

## The Lough Erne Cot: A History

by George Morrissey Aug 2009

The use of waterborne craft on rivers, lakes, and seas dates back over thousands of years. A variety of rowing, paddling and sailing craft were developed to suit circumstances around the world. They were used for war, fishing, farming, racing, trade, and colonization. Like all navigable rivers across the world the Erne has been the highway of human activity in this part of Ireland since humans settled on the island c 8,000 years ago. The Erne is the third largest river system in Ireland. It has been travelled by Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age people. Early Christian missionaries, the Vikings, the Normans, the O' Reilly's of Breifne, the great medieval chieftains O' Neill, O' Donnell and Maguire, the incoming Scots and English of the plantation, the Irish fleeing the Great Famine, all used the Erne as their highway.

It is commonly believed that boat types develop according to their function and environment. Certainly the Lough Erne Cot evolved as the craft best suited to transport man, beast, machines, and goods between the rocky shores and islands off Upper and Lower Lough Erne. On the inland waters of Ireland, up until the end of the eighteenth century, the normal craft was the cot Irish *coite*, as both literary and archaeological evidence has proved. In earlier days this referred to a sort of canoe or longboat. It was originally burnt out and later hollowed out of a single tree. The tool used for this purpose was called an adze.

In his survey of the literary evidence for cots in the Middle Ages, A. T. Lucas. concluded that all watercraft referred to as cots had their origins as log boats.

### Accidents

The Annals of Ulster record that in 1487 a great wind destroyed cots. In 1505 eighteen persons were drowned when a dug out overturned on Finnlock, the old name for Lough Derg. This must have been a big boat. The different specimens recovered from time to time have varied greatly in size. The annals record the use of the dug out in ordinary events of life, as when, in 1397, Dermot O'Brien, ill from fever, was being conveyed in a dug out on Lough Erne to his house, but in his delirium leaped out and was drowned. An excellent example of a twenty five foot long dug-out, can be seen in the County Cavan Museum in Ballyjamesduff. This craft was recovered from Lough Ennill. It was certainly in such craft that the early missionaries and saints reached the islands of Lough Erne. Pilgrims to the Holy Island of Lough Derg travelled in the dug-out. In 1411 a Florentine merchant described his transport as "a little boat, which was like a piece of roughly hewn hollowed tree trunk."

These dugout canoes only ceased to be used as transport when the great oaks ran out as the forests were cleared. They have left their name to their successors, the Lough Erne Cot. This flat-bottomed keel less boats served the people of the river Erne system for close on one thousand years.

In the mid eighteenth century Belturbet was the main centre for cot building. Sir Stephen Butler, the founder of Belturbet, built many cots, mainly for the transport of goods. Cots of up to fifteen ton burden were built here. Some were up to fifty five feet long. They were fitted with five to six sets of oars, a sail and a rudder for steering. They were later used to carry loads of timber down the River Erne, into the Ulster canal and on to Belfast. They travelled at about six miles per hour. Their use for commercial purposes contributed greatly to the economic activity in the area.

Prior to various drainage schemes being carried out on Upper and Lower Lough Erne in 1860 and 1890, water levels generally were eight to ten feet higher than to-day. Example; the Quay at Killconny Bridge, built to accommodate the forty two ton gross steam ship 'Belturbet' is now standing high and dry. Because of the high water levels vast areas were liable to floods, especially in winter. The records show that seven hundred and fifty acres flooded around Crom Castle alone. That area was densely populated by tenant farmers and crofters. They and their livestock had to be rescued from their homes. The cot was ideally suited for this purpose. Because it was flat bottomed it could travel where a clinker built boat could not. The rising ends allowed the cot to be 'shoed', that is reversed up to the door. The people and animals could then walk on to the cot. This was the original landing craft, a simple design still used by armies all over the world.

In the Upper and Lower Lough Erne areas of counties Cavan and Fermanagh the islands were densely populated until the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until then the Lough Erne Cot was the preferred mode of transport. The family cots were 18ft long by 4ft wide. They were used for many purposes, including travelling to church services, courting, visiting, house dances, wakes and weddings, funerals and smuggling. They were used extensively by farmers to transport cattle, horses, machines, turf, hay and milk. Cots were used at the building of the Lady Cragavon and the Lady Brookeborough bridges in 1933. Bridges that were to ring the death bell for many of the cots. Ferry cots were no longer needed. However, large cots were and still are needed to service the Islands.

## **Smuggling With the Five Ton Cot**

A large ferry type cot was used to smuggle 5 ton of sulphate of ammonia across the border into the Republic at the head of Upper Lough Erne during the Second World War. The fertilizer was used for the growing of sugar beet. It was not available in the Republic. This arduous and very dangerous task was usually done at night and in all weathers. The loaded cot was towed across the Lough behind an eighteen foot clinker built boat. The towing boat was fitted with an engine taken from an Austin Seven car. Having crossed the border the smugglers turned right into the Woodford Canal, then first left into Anoneen Lough. The contraband was then unloaded and carried up Curry's field to where it was safe to use a horse and cart to complete the operation. A lorry took it to the Counties Meath and Westmeath where the sugar beet was grown. The hessian sacks each weighted 2 cwt=100k. The smugglers did not return empty handed. They loaded the cot with six week old pigs. The pigs were well sedated with Guinness. This was done so as to ensure that the customs men did not hear the pigs squealing. The pigs were fattened up in Northern Ireland and eventually sent to England. Food was very scarce there at that time. The 5 ton cot was also used to smuggle flour into the Republic and the return load consisted of Indian meal. A television re-enactment of a smuggling scene was filmed at Aghalane Bridge in 1997 for Ulster Television. The 'Smugglers' were Kevin Timmins, Sean McElgunn and George Morrissey; using the cot he built in 1995. These men were also expert advisers for the production, having considerable first hand knowledge of smuggling.

## **Ferry Cots**

The larger ferry cots measured twenty four feet by ten feet. They were very strong because they were used to carry up to thirty people, or a mix of people, cattle, horses and machinery. This usually happened on market days. The late Mr. Paddy Gunn Curatistune, Derrylinn, was a noted cot and boat builder. His family built cots for three generations. Paddy built and operated a ferry cot from Derrylinn to Lisnaskea. Intending passengers hailed or 'shouted' for the cot from the opposite shore. He also built a model of a family cot for the National Museum of Ireland in the spring of 1953. Later that year he built a similar model cot for the Ulster Museum. Paddy also built a ferry type cot for use on the Woodford Canal at Dernagore Ballyconnell in 1966. A thirty four acre island was created when the canal was dug, and access was required. It was built in the open on the banks of the canal. This was the only cot to be fitted with steel crutches or ribs. The first tractor to be taken across the Woodford in the new cot was owned by Mr. Mervyn Foster. Knockadoose, Derrylinn. The remains of this cot can still be seen near to where it was built at Dernagore.

**Bernard McAvenue.** Dernaglush, Belturbet, was also a noted cot and boat builder. His cots complete with oars were sold for four pounds ten shillings. He was rated to be the best cot builder in the area.

### **John Comiskey's Cot**

John Comiskey and John Murphy Derrylinn built a cot in response to a challenge to a race in eighteen hundred and fifty- four. The ten verse poem says that, between tar nails and oakum it cost over ten pounds, and her top sails reached up to the sky. Her name was " clear the way." She was a three man cot and she won the race in fine style.

### **The All Steel Cot**

Jack Moorhead, garage proprietor Maguiresbridge and Jack Grenaghan a local handy man built an all-steel cot in 1964 for Lisnaskea Rural Council. She was required by the farmers to service the twenty six islands (1,400 acres) throughout Upper Lough Erne. This vessel measured thirty eight feet by ten feet and weighed 4 tons. A summer flood was required to sail her down the shallow Coldbrook River. They did not have long to wait. Scrap iron was used as an anchor to slow her down. The steel cot served the islanders for thirty two years. She was propelled by the use of a motor boat tied to her side. The total cost was five hundred and fifty pounds sterling.

### **The Upper Lough Erne Islander Cot**

William T Carter Chairman International Fund for Ireland launched her successor, The Upper Lough Erne Islander Cot at Lisnaskea Boat Club on 26 February 1997. She was named by Paddy Gunn Derrylinn the last remaining traditional cot builder from Upper Lough Erne. The builders were Alex Morton Welding Contractors, Dromore, County Down. The cost was one hundred and forty thousand pounds. The Islander is the first self propelled cot to serve the islands, and as such she has at last overcome the natural barriers of the Erne. She is fifty feet long with a thirty cattle capacity. She serves the farmers who farm land on islands on Upper Lough Erne covering a geographical area from Bellisle to Crom. The Islander will be used to maintain an essential service for the island farmers and help to preserve their way of life.

### **School Cots**

Cots were used to transport school children across rivers. School cots were fitted with long chains at each end. The chains were secured on each bank of the river. The children used the chain to pull the cot across the river. A school cot was used on the school river at the down stream end of Pholia's Cut. It was located there for the use of children who lived in the townland of Coragh. There was no school in that area so the children had to cross the river to get to Derravona School. They then walked up the Grassyard field to the school. This field was where football and other sports were played at that time.

## **The School Church Cot at Crom Castle**

The school children at and around Crom Castle traveled to and from school in a cot. This was necessary because their school was located on an island across the Lough from the castle. The children were rowed across and back. Mr. Gray the estate carpenter built a special thirty foot long cot for this purpose over one hundred years ago. This cot was re-built in 1950. Those involved in its restoration at that time included George Ryan and Hunter Say. History appears to have repeated itself as in 1999 as George's son Alistair Ryan and Hunters grandson John Say carried out major repairs on the cot. The Crom cot was refurbished yet again in 2005. It is used to ferry cyclists on the Kingfisher cycle trail from the Crom Visitors' Centre across Upper Lough Erne to Derryvore Church. The school cot was also used as transport to church services in Derryvore Church.

## **Cot Borne Funerals**

Mr Dick Fitzpatrick Newtownbutler related that his grandfather told him that one of his most abiding memories from childhood was the sight of a local man's water borne funeral. The flotilla was comprised of about twenty Lough Erne cots sailing up the Lough in the shape of a V. The coffin was in the lead cot. The most striking aspect was the coffin being held in place by what were called "coffin stakes". These were four wooden stakes, which were shaped to fit around the side of the coffin. The four men holding them in place stood at a very respectful 'attention.' The coffin stakes were placed in such a way that the coffin could not move from the cot. In 1821 nineteen people were drowned when a funeral cot, which had set out from the shore of Little Derryinch, foundered in a storm.

## **Saint Mogue's Burial Cot**

A cot was used to ferry the dead across to St Mogue's island burial ground in Templeport Co Cavan. The cot was supplied by Cavan County Council. In the film Korea an Island funeral is depicted using a cot. The refurbished cot was originally built by Bernard Mc Avenue. Belturbet. Like many other cots this cot was used for smuggling, in this case the contraband was thread.

## **The Hedge School Cot**

There was a Hedge School in a turf shed at the rear of the Morris home No 20 Barrack Hill now Morrissey Park. The school master Mr. Bernard Fitzpatrick traveled from his home in Coragh by cot.

## **A Tub of a Cot**

A man who lived on the shore of Grilly Lough took on to build a cot for his neighbor Tom Reehill who lived on the opposite side of the Lough. The fact that he was not very handy and that he did not have any experience of cot building

did not deter P----- . When the great day arrived for the cot to be launched on the Lough it immediately became apparent that the vessel was leaning dangerously to one side. The builder soon rectified this fault by placing large stones on the light side. The cot was so used until one day P---- was out in the cot trawling for pike and he hooked a big one. When he leaned over the edge to lift the fish into the boat the stones rolled over to his side and their additional weight caused the cot to capsize leaving P---- sitting on top of the upturned cot. He was so upset about the entire episode and the resulting jibes from all and sundry that he cut the cot up into small pieces. The imbalance in the weight of this cot was most likely caused by the incorrect angle of one of the *lagan* boards. See *Cot Construction* below.

### **John McGoldrick Lisnaskea**

Built and operated a ferry cot at Inishkooke Quay. A photo of his cot complete with raised side boards for cattle and John casting off appears in the Erne interpretive centre at Beelek.

### **The Cot at the Bloody Pass**

The deceased parents of Damian McDonald the Bloody Pass, Belturbet commissioned Mr. McDonough, Gobb to build a cot for the purpose of coting stones across the river over eighty years ago. The stones were needed for the construction of the present home. This cot was built a foot wider than usual at one end to accommodate a large load. This cot was in every day use by Damian until very recently. A Government grant of £5 was received for the building of the house.

**Mr. Kennedy** of Lower Bridge Street Belturbet owned a twenty three foot cot. This cot was used by William Stewart, Deanery, Street, to cot stones across the river Erne from Turbet Island to Mill Walk. The stones were used for road building by the County Council.

### **Cot Construction**

It required great skill to build a good safe, straight, speedy cot that could be used to convey all manner of goods, and also give a good account of it self in the local cot races. The races were held at Crom castle and at Trannis Island. Special narrow six man cots were built for these events. They usually gave a good account of themselves so long as there was no side wind to blow them off course.

When a family sized cot was to be built at say eighteen feet long the seasoned larch boards for the main body of the cot were sawn at that length. Seasoned timber was always used in cot building. The larch tree was felled and allowed to lie in log form for about six months before it was planked; sawn into boards for

use. Unlike fresh sawn boards the seasoned timber would not warp or twist. Cots were eighteen inches high. The boards for the bottom were cut at one and a half inches thick and one inch thick for the sides. The builder had a frame or stocks, made of planks, on which he commenced to build the cot. The three bottom boards, their width depended on the size of the cot needed, were placed on the frame. They were then nailed together with crossbars. The pitch, that is to raise the fore and aft ends higher than the bottom was then given to her. This was done by filling the middle of the cot floor with heavy stones. A fire was then lit under each end to be raised, and a container of water was brought to the boil. The steam eventually softened the timber, and the ends were raised. A string was placed from end to end to ensure that the all important level was maintained throughout the construction. A level and a rule were also used for this purpose. The understrake or lagan board was then fitted. The angle at which this first side board was joined to the floor boards was crucial to the eventual successful shape of the cot. This applied equally on both sides. The side boards on any boat were called 'strakes'. If the first (lagan) side board was fitted at the wrong angle the cot would be box shaped and uneven. She would be very hard to pull and liable to overturn, a tub of a cot. A specially made bevel was used to achieve the correct splay on her side. Having fitted the first lower side board at the correct angle the crutches (or ribs) were then fitted. It is the crutches that hold the entire cot together. They were made of seasoned oak. Before they were cut a model crutch was made to suit the splay after the understroke was put in position on the floor. The model was taken to the saw mill and the required number of crutches was fashioned according to it. They were fitted in pairs, side by side for strength. Wooden pegs or dowels were used to add to the strength. Oak wedges were inserted at each end of the pegs. Steel nails or square copper nails were used to secure the bottom and the understroke to the crutches. These types of nails would not rust. Where the above three met a small section was cut out at the back of the crutch. This was to allow rain water to drain down to the bottom of the cot, where it could be bailed out.

The two end blocks were then fitted. They were solid blocks of seasoned oak. They were nailed to the floor. The side boards, called strakes, were then fitted. They were given a one inch overlap. The crutch was specially cut to allow for this. This is called clinker building. They were nailed to the understroke, the crutches and the end block. The gunwale or gunnel was then nailed to the top of the crutches and to the end block. Lastly the oar saddles and oar pins are fitted. The oars were made of seasoned larch, with a rectangular blade and boxing to save the part that plays on the oar saddle and oar pins. The oars were long and heavy. It was because of this that they were part balanced on the gunwale to such an extent that the ends protruded into the cot and crossed over each other. In the case of larger cots a special oar was made called the steer or rudder. Two movable pins were fitted at the rear of the cot for it. In cot racing with smaller cots, a short paddle was used. The person who used it was called the Cox. He could turn the cot in any direction with one stroke, and he could give great help to the men on the oars. Where the boards over lapped on a cot the joints were

plugged with a residue from the rope manufacturing industry called oakum. This waste was teased out by prisoners who were not rated medically fit to perform heavy work. (Oscar Wilde teased oakum in Pentonville prison). Cots were waterproofed and sealed using two coats of boiling tar into which was added lime or cement to make it good and sticky, and to reduce the froth. The boards at the joints were soaked in tar, as was the oakum before it was forced into the joints, creating a perfect seal.

The alternative method of cot building was called the three door system. The floor and the two rising ends were made separately, thus the name three door. The two rising ends were joined to the bottom at the required angle to give the necessary pitch fore and aft. The ends were joined to the floor by using a landing board. This was a wedge shaped piece of seasoned oak fitted where the ends and the floor meet. The landing board being so positioned took the pressure when the cot met the rocky shore and so saved the floor of the cot from damage. The landing board was easy to replace. The completed cot was sunk in the water for two weeks in order to swell out the boards. The water tightened the joints still further. This was called 'Stenching'.

Cots were eighteen inches in height. Blue (channel) clay was often carried on cots. It was used to plug holes when a leak would appear. This type of temporary repair often became permanent. Cots were said to be pulled not rowed. Boats called cots were used on Lough Neagh, the Shannon and at Mornington. However none of these were the same shape as the Lough Erne Cot. A mule cot was used to carry bricks from Enniskillen to Belturbet and a load of special sand was taken back. The rower was paid one shilling per load. The boat was called a mule because it was a cot at the rear and boat shaped at the front. A poitin maker was said to have made the spirit on a cot. In doing so he could easley evade the police because the cot was very maneuverable and the police launch was very large and cumbersome.

**George Morrissey** Belturbet built an authentic Lough Erne Cot in 1995. This was done under the supervision of the late Paddy Gunn Curratistune Derrylinn. Sean McElgunn was the instigator and the fund raiser for the project. This cot was donated to Cavan County Museum Ballyjamesduff in August 2007. It was placed beside its forerunner the dugout canoe. The demise of the cot was brought about by the building of bridges, the introduction of Railways and road transport also the use of fibre glass and other modern boat construction materials.

### **The Genesis of the 1995 Cot by Sean Mc Elgunn**

George Morrissey and I both arrived back home in c1995 having spent many years away. We were bemoaning the disappearance of the unique craft the Lough Erne Cot, an important part of our heritage. George had built and repaired wooden boats in the abandoned Narrow Gauge railway shed in Belturbet. Soon



the idea of building a cot began to take shape. In his methodical way George began the research. He examined two survivors we found. Bogues cot for passengers in Coragh, and Damien McDonald's large cot at the Bloody Pass in Derryvona.

George also started a series of visits to Paddy Gun of Corratistune Derrylinn, a man in his eighties who had built cots. Paddy spent many hours working with George on drawings, explaining among other things that if you were hairs breathe out in the centre line, the cot would not sit level on the water and she would be hard to pull, a tub of a cot.

We had great difficulty finding seasoned larch. I happened to mention our project to Jack Johnson and he said he had seasoned larch at his place in Clogher, Co Tyrone. Jack had the larch cut and taken to McKeon's sawmill. George went down to supervise the sawing into the sizes of planks and brought them up on his trailer. The timber was stored in grand father McElgunn's house in Derryerry, a townland touching the Border on the southern side. The copper nails were very hard to come by. Eventually they were obtained from a chandlery in Cork. The work was ready to start in the spring of '95.

George, his brother Martin and Tommy Murphy had dug up the remains of Tinneny's cot which had lain buried on the shore of Quivvy Lough for about thirty years. This was a stroke of very good fortune, because the Tinneny cot had been built by the master, Bernard Mc Avinnue. In the cot races of long ago everyone wanted to pull a cot built by Bernard. George felt he was able from these relics to, 'get inside Bernard's head', as he put it. We obtained permission from Pat and Conner Rudden of Creeny, Belturbet to build the cot in Packie Fitzpatrick's byre on Creeny Hill. Under conditions similar to those of the old cot builders and using very basic tools, the work started. The crutches were cut by Paddy Sheridan, Mounthugent, he is the last builder of wooden boats in all Ulster.

One day I drove down from Cavan and there she was, that well -remembered shape, sitting upside-down on the trestles. Next the meitheal was called to carry her outside, and she was given two coats of tar. The meitheal was called a second time and the Erne cot was launched for her trial run. She rode the waves like a seagull, sitting light and true on the water. The supreme test, she is easy to pull; I am no oarsman and I pulled her to Pholia's Cutting and back without even breaking into a sweat. The official launch of the Erne cot took place in March 1996.

I want to thank and congratulate George Morrissey for this magnificent achievement. I also thank all involved in this project; and in a very special way, the late Paddy Gunn of Corratistune Derrylinn.

### **The '95 Erne Cot**

The Erne Cot a mighty boat was built on Creeny Hill.  
Ruddens gave permission they loved the old boat still.  
A lifetime now since one was seen on Erne's smiling shore.  
A thousand years of history gone beyond recall, astore.  
But a few white bones from Quivvy strand,  
That once was Tinneney's Cot.  
A broken crutch, a wooden dowel, a rotten lagan board,  
The secrets did unfold  
The larch came up from Clogher  
Jack Johnson was the man.  
The Oak came down from Sheelin side,  
The nails from County Cork,  
The Erne waters called the cot.  
Strong arms were needed now,  
The meitheal came from Quivvy  
From Creeny and the Lawn  
Holborn Hill and Barrack Hill  
All answered to the call.  
And Sean came down from Cavan .  
To where his heart is still  
Lorie took the photos.  
The kids enjoyed the crack  
Paddy Gunn declared she is right  
THE ERNE COT IS BACK.

by George Morrissey cot builder and would be poet.

----THE END.