

The Damming of the River Lee

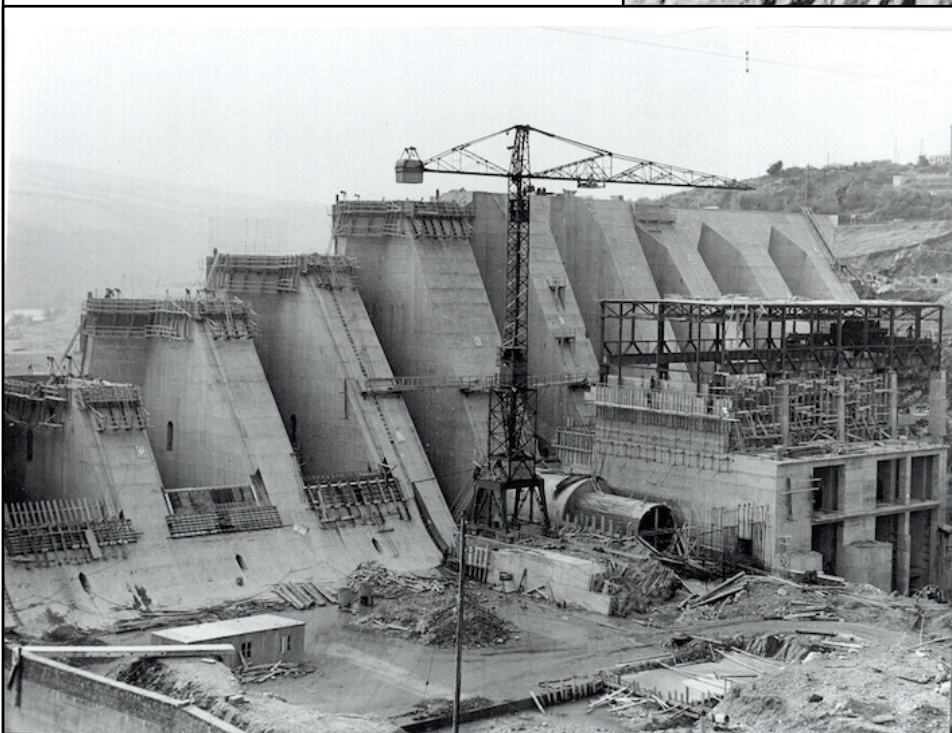
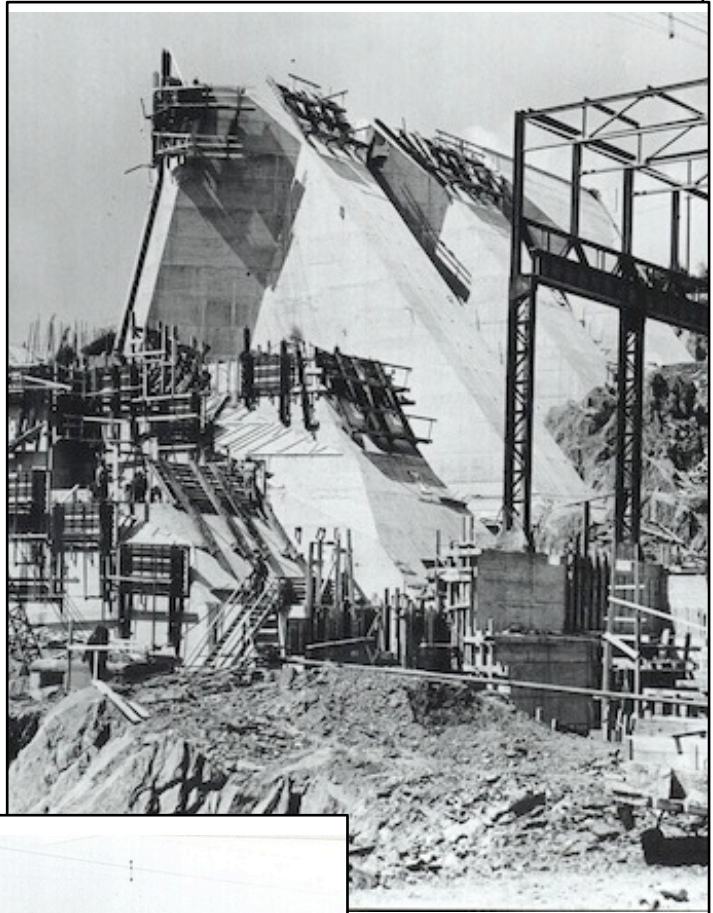
Compiled by Richard Murphy from articles written by Tim Sheehan, RIP

In 1848, farmers in Mid Cork, as well as farmers in other districts, became alarmed at an announcement from the then Minister for Agriculture, Mr James Dillon, which amounted to a break in the traditional farm labourer market.

In hindsight, it is now understood that he was a person of vision. At that time, the farm labourers in the more prosperous areas of Mid Cork were paid £2 per week. Mr Dillon stated that the farm labourer should be paid £4 per week, and forecast that the farm labourer of the future would be equally skilled with his counterpart in industry, and paid wages equal to factory workers. In Mid Cork particularly, there was a more ominous threat to farmers in 1948. Work had begun on the River Lee at Inniscarra as a forerunner to a well-conceived policy by the ESB to step up rural electrification in Ireland. The employees taken on at the works of soundings were mainly local farm labourers who spoke fortuitously of the big construction work that was to come. Work that would absorb every farm worker in the district.

Harnessing water power in the River Lee was in the plans of the ESB since the completion of the Shannon Scheme in 1927. River soundings and a general survey showed the River Lee, with its deep valley gradient, was capable of producing 76 million units of electricity. But the outbreak of World War II in 1939 forced a deferment of the programme.

Work started on the Lee Hydro Electric Scheme in 1952 when contracts were placed with three main contractors – Le Societé de Construction de Batignolle, Paris, known as SCB, who were to excavate the ground and lay concrete in the two dams, Inniscarra and Carrigadrohid, as well as erecting the two powerhouses; Semens-Schuchert of Germany



whose contract was to install the turbine and generator in the western dam at Carrigadrohid, another German firm J M Voith of Mannheim was contracted to erect the turbines and pump at Inniscarra; Brown-Vovert of Switzerland had the contract of fitting the generators at Inniscarra; while the English-Dublin based firm, John Paul Cementation Ltd were to build three bridges and construct new stretches of roads.

The entire project was a giant undertaking involving 306 square miles, extending from Inniscarra to the district south of Macroom. Apart from the two dams, Inniscarra and Carrigadrohid, other relevant constructions envisaged 11 miles of new roadways, three major bridges and several culverts.

Completion of the scheme gave large scale employment, not only for every heretofore farm labourer to the Mid Cork, West Cork and North Cork baronies but also for carpenters, masons and blacksmiths. In consequence, public houses in the surrounding districts, guesthouses and lesser forms



of accommodation did a roaring trade. In fact, within a year it was virtually impossible to find a bed in a two-mile radius of Inniscarra. The foundation of the dam wall at Inniscarra was laid 70 feet below the flow surface of the river bed and embedded in excavated rock on both banks of the river. This assuaged residents of Cork City who feared for a collapse of the dam at Inniscarra at some future time that would drown the city. These fears arose from media reports at the time of dams in Africa and Asia collapsing and causing untold destruction. Though technical explanations removed the fears of city residents and of those living in the eight miles stretch from Inniscarra dam to the city, landowners on both sides of the Lee, who would be losing land in the 306 square miles of the catchment area, were unhappy about the compensation they were to receive for their flooded lands. Historians and archaeologists were also unhappy about the fate of, at least, the two most historic edifices nearest to the dam which would inevitably be the deepest submerged on completion of the ESB scheme. Those two were Castle Inch on the southern bank of the river and the more ancient Innislinga Abbey, an extension of St Senan's

Inniscarra foundation in 520 or 525.

The significance of Castle Inch arises out of the last enactment of divorce in Ireland under the Brehon laws. This castle, formerly owned by the McCarthys, (the last McCarthy there having been Domhnall MacDomhnall) was usurped by descendants of the Norman Barretts in the 15th Century. A girl in the Barrett family of Castle Inch, almost two centuries later married Cormac Mac Teige McCarthy of Carrignamuck, Dripsey who, on having been raised to the Lordship at Blarney Castle, revived a tenet of the old Brehon Law to divorce his wife, Ellen Barrett, to marry Joan Butler from County Tipperary.

Landowners in the catchment area were advised in 1955 not to till the portions of their lands which were to be flooded on completion of the scheme. A 70-acres holding of Patrick Buckley of Fergus, Coachford was to be lost in the flooding. However, the Buckleys, having raised a corn crop in this designated portion in 1955, felt it would be uneconomic in good farming logic not to follow with a crop of potatoes in the hope that the crop might be lifted before the expected flood water would rise to this field level. The chance of securing the potato crop turned out to be touch and go. It was scarcely

cleared off the field in the face of the encroaching rising water levels. This crop, the last potato crop in the catchment area, was a media topic. The Examiner sent a photographer in the late Autumn to photograph the operation. Most of the surrounding neighbours helped to lift the crop in one day. There were tears and laughter from those engaged, all agreed that a potato would never again grow in the field.

The floodgates of the dam were closed in mid-Summer 1956 but the trapped water did not rise to the required level on the dam wall face until the second week of November.



Former Hurling star, the late Senan Morrissey, at work on the River Lee SHEME

The Sword that Once Was O'Neill's

Finbarr Healy of Curraleigh, Inniscarra never in his dreams or ambitions in his life entertained the notion that he would be the finder of one of the most historic battle swords ever found in this country. Finbarr, an established Inniscarra resident for many years past, was not of the parish. He was born in Rusheen, near Macroom, where he went to school, and his ambition was to become a driver of heavy machinery. As a youth of six feet in height and weighing fourteen stone, he had little difficulty in securing employment with the owner of an old time threshing set which was hauled along narrow lanes and into awkwardly situated haggards. From that beginning in which he became a good tractor driver, Finbarr progressed to driving heavy machinery, diggers and cranes, with different firms before he took up employment with the main contractors engaged in the construction of Inniscarra and Carrigadrohid Dams.

That firm of contractors, one of four involved in the construction of Inniscarra Hydro Electric Scheme in the early 1950s, were French, officially named Société de Construction, Batignolle, France and locally known as SCB Contractors. By that time, Finbarr had changed residence to an inheritance left to him by an aunt at Curraleigh where he settled down with his Dripsey-born wife, formerly Josie Begley, in a scenic area overlooking the site in the River Lee where work had begun on the Inniscarra Dam. One day during the very fine summer of 1955, Finbarr was operating a heavy digger on the southern end of the Dam outlay where he was excavating an old watercourse in the townland of Currabeg, spotted something protruding from deep down. His first impression was that the object was the head of long submerged fish. He did not stop his machine to investigate; because at that time (and in fact all during the four years the scheme took to complete) a man, or machine, seen stopped meant instant sacking, without redress, by any one of the numerous bosses who might have seen the stoppage from quite a distance. In those years, a leading general-business house in Dripsey was owned by Bill Williams, a High-Church Anglican and a very knowledgeable local historian. He had a sister, an Anglican nun in Belfast. Among his customers was Galwayman Tom Burke, who built an exquisite residence in Dripsey, admired to this day for its picturecard design. Tom was also a heavy machine driver at the Inniscarra works, and every evening on returning home

from work he called to Williams shop, where he was constantly grilled by the owner about any possible finds.

Bill Williams, having learnt from Tom Burke that something was found by Finbarr Healy, immediately set up an inquiry with the firm's management. An engineer who questioned Finbarr investigated the object, and recognised it as the head of a sword. It had the clear inscription – O'Neill. Finbarr Healy was instructed to unearth the object which was actually thirteen feet underneath the top surface where he had begun digging some days earlier. The outcome of the find was that it was a sword dropped by O'Neill's army on the way to the Battle of Kinsale in 1601. Finbarr Healy received a five guineas finders award, and the sword was deposited in Cork museum.

The great O'Neill's anterior chieftain of the North Nial of the Nine Hostages divided territory between two sons, Owen and Conail, naming the divided territory Tir Owen and Tir Conail. Intermittent wars between the two clans weakened both before one emerged as O'Donnells chieftains of Tir Conail, a name which the Lord's Deputy, John Perrott, changed in his good Gaelic to Dun na Gall. At that time, the O'Neills held control over the North and much of Connaught for nine years. Their revolt, and ultimate objective to rid Ireland of the English inflamed the whole country.

However, Hugh O'Neill did not trust the southern chieftains, particularly the McCarthys, and to a lesser extent the O'Driscolls and Longs. He was confident that with their loyalty and support Ireland would be liberated; so, in the year 1600 he journeyed south to meet them, with a view of securing their support. Assistance was promised by Spain. But when the Spanish Army under the command of Don Juan del Aguila with twenty-four ships reached the coast of Ireland a huge storm forced him to land in Kinsale instead of Lough Swilly in the North where the forces of O'Neill, O'Donnell, Maguire and other clans were ready to welcome him and proceed south through the country. The Spaniards were in Kinsale some days before Hugh O'Neill was informed of their arrival. A forced march was undertaken, and details of the route given to the vanguard. From Mourneabbey they were to espy Garravagh Wood, Inniscarra, and cross the rivers Lee and Bride at a ford near Inniscarra graveyard. When O'Neill's army reached Inniscarra they camped overnight on the hills overlooking the River Lee, including Currabeg where the sword was found, and forded the

River Lee early the following morning, en route for Belgooly. From there onward there was little ground cover; because the Lord Deputy, Mountjoy, had already given orders to burn, despoil and ruin corn and other crops within five miles of Kinsale town.

The tragedy of the Battle of Kinsale, brought about seemingly by Divine intervention is widely known. The violent storm which forced a change of port docking; inclement weather from late October to January 1602; dithering of some of the Southern chiefs; disloyalty of others, and the leaked information of a drunken Irishman that reached the English camp and deprived the Irish Army of a planned surprise attack which would have routed the English out of Kinsale. But the real tragedy was to follow. The Northern chieftains never really settled down after the disaster of the Battle of Kinsale, believing that

Gaelic Ireland was a lost cause. In 1607, the O'Neills and the O'Donnells chartered a ship and left for the Continent, taking with them ninety-eight other Ulster Gaelic Catholic chieftains, an event which was termed in history "The Flight of the Earls". It opened the way for the Plantation of Ulster by the Scots king, Catholic James the VI who became James I of England.

Finbarr Healy was oblivious of the historic importance of the sword he unearthed at Currabeg in 1955. Were it not for the interest of local historian, the late Bill Williams, the sword that survived the most tragic battle of Ireland's history might have lain forever in its long resting place mourned by the susurrate murmur of the River Lee as it passed by the tailrace of Inniscarra Hydro Electric Station.

Inniscarra—France—Vietnam

March 1954 was the defining moment in the development of Vietnam fighting for its existence as a French dependent Vietnam Nation. The battle of Dien Bien Phu (FU) began lasting approximately 7 to 9 days resulting in the defeat of French and its Vietnamese allies to the forces of Ho Chi Minh. Following peace negotiations the country was partitioned into Communist North Vietnam and French" friendly" South Vietnam.

The Inniscarra connection

In the 1950's the ESB was constructing on the River Lee two Hydro electric facilities , one in Carrigrohid and another at Inniscarra. The main contractor was a French company. It had a large complement of French engineers and support staff on the work sites.

Following the the defeat of the French army and its heavy losses of dead and injured, the French employees erected a large Cross on the southern side of the river bank and a religious service (Mass) in their memory. For the remainder of the contract the Cross was illuminated every night.

Fast forward to the end of the project. All the staff returned home to France except for one engineer who saw to the sale of all the various items, ie,heavy machinery , dumpers. cement mixers scaffolding, picks , shovels, office equipment along with steel cabins used for storing building materials and offices. The sale was by tender to the highest bidder. The successful bidder was Sherlings in Cork city.

Some two weeks after the completion date for the removal of all items from the site, Sherlings got a phone call saying their contract to remove

everything was not completed . Sam Sherling went immediately to the Inniscarra site and was shown the Cross which was a steel construction. Sam who was from a second or third generation Jewish family in Cork, said he had no intention of removing this item, as nearly two thousand years ago the Jewish people got into a lot trouble with another " Cross". There it remained until it rusted away to nothing.



The large illuminated Cross at Inniscarra bore the Irish and French colours and was originally constructed as a gesture of goodwill by the workers of the French firm Societe de Construction des Batignolles for their Irish co-workers. It was felt that the Cross would commemorate the gallant resistance of French defenders against communism.

Fitzgibbon Bridge

When the original plans for the Dam at Inniscarra were agreed, the Fitzgibbon Bridge, which crossed the Dripsey River just to the west of where the Dripsey River joined the Lee, would be submerged by the rising water and there would therefore be a replacement bridge constructed a little further west at Magoola. The Fitzgibbon Bridge was considered vital to the residents of Cronody and Fergus, the only other crossing being the bridge at Dripsey Cross which would entail a journey of several miles. Of particular concern was access to the Creamery at Magoola and the Dripsey National School.

As the work of the Dam proceeded, residents became anxious about the non-activity in regard to the replacement bridge. Local TDs asked questions in the Dail on a number of occasions:

On 21 June 1955, the question entitled Cork County Bridge was asked by Messrs Desmond and Manley of the Minister for Local Government "whether he was aware

that the people living in the townlands Fergus and Cronody, Dripsey, County Cork, were very dissatisfied at the refusal of the E

to provide an alternative centrally situated bridge in lieu of the Fitzgibbon Bridge, which is being removed because of the development of the Lee hydro-electric scheme; and, if so, if he will make further inquiries in an effort to secure a satisfactory solution to the problem.

Mr O'Donnell, the Minister for Local Government replied: "I have no functions in this matter until it is referred to me in accordance with the provisions of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act, 1945."

On 29 February 1956, referred to as Dripsey Reservoir Bridge Mr MacCarthy, TD, asked the Minister for Industry and Commerce when the ESB will start work on the erection of a new bridge over the reservoir at Dripsey, County Cork, to replace the Fitzgibbon Bridge which leads to the schools and creamery; whether he is aware that it is essential in the public interest to erect the new bridge before the existing one is submerged, and, if so, if

he will ask the board to expedite the work.

Mr Norton, Minister for Industry and Commerce, replied, "I am informed by the ESB that the question of the replacement of Fitzgibbon Bridge is being discussed with a representative of the people concerned. I have been assured by the board that every effort will be made to bring these discussions to an early conclusion."

On 26 June 1957, referring to the Replacement of Cork Bridge, Mr Desmond, TD, asked the Minister for Industry and Commerce if he will inquire from the ESB when the erection of a replacement bridge for the Fitzgibbon Bridge, Dripsey, County Cork, will commence.

Mr S Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce,

replied: "I am informed that the board are considering possible alternatives to the construction of a bridge."

Mr Desmond: "Will the Minister tell the House



In the centre of the picture can be seen the bridge where the road crosses the Dripsey River before it joins the Lee

Mr S Lemass: "I am not able to answer that question."

On 23 October 1957, Referring to Replacement of Cork Bridge Mr Desmond asked the Minister for Industry and Commerce if he will state the present position relative to the erection of a replacement bridge by the ESB in lieu of Fitzgibbon bridge, Dripsey, County Cork.

Mr S Lemass replied: "I am informed by the ESB that they are at present discussing possible alternatives to a replacement bridge with representatives of the local landholders concerned and that they are hopeful of bringing the matter to a satisfactory conclusion at an early date."

The replacement bridge was never built, and this led to the following clause in the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act, 1958

Power to compensate persons for loss or inconvenience from submerging of Fitzgibbon Bridge.

7.—Where, in the opinion of the Board, the submerging of Fitzgibbon Bridge (otherwise known as Dripsey Bridge) situate on the River Dripsey in the county of Cork has caused or will cause serious loss or serious inconvenience to any person who, at the commencement of this Act, is the owner or occupier of land situate in the townland of Cronody or townland of Fergus, both in the county of Cork, the Board may, if they so think fit, pay to that person compensation in respect of the loss or inconvenience aforesaid of such amount as the Board consider reasonable having regard to all the circumstances.