

PRESENT AND FUTURE USES OF THE LAGAN WATERWAY

Present uses

- Although long defunct commercially, the Lagan Waterway is now enjoyed for recreational purposes. The Ulster Way, a long-distance footpath, runs along its towpath between Belfast and Lisburn. This is a very popular destination for walkers, cyclists, runners and bird watchers, attracting over one million visitors annually. The canal towpath is also accessible between Moira and Aghalee, and at Aghagallon.
- The Navigation lies within Lagan Valley Regional Park, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty created in 1967. The park is jointly run by Belfast, Castlereagh and Lisburn Councils with the aim of protecting, conserving and enhancing its built and natural environment for the public's enjoyment.
- The canalised sections of the Navigation have also been designated Scheduled Monuments by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Some lock houses and bridges are also Listed Buildings because of their architectural and historical interest. These statutory measures aim to safeguard the waterway's surviving features from unsympathetic development.

Canal restoration in Ireland

- The Shannon-Erne Waterway, Erne Lakes, Lower Bann, and Newry Ship Canal are now the only navigable waterways still operational in Ulster. Although the Newry and Coalisland canals are long abandoned, their towpaths are still used for recreational purposes.

Further afield, the Shannon and Barrow Navigations and Grand Canal are also still in use, along with the Royal Canal which reopened in 2010.

Today all of Ireland's remaining navigable waterways are used for recreational rather than commercial purposes. They are maintained by Waterways Ireland, a joint North-South Government body which also intends to restore the Ulster Canal between Clones and Upper Lough Erne.

- The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland, founded in 1954 by canal enthusiasts, is also actively involved in restoring and promoting Ireland's waterways. It has branches throughout the country, including the Lagan.

The Lagan Waterway's future

- Various proposals have been made to reopen the Lagan Waterway along its entire length. The Lagan Canal Trust was established in 2009 to progress this vision. This charitable body is funded by the four local authorities along its route (Belfast, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Craigavon) and the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure.
[Check if Castlereagh will still be involved with the Trust after council reorganisation in 2015].
- The Trust's plan is to restore the Navigation to Lisburn, and then circumvent the motorway by making the river navigable as far as Moira. Here a locked section of canal will connect the river with the canal's summit level. The former canal will be then be restored all the way to Lough Neagh. This scheme is virtually identical to that proposed by Acheson Johnston in 1749!

- In the meanwhile, piecemeal restoration continues. Lock 3 and the lock-keeper's house at Newforge have been restored, as has lock 12 and the canalised section at Lisburn Civic Centre. The Union Locks have been conserved and a new footbridge erected over the Lagan. The *Industry* has also been returned to the Lagan here at Newforge.
- Immediate future plans include the construction of a new lock and footbridge at Stranmillis to enable boats to pass upriver from the river's tidal reaches – where it all began in the 1750s.