A Butler Bridge

Edmund Mac Richard Butler known as ‘Richard the Builder’ erected this bridge, now known as the Old Bridge in 1447. It probably replaced an earlier timber bridge, and also a ferry service from the foot of Oven Lane. This was for centuries the first bridge above the estuary of the Suir and hence of strategic importance as a link between South Leinster and East Munster. The city of Waterford downstream had no bridge until Old Timbertoes was erected in the 1790s. In the early 19th century the ten-arch Carrick bridge was modified to accommodate bigger boats. The central abutment may once have supported a toll-house and later held a nail-maker’s forge.

A second Carrick crossing, the John Dillon Bridge (The New Bridge) named after a local MP, was built in 1880 and during The Land War.

Tragedy at Old Bridge

In 1579 possibly the worst accident in the history of Irish inland waterways took place here. Three boats were hired to take a military detachment downstream from Clonmel to Carrick. The boats left Clonmel at half hourly intervals. The river was swollen with thawing snow and the current was very strong. Officer James Fitzgibbon wrote: “When the first boat came within half a mile of Carrick Bridge a boy jumped on shore and took the hawser [rope] with him. He made it fast to a stake but the boat on coming round snapped it in two. They fell away immediately down towards the bridge. Their terror at that moment was not to be conceived. Death was inevitable. The boat ran full speed against one of the cut-waters sideways and was dashed to pieces – the men, women and children spread all over the flood.” Only four men and six women of the 101 passengers on the first boat survived; all of the children drowned. Those on the two later boats landed safely upstream.

“His Grace’s Quay of Carrick”

The river was the main mode of transportation until the arrival of the railway in the mid 19th century. In 1668 Captain J.A. Archer put forward a plan to improve navigation and enable ships to sail directly to “His Grace’s Quay of Carrick”. He foresaw sailing ships from Britain, France and elsewhere dropping anchor in Carrick. To improve the local navigation the Duke ordered the blasting with gunpowder of a large outcrop of rocks in the river facing the castle. The area is still known to fishermen as The Rocks and may hint at the location of the Carriga element of the town’s name.

From 1665 the 1st Duke of Ormond brought skilled weavers to establish a woollen industry in Carrick and Clonmel. Carrick became famous for ratsins, thick woollen cloth “which our nobility and gentry often find to be a most light, warm and commodious wear in winter”. Flour milling replaced it as Carrick’s main industry in the 19th century. Seasonal migration from Carrick and its hinterland to the Newfoundland (Talamh an Íisce) fishery was also a significant component of the local economy from c.1750-1850. This resulted in Irish settlement in Newfoundland and the remarkable survival there of unique Irish cultural links to the present day.

By the early 1790s a towpath was constructed along the north side of the river to allow for horse-drawn barge traffic between Clonmel and Carrick. In 1830 the quaysides were upgraded from Old Bridge to Castle Lane. In 1836 the Suir Navigation Company was founded to manage traffic on the Suir and to improve navigation. Exports in 1837 included flour and barrels of wheat, barley and oats, butter and bacon.

J. Ernest Grubb (1843-1927) founded the Suir Steam Navigation Company in 1877. His boats carried cargo to Waterford and returned with coal and other commodities. The Fr. Matthew was a steam tugboat which was used to haul cargo barges. Lighters were used to transport cargo of up to 40 tons to and from Waterford. When not being towed in convoy by steam tugs, they were punted up river by two men, one at each side of the boat. It took two tides to reach Carrick from Waterford, and the large oars were used to keep the boat in the tidal stream.

The coming of the railway (1850s) and growth in road traffic sidelined Carrick’s role as a port, although cargoes continued to travel by river in boats such as the Knocknagow well into the 20th century.

Cromwell

In 1649 Cromwell’s troops captured Carrick through a strategem. Irish troops from Ulster under Major Geoghegan tried to re-take Carrick, but were eventually beaten off with the loss of over 500 men outside the West Gate. Cromwell later led out his troops across the Old Bridge and marched to Waterford with 5,000 foot and 2,500 horse.