finn Valley Railway Company had completed the line between



Strabane bridge, viewed from the McGirr area, showing the spires of First Presbyterian Church and Church of the Immaculate Conception.

Strabane and Stranorlar, the same rail bridge was used with a double track system, both using 5'3" gauge. The Finn Valley Railway Company paid a toll for the use of this bridge until 1892 when a second bridge was completed, parallel to the first structure to carry the new 3'0" narrow gauge to Co. Donegal. In January 1909 when the final stretch of railway was opened from Strabane to Letterkenny a new iron structure was built over the Foyle into Lifford station.

In 1871 the firm of Herdman's in Sion Mills erected a pedestrian bridge over the Mourne at Bearney to facilitate their workers who lived on the east bank of the river and who previously had to travel via Victoria Bridge or, in summer or when the water was low, would have paddled across to work in the mill.



Strabane Bridge, viewed from the river bank at Melvin. At low tide the bed of the river was sandy and stony.



Looking towards Strabane



The Suspension Bridge at Sion Mills was originally built in 1871, it was washed away in 1929, rebuilt and washed away again in 1987.



This map of Strabane shows the location of the present bridge and the exact location of the proposed pedestrian bridges at McGirr and Melvin.

A social history of the Mourne

Sundays in the summer months were traditionally family-outing days on the Banks of the Mourne. Before the era of cars, buses and trains, families would have congregated along the river with their picnic baskets to while the summer day away. Children would have paddled or swam in the fresh waters, even played on the white sands of the dried-up river bed and the gravel pits. A favourite pastime has always been 'skimming', a family or peer group pursuit of 'counting the number of skims made on the water, by throwing a flat stone across the top of the water to reach the other bank'.

On a more personal note the river bank has always been a location for 'walking out' couples or as a place where romantic pairs would go 'courting'.

It was a popular 'Lovers' Retreat'. During the summer evenings in fine weather the river bank was an excellent resource for a pleasant leisurely walk. Many fishermen were frequently coming or going, en route to and from their favourite throw at the Blackstone, Haggin's Stream, the Doctor's Water, Beldoo, the Mill Stream or The Holms. Mill workers would frequently be seen walking to or returning from work in Sion and crossing the river to the Head of the Town when the water level was low.

There is a tree at Beldoo, close to the river, called the Heckler Tree. A group from the mill once met there to discuss working conditions and submitted requests to management. The outcome of the action resulted in the dismissal of one of the workers who had written his name

to the request. He was the person who lived closest to the location. The place has since been referred to as the 'Heckler Tree'.

Adjacent to Haggin's Stream at Drumnaboy are now the very picturesque 9th and 10th holes of the Strabane Golf Club championship course. The 18 hole course was developed in 1975 and the 9th hole along the river in particular has become one of the best tests of golf in the country, especially from the blue 'back' marker. Many a good round of golf has come to a watery end on the 9th hole, especially in a stroke competition.



A view from Strabane Bridge looking south at the young boys and girls paddling in the shallow waters of the Mourne.

It is no coincidence that the old U.D.C. Park, now Melvin, was located on flat land along the river bank. Further up the river bank are the excellent Sigerson G.A.A. facilities, opened in 1996, the athletics stadium and the Irish medium schools.



in summer children used to gather below the bridge and cross the river from arch to arch.

New Bridges Project

Strabane 2000 was formed in 1997 by Strabane District Council and Strabane Chamber of Commerce & Industry. The group set out to regenerate the centre of the town with the support of the Department of the Environment. To date this group has been responsible for the S.C.O.R.E. centre, Water Front development, Water Wall Planting & Lighting, Riverside Walks and many more initiatives.

For many years the old bridge which joined the town centre to the Bridgend area was the only means of access for townsmen. There had been two rail crossings for the G.N.R. & Co. Donegal trains. Then in 1992 the new by-pass was completed which necessitated a bridge over the Mourne at the Lifford Road crossing.

However it has long been acknowledged that, with the re-location of families in the Upper

Townsend area, and across the river in Ballycolman and Carleton Drive, there has been a need for a pedestrian bridge crossing on the south side of the town to improve community cohesion. Furthermore, with the commercial development in the McGirr townland, and with the re-location of the bus terminal in that area, there was a need for another pedestrian link to the town centre at the location of the ancient ferry crossing point. A public consultation was carried



Looking west towards the old bridge this artist's impression shows the location and structure of the new bridge linking Townsend to Melvin

out by Strabane 2000 which identified the need for two pedestrian and cycle bridges across the Mourne, equidistant above and below the present bridge to make access more convenient from Meetinghouse Street and from John Wesley Street. Reasons put forward for the projects were 'symbolic and physical – to unlock underused spaces by creating new movement and circulation patterns. By connecting to the existing street pattern the bridges are embracing qualitative change with conservation'.

The bridge linking Meetinghouse Street to the Bridgend/Melmount area will be a pedestrian and cycle link for the people north and south of the river. Traditionally girls at post primary stage crossed the bridge to the town side of the river to attend Our Lady of Mercy Secondary School and the Convent Grammar School while boys travelled in the opposite direction to attend St. Colman's High School. since September 2008 all pupils have attended Holy Cross College at Melmount so there is a greater need for a convenient crossing point.

The other proposed bridge will link the town centre to the residential area of Bridgend/McGirr area and will provide easier access to the new bus station, to the shopping facilities at Lidl, K.F.C. and other commercial developments. It will also allow convenient access to the fishing and recreational facilities on the south side of the river.

By 30 June 2006 the technical brief had been issued to the five teams which had expressed an interest in the project. Each team visited the river sites and submitted their proposed designs by September. In November each team was invited to present their designs to the Strabane Board and the Technical Assessment panel.



A night scene shows how the new bridge will be lit up against the dark background and the lights of Lifford

The engineering firm of Roughan and O'Donovan from Dublin was appointed on 27 March 2007 by Strabane District Council after the firm had won an International Design Competition. The winning proposal offered striking features in the landscape of the river area of Strabane.

The design had to overcome the recently erected strong concrete flood wall defence which dominates the views of the river. The sites were described as being ideal for a slender cable-styled structure, with a light visually unobtrusive deck suspended high above the river. A cranked sculptured pylon supported by steel ties is to be used.

At night the lighting design will ensure that the pylon is the outstanding feature of the bridges. The river bank side of the top part of the pylons will be lit by very narrow luminaries, set in the foundations adjacent to the angled pylon back-ties. The on-side of the top half will be lit in a vertical plane from narrow beam luminaries based in the gap between the two bridge decks. The lower part of the bridge will be lit by narrow luminaries located at deck level. The foot of the pylons and the concrete supports will be lit from lights at bridge level.

The designer is seeking the effect of a lightness of touch and provision of a transparent cable-stayed structure supported from an uncluttered triangulated tower structure with a strong vertical visual emphasis. The bridges are designed to be simple and uncomplicated, but to have an 'understated elegance'. The aim of the designer is to feature landmarks which will enhance the visual image of the river vista.

In order to finance the project A multi agency approach was taken to secure funding towards the overall cost of the project which includes the two new pedestrian and cycle bridges and links. The overall cost will be in the region of 3 million.

The artist impression bridge will link the town centre to the bus depot.

The bottom photo shows the bridge to the east at Melvin, linking to Townsend Street



Fishing on the Mourne

The fisheries of the Mourne (& Foyle) are of great environmental, social, sporting and economic importance to the area. The Mourne which flows in a northern direction is 14.24 kilometres in length and has a catchment of 82 square kilometres. The primary fish species present in the river catchment include Atlantic salmon (*salmo salar*), trout (sea trout and brown trout) (*salmo trutta*) sea lamprey, river /brook lamprey, European eel, (*anguila*) pike (*esox lucius*) and perch (*perca fluviatilis*). Salmon and trout are anadromous which means that they migrate between freshwater and marine environments. They return to the freshwater to reproduce. Adult Atlantic salmon return to their natal rivers where spawning takes place. The rivers Foyle and Mourne have the largest population of Atlantic

salmon in Northern Ireland. The River Derg and its tributaries have a channel length of approximately 60 kilometres and a catchment area of 438 square kilometres. The rivers generally flow in an eastern direction from the uplands of Killeter through Castlederg to its confluence with the Mourne at Mulvin, near Victoria Bridge.

Traditionally the fishing rights on the River Mourne belonged to the local chieftain. Turlough Luineach O'Neill was known to have received duties from his clansmen. Later the rights were given to the Scottish Plantation leaders under the ownership of the Earl of Abercorn. The claims of the Abercorn Estate were established in an Indenture of 1703. In the reign of King William III and Queen Mary a document, signed on 19 June 1703 gives

ownership to the Earl of Abercorn. The document states "...and those Castle Mannor Lordshipp & Town of Strabane with all the Tenements therein and the lands thereupon belonging vz part of the Mannor of Strabane.... And the Fishing thereunto belonging together with all Messuages Mills & Mill () lands Tenements Woods underwoods Boggs Gutters waters watercourses Piscaries Fishings and Rights of drawing nets in and throughout the Rivers of Mourne and Finn..." Local groups such as the present Strabane Anglers' Association and the Strabane-Lifford Anglers have enjoyed the pleasure of fishing on the Mourne through the granting of leases.

The Mourne has always been an excellent fishing ground because of the gravel and sandy beds, the lack of overhang trees, which cause

Fishing on the Mourne has always been a popular sport. Here the new 'Bill's Pool' at Lower Main Street attract many fishermen



high acid content, and the deep pools in the river valley. The sharp rise in the river gradient is significant as is the short tidal reach on the Mourne which reaches a mere 800 yards, while that on the Finn stretches over 7 miles to above Castlefinn. Good fishing areas along the Town stretch of river include The Holms, Haggin's Stream at Drumnabuoy, The Black Stone, The Doctor's Water (after Dr. Gordon), Beldoo and the Bluebell Wood from the foot of Beldoo to the Tin Gate, The Mars, The Wood Hole at Sion Mills, Jimmy's Stream below the Bridge and Houston Graham's below the new by-pass bridge. Other names of river locations include The Pear Tree, The Clabber Yard, The Gardens and further on is found The Point of Finn and The Hospital at Lifford. It is interesting to note the evolution in the fishing patterns on the Mourne, partly caused by

climate and environmental change, partly by change in farming methods, and the disturbance to the river bed. Increased drainage has meant that floods subside more quickly, lasting only two days instead of three or four in previous times. Disturbance to the river bed has affected the habitat of some species, and others have suffered because of the discharge from farmland. In past decades many fishermen would have thrown the rod from the bank during flood conditions and in fact for about 3 days afterwards. Gone are the days when the water's edge would have been black with elvers (eels). These little eels hatched in the Sargassa Sea, near the east coast of the American continent; they would take about 2 years to cross the ocean and find their way up the rivers, including the Mourne. These little fish were semi-transparent and leaf-shaped.

They have all but disappeared from our river. Many young people of previous decades will remember using jam jars to catch the beautiful coloured minnow of the karp family. These are no longer in our river. Flukes or flounders were prevalent in the sandy bed of the Mourne and are remembered for their quick darting action when disturbed. Youngsters used rod and worm to fish for fluke. These can no longer be caught along the Mourne. Even the trout have disappeared, as has the semi-transparent loach.

It is also interesting to read claims that our fishing attracts internationally famous personalities such as top golfer, Tiger Woods and T.V. celebrity, Chris Tarrant of 'Who wants to be a millionaire' fame.



Scene site looking towards Alley arts Centre



Two views from the by-pass bridge, looking east up the river towards the old town bridge. This scene gives an indication of the improved fishing facilities. The flood wall runs along the river's edge to the bridge

Floods



A scene in 1929 of the flood at Lower Main Street, showing a horse and cart bringing supplies to the stranded flood victims

Due to varying cycles of climate change, climatologists believe that the 17th century seasons were cooler and wetter. A brief examination of the geographical contours of the area around Strabane would quickly reveal that the south east side of the town is on high ground. This is where the older housing stock is located. To the west and south side the ground is low- lying and liable to flooding. The Calendar of State Papers

recorded on 25 March 1601 'rivers are in high flood, not fordable, due to heavy snow now melting'. In June 1680 it was reported that a warm sunny afternoon was suddenly transformed into a roaring cataract of death. Thunder and lightning, followed by torrential rain occurred which caused a great flood in this area. The Glenelly valley was devastated by the raging waters, as reported in Strabane. 'The thunder clap forced the

bowels of a great mountain belonging to one Elaine Hamilton, after which ensued the fall of a great cloud, which entered the cavities of the said mountain made by the thunder, its weight bore the greatest part of the mountain before it.....drowned 19 people in their houses, turned the whole valley into a desert of dirt....hath killed all the fish for 20 miles in length'.



On the night of 27 October 1987 the Water Wall at Lower Main Street finally crumbled with the force of water from the river. Extensive flooding followed for three days

The *Derry Guardian* and Belfast *News Letter* of 18 March 1858 recorded great floods in Strabane. On the previous Saturday a big thaw caused the River Mourne to overflow its banks. Flooding up to a depth of five feet occurred in the Bridgend area between the hours of 9.00a.m and 1.00p.m. Several families had to be evacuated and 'the passage through the streets and between Mr. Simm's Hotel and the railway terminus, was by boat. Mr. John Graham of the Castle, was particularly active on the occasion, having got a light boat, well-manned with which, after removing a number of persons from houses in the lower part of the town, he preserved twenty head of sheep from being swept into the river and being carried on to the Foyle.....so

great a flood has not been seen in Strabane for the last twenty years'. A strengthened Water Wall had been completed from Strabane Bridge to Lifford Road in 1909. This was still inadequate to hold back the flood waters that winter and again Bridgend, Main Street, Abercorn Square and Lower Main Street were flooded. The rescue boats were once again out on the streets of Strabane.

On Sunday 6 October 1929 there was extensive flooding and the Mourne burst its banks. Bridgend was the first to suffer, leaking 6 feet of water. Locals compared the scene to Venice with boats plying up and down the streets bringing much needed bread and water for up to 3 days to those stranded in their upstairs bedrooms.

Many families had to be rescued and pigs had to be evacuated out of the area to Elliotts on Urney Road.

An indication of the severity of the conditions was shown by the fact that the bridges at Newtownstewart, built in 1890, and the pedestrian bridge at Sion Mills, were both washed away in the strong flood waters.

In 1947 during an extremely poor winter there were severe storms. The River Finn and the Strabane Canal were frozen over. The Canal provided a skating rink for local children. As the thaw set in rivers began to fill up and the town was again flooded.



A view from Main Street looking into Castle Street and Castle Place gives some indication of the 1987 flooding in the town centre

As a result of this season of floods local authorities sought funding to widen the river, dredge the river bed deeper and make the river banks higher. This work was carried out by the DOE during the summer of 1953. Many young people will recall the pools created by the dredgers which allowed for many happy days of swimming during the long hot summer.

Bridgend had always been susceptible to flooding during heavy rain, and especially during long wet winters. The most recent destruction occurred during the night of Wednesday 27 October 1987. After approximately 27 hours of continuous rain the rivers Strule, Mourne and Finn rose very

quickly. The fast flowing and rising water gave early concern for trees, livestock and structure materials. At 1.55 a.m. in the morning 20-30 yards of the water wall inevitably gave way and water poured onto Lower Main Street, and flooded the main commercial centres of Main Street, Castle Street, Railway Road, Castle Place and Abercorn Square. The town was under 4 feet of water. By 6.30 a.m. Bridge Street, McGirr Park and Melvin Park were also flooded. Boats were back on the streets of Strabane to ferry those in need of food or rescue 50-60 families who had to be evacuated from their homes. Ironically, the British Army played a major part in the aid and rescue service for those stranded.

Earlier in the day the pedestrian suspension bridge at Sion Mills buckled and was washed away. Aircraft crossing overhead to report on the disaster recorded a 'sea' of water covering the whole area.

In 1989-90 a new flood wall was built by a Belgium firm at a cost of £7 million. It has been well tested on many occasions since and has stood up to the flood waters. Residents live in hope that the days of flooding and water damage to their property and businesses are in the past.

What's in a Name?



A view from the old railway bridge looking eastwards up the river to the bridge. The town crest can be seen in the bottom right hand corner. The spires of Christ Church, the Convent of Mercy, The Church of the Immaculate Conception, the Town Hall and First Presbyterian Church can be seen in the background.

Some claim the River Mourne was originally the Morne, named after a Prince of the De Danann. Others have said that the name comes from Mor Abainn, meaning Great River. The Foyle, similarly derives from Feabhail, the son of Lodran of the De Danann who was reported drowned in the waters of the Foyle. These names predate the coming of Christ.

According to the renowned topographer John O'Donovan, who translated the Annals of the Four Masters, the name Knockavoe is derived from Cnoc a Bove Dearg or Hill of Bo Dearg in memory of a chieftain of the prominent De Danann who once reigned over the North West area of Ireland.

In Ptolemy's 2nd century map the upper Foyle is shown as Argita which was the ancient name for the River Finn. According to Joyce, a sister of Fergorman named Fionn (fair or lovely) was drowned trying to save her brother in the lake, now known as Lough Finn. The Lake was thereafter, from the 3rd century, called Loch Finne and the river flowing northwards to the Foyle became known as the Finn.

The area above Strabane long associated with monastic settlement is called Camus or Camus-iuxta-Mourne. Camus is derived from the Irish word which means a winding stream or river bend.

Cavanalee comes from Cabhan na Laoigh which means hill or hollow of the calves. Another interpretation is Cabhan Liath which means the grey hillside.

Drumnaboy means a yellow ridge from the Irish Druim Buidhe. There is a possibility that this was Druim na Buaidge which means ridge of the victory.

Names around the town which are associated with the rivers include Bridgend, Riverside Terrace and Riverview, Mourne Avenue, Derg Villas, Finn View and Foyle Terrace.

Other names include:-

Ardstraw	Ard Stratha	High bank of the river
Ballycolman	Baile Ui Colmain	Colman's Town
Calhame	Caol caomh	beautiful narrow valley
Camus	Camus	A winding stream or river bend or crooked bend
Cavanalee	Cabhan liath	The grey hillside / hollow of the calves
Clady	Claidigh	Muddy margin of a stream or river
Drumnabuoy	Druim na buaidhe	Ridge of the victory / Yellow ridge
Edymore	Eadan mor	The big hill face
Evish	Eibhis	Coarse mountain pasture
Knockavoe	Cnoch a bove dearg	Hill of the cow / Yellow hill / bove dearg
Magirr	Maigh Ghearr	short plain or level tract of land
Mourne	Mor Abainn	Great river
	Mugdornia	Mourne River Valley
Stragullin	Srath cuilinn	Holm of the holly
Urney	Urnaidge	Place of prayer, Oratory

River Mourne serendipity

(a)

John Dunlap, printer of the American Declaration of Independence was born in Meetinghouse Street, Strabane in the year 1747. The family home was described as a large thatched house with a small garden at the rear which ran down steeply to the banks of the River Mourne. The actual building was demolished in 1895 to make way for a terrace of three working class houses. The site is marked by a plaque erected by Strabane Urban Council in 1965 which was unveiled by the then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Captain Terence O'Neill.

(b)

The River Mourne is a mere 10 miles long, running from Newtownstewart to Lifford Bridge. The river is tidal for 800 yards, up to Strabane bridge. The tributaries which feed into the Mourne include the River Derg, the Cavanalee River, the Douglas Burn, and the Grevenue Burn.

(c)

For many generations the people in the neighbourhood of Camus handed down a tradition that a large stone in the River Mourne close to the Railway Bridge was the font from the old monastery. In 1950 the late John O'Kane Senior was working with a group of volunteers, constructing the Lourdes Grotto at Townsend Street. He brought the men to Camus and together they retrieved the stone and brought it to Strabane where it now stands proudly in the Grotto, which is the site of the old St. John's Church.

(d)

During the construction of the new flood wall at Strabane in 1989-90 the remains of a large tree trunk was found under the foundations of the old river wall. It has always been claimed that large oak trees lined the east side of the river above and below the Bridge. The tree measured over 5 feet in diameter and was estimated to be over 300 years old.

(e)

Brian O'Nolan had cherished memories of his childhood and subsequent holidays in Strabane which he described as 'the happy-go-lucky town at the confluence of two tumbling rivers'. His brother Ciaran wrote that the days he and Brian and brother Gearoid spent by the Mourne were the happiest days of their lives 'particularly the hours spent in the long grass of the River Bank while the sun seemed to stand still in the cloudless summer sky and they could hear the distant clank of mowing machines and the faint hum of the turbines in the linen mill....'

(f)

George Otto Simms, a native of Lifford who held the position of Primate of Ireland, recalls "growing up in the valley with the hills in front of us and behind us, was a gentle, quiet process...we ranged freely enough in what were country surroundings with the town life of Strabane but a mile away in the bordering town of Tyrone...the



View of flood defence wall

rivers that glinted in the sunlight on a wintry morning seen from our windows, through the bare branches of the trees, lent distinction to the Lifford/Strabane neighbourhood. The stately waters shaped the valley.

The Mourne and Finn met before our very eyes and formed the broader Foyle, sending it on its way to Derry and the lough beyond, a stretch of some fifteen miles. Often in flood, rich in fish, majestic in their onward flow, we found these waterways as they dominated the landscape but with familiarity and affection we named and claimed as part of our life these rivers and their tributaries, the heather hills and each peak of their range. Purple headed Knockavoe and the sprawling contours of green topped Croaghan were special and constant companions.

(g)

A contemporary description of his native Strabane by Dr. John Gamble who was born in the town in 1770.

'It was evening; the setting sun shed its ray on the hill which was opposite me, and threw a ray of glory on the distant mountains. The lower part of the town, surrounded by water, appeared like a city in a lake, or like a Venice in miniature. The neat little cottages of the upper part, as I caught partial view of them through the trees, realised the visions of the poet, and transported me, as it were, to Arcadia. I do not say that Strabane will appear so to everybody; short-sighted persons have a kind of second-sight; they do not see what others see, but, to make amends, often see what others do not. Much of this magic colouring, however, dissolves on entering the town. What was beautiful in perspective loses its charms contemplated at hand.

Strabane, like most pictures, many men and women, appears to most advantage at a distance.'

(h)

Dr. Francis Rogan founded the first dispensary in Strabane, situated at Upper Townsend Street, in the early years of the 19th century. Evidence of the health hazards of Strabane were recorded. In 1817 he wrote an article concerning health conditions in the area and he referred quite a lot to a very serious flood in the Mourne in 1815. He talked about cholera and dysentery which were plaguing the people of the town and leading to loss of life. These conditions were directly contributable to the flood because the sanitation was very crude and literally washed about the area.



A family group enjoys a pleasant stroll along the Water Wall at Lower Main Street. The trees and vines have been planted as part of the Strabane 2000 project.

(i)

The bridge at Milltown, Burndennett, is known as the Presbyterian Bridge. It was built over 250 years ago by the congregation of the Presbyterian Church at Donagheady. In 1943 repairs were made to the River Dennett to prevent a re-occurrence of flooding.

(i)

The bridge at Clady four miles south of Strabane was almost blown up in 1922 by the I.R.A.

Oliver Cromwell's troops crossed at this fording place during 1650.

James II led his troops across the shallow crossing at Clady in 1689 on his way to lay siege to the walled city of Derry. Legend has it that Patrick Sarsfield used the old forge in the village of Clady to have his horse shod.

Celebrities such as Tiger Woods, the World's Number one golfer, and TV presenter, Chris Tarrant, of 'Who wants to be a Millionaire' fame frequently fish on the Rivers Mourne and Finn.



A view from Milltown, showing Melvin Park and the beginning of the flood wall on the south side of the river.

Reference in song to the River Mourne



The Point of Finn where the Mourne and Finn become the Foyle. It is mentioned often in poetry and song.

Exile's Longing: by H Devine, Texas

"...The Mourne flowed beneath us
Its banks with flowers dressed
And Strabane just sat beside her
Like a swan upon her nest..."

Memories: by Joseph McCrossan

"The bridge which spans the river
a river famed in song
where the boys yet go a-fishing
when the water's running strong..."

Oh! sing me the songs: by William Collins,
New York

"...When I roamed with my friends who were kindest
and dearest beside where the Mourne & Foyle's water
flow...."

A sigh for Old Times: by William Collins,
New York

"....In Tyrone among the bushes where the Finn and
Mourne run
Where my heart was gay and merry, reeked then not of
care or toil
....among the field and meadows, fair by Mourne
winding way
Or the slopes of Knockavoe, bedecked heather brown
That rises o'er the Mourne shore..... "



A romantic view from Croaghan with the town, rivers, bridges and Knockavoe in the distance

The Sands of Mourne: by Author unknown

"...Oh! I see the brown burns flowing
And the strong men busy sowing
And the restless cattle lowing
As the twilight hour draws nigh
Just to watch the white clouds flying
From the mountain breeze' sighing
While the Sands of Mourne are silver,
underneath the northern sky..."

Flower of Sweet Strabane: by Author unknown

"...adieu then to the Liffey' banks, and Mourne's water side
I'm sailing for America whatever may betide
Our ship is bound for Liverpool straight by the Isle of Man
Adieu my dearest Martha, the flower of sweet Strabane"

"The bending road to Liskey
Passing the 'Hecklers' at Beldoo
Over the bridge to the Mill at Sion
Just as the workers of old used to do"
By author Unknown

"Oh sing me the songs that my heart loves the dearest
The songs that in Erin I heard long ago
When I roamed as a boy through the fair sunny woodland
Beside where the Mourne and the Foyle waters flow
Oh! Sing then again I could lister for ever
And sit here in silence the summer night long
For memory goes back to the bright shining river
Where I first heard the strains of An Old Irish song."
Exiled scenes of his boyhood by William Collins

A poem written by a local writer to mark 10 years since 1987

As the photographers and reporters
approached our little town
Stricken and very anxious
people were all that could be found
The 21st of October in the year '87
is now remembered since that day
that the flooding waters of the River Mourne,
destroyed everything that came in its way.

.....

Fishing Patterns

Appendix 1

The Mourne is part of the Foyle system which is regarded as being one of the finest salmon-fishing systems in Europe. Because of its nature, the Mourne makes a major contribution to the success of the system. It is a river of fast-flowing streams with intervening pools, long stretches of gravel beds which are the ideal habitat for spawning, and an absence in the main of coniferous forest plantations close to the river, plantations which can leave a river with a high acid content. Harmful to aquatic life, is also a very beautiful river.

Fishing patterns in the Mourne have changed over the years. Two of the factors in this change are -

(i) improved drainage in the Mourne and Foyle valleys and (ii) the increased use of fertilisers and pesticides which are discharged into the river.

As a result of the improved drainage, floods which would have given good fishing for four or five days now subside in two or three days.

In the years up to the '30s and '40s decades, it would have been a common sight to have men and boys worm-fishing from the banks anywhere between the railway bridge up to the Holm's in the first two or three days of a flood.

Sadly that is no longer the case. Sea-trout have almost disappeared from our rivers, brown-trout have decreased in numbers and size and our worms have disappeared.

The greater damage to our river has been caused by the discharge into waterways of harmful pesticides. These have affected native brown-trout, minnows, roach, fresh-water clams and insect life. Eels which come from the Sargasso Sea into our rivers have almost disappeared but this may be due to some happening in the spawning-area at sea. Salmon are not affected as they do not feed once they enter fresh water.

Contributed by Declan Doherty

Significant on the Mourne & Foyle

Appendix 11

Blackstone
Haggin's Stream (Gordon's of Stragullen on right bank)
Scroggs
Bluebell Wood
McCay's
Doctor's Water
Beldoo
Smyth's Flats
Millstream
Gardens
Clabber Yard
Doran's
Bungalow Stream / Jimmy's Stream
The Slip
Billy's Pool
Between the Bridges (The railway bridges)
Houston Graham's
The Bowl
The Strand
The Barrack Yard
Factory Hole
McCorkell's Gate
Mint Island
Green Brae
Island Mor



Significant fishing location



Billy's Pool at Lower Main Street, above the new road bridge and below the Slip

Very good brown-trout and sea-trout were caught in the area, with the odd salmon as the river was mainly shallow and not suitable for holding salmon. Large numbers of roach congregated at the untreated sewerage discharge points and these were much fished for by tourist anglers and many coarse angling clubs. Some record catches were made by English anglers on the lower Mourne in the early 1960s. Good numbers of brown-trout were taken by the few local anglers who fished at that time and the appearance of the March brown-fly (a large brown fly) during mid-April was feasted upon by the trout. But this fly has now disappeared from most rivers since the 1960s. Excellent catches of sea-trout were taken in late June and especially in July when the 3/4lb trout appeared. These were caught on the fly, mainly at dusk. Floods were much looked forward to with many

people out with two rolls of 10 yards of brown flax line wrapped around a leg or stick, and a black-headed worm which was found under every sod at that time. Good catches of trout, fluke or eel were common place.

A great transformation of the river took place early in 1980 when the sewerage was pumped to the new treatment plant at Green Brae on the Foyle. Even now in periods of low water anglers can fish in clean water whereas in the earlier days the river was stinking—so good is the river now that the dipper, king fisher and otter are quite common.

A big explosion in angling numbers took place in the early 1970s and an angling club (Strabane & Lifford Club) was formed around 1980 and was responsible for the development of new angling pools upstream of the by-pass bridge. The driving force behind this new

project was the Chairman, Mr. Billy Diver, a local tackle dealer, who, following a visit to River Moy in Ballina, Co Mayo, decided to create something similar to the new pools there (the salmon mecca of European angling) in this area. As a result the area upstream of the Bridge (a very shallow area) was deepened and now anglers catch approximately 300 salmon annually in that area. The area has been affectionately christened 'Billy's Pool' and is now used by many tourist anglers. During low water in June, July and August it is a sight to behold to see so many salmon jumping and the area yields up excellent catches as a result of the development.

Contributed by Frank Elliott

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