

# The Great Southern Trail 1991-2010

## A personal reminiscence

*by Liam O'Mahony*

(This is a factual account, augmented with occasional subjective opinions which are mine alone)



The railway came to Newcastle West in 1867 and its arrival is well documented in previous issues of this Journal. For over a century it was an integral part of the landscape and a very important piece of infrastructure in the area. Its decline accelerated with the withdrawal of regular passenger services in 1963 and culminated with the final goods train of 31<sup>st</sup> October 1975.

For another decade or so the tracks remained intact and were traversed once a year by the weed-spraying train until 1984. There was also a sole CIE employee, Denis Foley of Templeglantine, whose responsibility it was to patrol the 53 miles of railway between Ballingrane Junction (near Rathkeale) and Tralee. Denis was provided with a rail-bike to facilitate his work. It had an engine but was prone to mechanical difficulties from time to time. Before the tracks were lifted some CIE personnel pedalled a similar machine along the line, broke down near Newcastle West and got Seánie Kelly of Maiden Street to re-rail them! As the years went by it seemed that this 'mothballing' of the line would continue indefinitely. At one stage in the 1980s the line was offered to a steam railway preservation group who declined because it was simply too long. (An offshoot from this body eventually developed the 'Dingle Steam Railway' which operates between Tralee and Blennerville's Windmill). However, the internal combustion engine, the instrument of the initial decline of the railways, was to intervene again; this time it manifested itself via the Rathkeale bypass which was being planned by Limerick County Council in the mid-1980s.

To minimize interference with farmland the Council's design team proposed laying the new road on top of the railway's track-bed in the vicinity of Rathkeale Railway Station. Despite a vigorous campaign mounted by the Limerick & Kerry Railway Society,

of which the author was Secretary, the Council's will prevailed and in November 1987 the Board of Córas Iompair Éireann formally 'abandoned' (the legal terminology) the railway. It appears that CIE deliberated as to whether or not they should accede to the County Council's request. As late as May 1987 a final inspection car travelled the line with the late Gerry Dalton, Limerick Junction Engineering Dept., making an inventory of the extant assets and of the conditions encountered. However, in the end all 53 miles had to go so as to facilitate about a half-mile of the N21 road.

It is worthy of perpetual consideration to compare and contrast the fate of the Ballingrane Junction to Tralee railway with that of the Sligo to Claremorris line. Both were similar in length; both were once operated by the Waterford, Limerick & Western Railway (WL&WR); both lost their passenger trains in 1963; both closed for business on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1975 – and there the similarity ends. The local authorities in Sligo and Mayo continually supported the campaign to retain the Sligo-Claremorris track in situ pending eventual reopening. Their line was never 'abandoned' and today, as the Western Rail Corridor is progressively reopening northwards from Limerick through Ennis to Athenry (Galway 2010) and Tuam (expected in 2011/2012), there is an increasing prospect of Sligo being once more directly accessible by rail from Limerick. In fact, €5m. has been spent a couple of years ago in restoring fencing, level crossing gates and mileposts along with clearing trees/vegetation from the Sligo-Claremorris route.

Now, let us examine the post-1987 history of the West Limerick/North Kerry railway. The nibbling begun in Rathkeale continued in other locations. At Barnagh two railway bridges were removed and part of the track

was incorporated into the slow lane of the N21 near the viewing point lay-by. Kerry County Council acquired a section at Listowel which is now the John B. Keane road linking the Tarbert and Ballybunion roads.

In Newcastle West the 6-acre station is now Bishop Court with all railway buildings consigned to history except for the Station House itself. Its counterpart in Rathkeale also survives as the Palatine Centre although it was repositioned, being rebuilt stone by stone, since the N21 runs through its original location.

The twin-eyed bridge at Newcastle West was demolished in 1999 to accommodate the widening of the incorrectly named 'Station Road'. (This should have been called 'Railway Road' because station roads invariably provide vehicular/pedestrian access to the station, which our 'Station Road' never did. Therefore, in Newcastle West it is Bishop Street that was the real 'Station Road'. However, I digress ...)

That the nibbling of the County Councils didn't become a veritable feast on the carcass of the railway is as a result of a dogged and persistent campaign by the 'Great Southern Trail', an organisation founded in July, 1991 to bring to fruition an idea conceived three years earlier. The year 1988 began with the physical breaking of the trackwork at Ballingrane in January, thereby disconnecting the moribund railway from the still functioning and quite busy Foynes to Limerick line. The late Noel Phair from Clonakilty was the contractor who oversaw the removal of the 53 miles of railway over the next three years or so. Some 16 miles of the better rails were shipped from Foynes to the Sudan as part of Ireland's contribution to the economy of that African State.

But what to do with the now rail-less railway? Shannon Development came up with an innovative solution – convert it to a linear pathway which would accommodate walkers, cyclists and horse caravans. This would be a first for Ireland. They commissioned John Grimshaw, the founder of the Bristol, England based Sustrans (an acronym for SUSTainable TRANSport) to survey the route and to write a report. John was already experienced in developing the rail-trail concept in Britain where a disused Bristol to Bath railway route became one of their pioneering cycle/walkways.

The Sustrans Report was broadly in favour of developing what was to be called The Great Southern Trail. Newcastle West railway station was to be a major hub with the station buildings being revitalised to be used as craft shops, museum, tea rooms, hostel and tourist facility. A Project Manager, Seán Ó Nuanáin, was appointed and a joint venture with the local

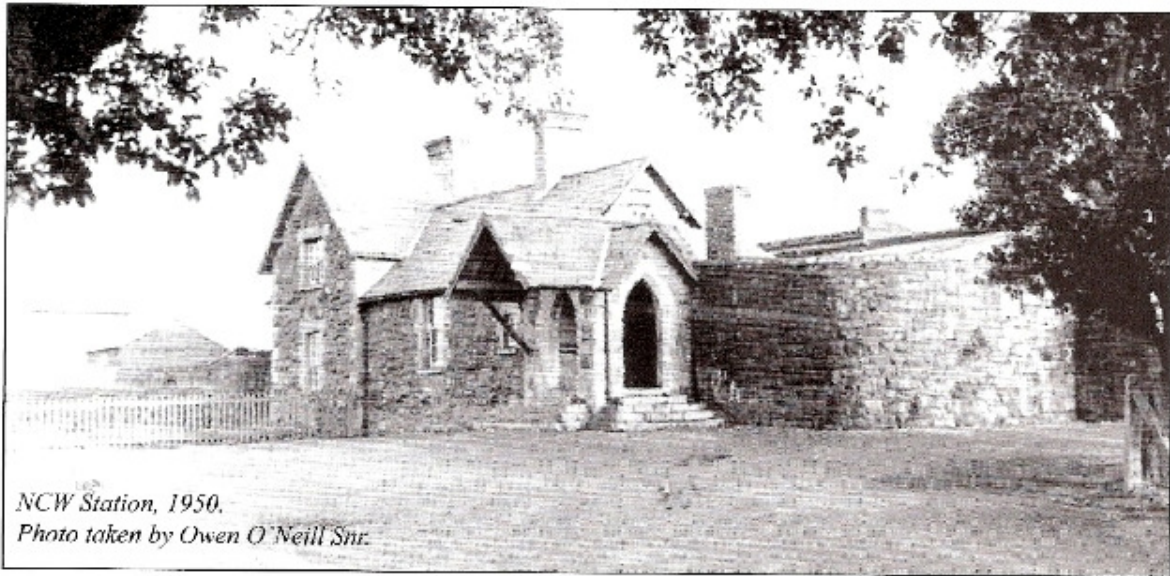
authorities was planned. A public consultation was also embarked upon with a series of public meetings to which adjoining landowners were invited. It was at these that a vocal opposition to the scheme became manifest. A very strong anti-GST lobby was activated and the grand plans of Shannon Development were gradually whittled away with the project being finally abandoned in June 1991 despite there being the nucleus of a counter-balancing pro-trail group in the wings since the previous year.

In 1990, the author had organized a few walks between Newcastle West and Ardagh under the label 'TRAK-TREK' just after the rails had been removed and had also commenced a local information campaign in favour of the rail-trail concept. Thus, in 1991, with the principal promoter (Shannon Development) sidelined and the prospect of funding gone the situation looked pretty bleak. The line looked set to go the way of other former railways – to be sold off to the adjoining landowners in piecemeal lots. This is the fate which befell the Patrickwell-Croom-Bruree-Charleville line some twenty years earlier, in the late 1960s.

However, as a result of the Limerick & Kerry Railway Society's 1986-87 campaign to keep the tracks in place, a core group of like-minded persons was in existence and determined to mount a rearguard action to prevent the disposal of the CIE lands. They were augmented by some new blood with the result that the void created by Shannon Development's stage exit was short-lived. So it was that a public meeting was convened for Newcastle West Parish Hall on Thursday, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1991 under the aegis of 'TRAK-TREK'. Forty-five persons attended and The Great Southern Trail Action Group was founded. Mike Mac Domhnaill, Jim McNamara and Liam O'Mahony were elected to co-ordinate and plan the strategy of the new organisation.

Just over three weeks later, on Sunday, 28<sup>th</sup> July, Gearóid Piersé of Listowel organised a cycle from Listowel to Rathkeale to raise awareness for the coming campaign. The cycle was along the public roads but the bikes did venture into Barnagh Tunnel. A crowd of 100 people was present to greet the cyclists at Rathkeale Station. Liam Barrett, the St. Kieran's clubman and Limerick senior football captain, also lent his support. His team had just been narrowly beaten in the Munster final by Kerry on the previous Sunday.

The following month, on Saturday, 31<sup>st</sup> August, another large gathering convened at Barnagh Gardens by permission of the late Mossie Sheehan (Devon Hotel). The GST's first promotional material, a simple A4 information leaflet, was launched by Cllr. Jim Houlihan, Chairman of Limerick County Council and the late Jim Kemmy, T.D., Mayor of Limerick. Both



*NCW Station, 1950.  
Photo taken by Owen O'Neill Snr.*

men later led a walk through Barnagh Tunnel at which Jim, a stonemason himself, marvelled at the craftsmen who created the tunnel in 1880. Both dignitaries, along with the rest of the large group of walkers, had to roll up their trousers such was the extent of waterlogging due to blocked drains on the tunnel approaches.

Throughout the nineties it was sleeves that were rolled up as the fledgling organisation took up the cudgels for what was to be a marathon campaign. Interminable meetings with local authorities and various state and local agencies clearly illustrated the lack of any will on the part of 'officialdom' to be pro-active on the issue. Individuals within were supportive in many instances but the body corporate didn't want to know. The public's support was also being closely monitored by The Great Southern Trail Action Group (GST) through its various public events. These consisted, in the main, of

- (1) Annual walks with guests such as Donncha Ó Dúlaing (Ardagh Walk); Mayors of Limerick Jan O'Sullivan (Abbeyfeale Walk) and Joe Harrington (Tullig Wood, Templeglantine Walk); Cathaoirleach, Limerick Co. Co. Eddie Creighton (Newcastle West Walk). These all attracted large numbers of participants which was very heartening for the organisation.
- (2) Exhibitions at libraries (Newcastle West and Abbeyfeale); West Limerick Resources Trade Shows (Newcastle West and Rathkeale).
- (3) Launching a book entitled 'GST Review' in 1994. The work was undertaken by students on the Summer Jobs Scheme (SSJS) and highlighted the potential of the GST in accessing several historic and recreational attractions. It also contained an ecological study of Tullig Wood, Templeglantine by the botanist, Gordon D'Arcy.

- (4) A Survey carried out by Summer Jobs Scheme students in 1997 in the hinterland of the railway highlighted positive attitudes to the GST. The students interviewed a large representative sample of the communities along the route. Nick O'Neill of the Social Welfare Department launched the Survey.
- (5) His previous political boss, Minister Michael Woods, had visited the GST at Newcastle West on 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1994 to inspect the physical work done by a separate SSJS workforce on the mile from Newcastle West Station to the Old Mill Road level crossing. In the mid-1990s the SSJS was invaluable to the GST as the students cleared vegetation and laid a basic walking surface along the line from Ardagh to Newcastle West and a short section of the Barnagh trackbed. Their work was supervised by Jim Ronan of the GST.
- (6) A video promoting the GST was filmed and produced voluntarily by George Daly, Newcastle West in 1995. This video was sent to the relevant Government Ministers and their Opposition 'Shadows'.

Despite these myriad activities it was still not possible to make much progress on the ground without funding. Despite the visits of politicians from outside the local area it proved well nigh impossible to involve locally based public representatives, apart from a few honourable exceptions.

As 1999 beckoned one could question the viability of the campaign. Obstacles to progress were not confined to the lobbying corridors but became visible in tangible form as trenches were dug across recently cleared areas, barriers erected and drains were deliberately blocked to create flooding, thereby incapacitating walkers. Compounding this was the spreading of animal effluent

at a number of locations and the demolition of a bridge – which event attracted the attention of Gay Byrne in his Radio 1 programme.

Two events took place in 1999 which heralded a new era. Firstly, CIE entered a contract with mobile phone company ESAT to lay fibre-optic cables along their railway network, with the Ballingrane-Tralee line being the only ‘rail-less’ route included. Thus, while Sligo-Claremorris still had its visibly symbolic thread of steel running through the Western Corridor we in the southwest had our underground thread re-establishing CIE ownership of the route. To instal the cable a new set of contractors followed in the footsteps of Noel Phair who had ripped up the tracks ten years earlier. Once again the corridor was cleared of briars, bushes and other obstacles. The GST seized the opportunity and in 1999/2000 organized large group walks along every inch of the Co. Limerick section of the line along with stretches in Co. Kerry also.

It also became evident that a piece of land with an underground cable wasn’t the most saleable of commodities as it restricted development. It was no longer as attractive a purchase as hitherto. Prior to the cable laying it looked as if CIE, who had been patiently waiting for the local authorities to purchase the line, would indeed be forced to sell off the route to the adjoining landowners as the GST debate had been ongoing without resolution for ten long years. The GST Action Group had been aware of the possibility and had written individually to each member of the CIE Board appealing to them not to make any irrevocable decision. Late in 1999 the Board decided that it was their wish to see the railway developed as a public walkway. This was the second event of 1999 and, coupled with the ESAT cable, it appeared that the tide had finally turned to favour the GST.

As the new millennium dawned the GST had to keep up the momentum. Like an athlete getting his/her ‘second wind’ they continued with the regular walks which were supported by an intrepid band of adventurers. Those who turned up Sunday after Sunday to walk the line in all kinds of weather, not knowing what obstacles they would encounter, are the salt of the earth. Their “true grit” was instrumental in achieving what we have today. The distribution of regular Newsletters/Christmas cards to several hundred people on the supporters list was complemented by the expanding of the Group’s website [www.southernrail.net](http://www.southernrail.net). Gerard O’Connor of Gurrane, Newcastle West has done Trojan work in this respect and the site is ‘viewed’ by a global audience.

On Friday, 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 2000 a major exhibition/seminar on the Rail-Trail took place in Halla Inse Bán,

Templeglantine with Brian Crowley, MEP being the guest speaker. He was joined by the various interest groups and the audience of a few hundred people was treated to a robust debate on the merits/demerits of the GST. As the proceedings concluded it was evident that this seminal meeting to which all parties had been invited was clearly in favour of developing the old railway for 21<sup>st</sup> century amenity use but that this was not to be at the expense of the rights/privacy and enjoyment of life of those residing near the Trail.

Gradually, the new era dawned and in 2002 the Heritage Council grant-aided a habitat survey of Barnagh Tunnel and environs. Dr. John Breen of U.J., edited this study to which Sylvia & Julian Reynolds (Botany, Zoology), Conor Kelleher (Bats) and Geoff Hunt (Birdwatch) contributed. Another renowned environmentalist, Bro. Anthony Keane, OSB, Glenstal Abbey has also been a good friend to the Trail having led many walks over the years.

By Autumn 2002 the late Joan Leen, Ashford was on site preparing the Newcastle West to Ardagh rail-trail (2½ miles) and surfacing the cleared route. This section was officially opened by Tim Finn, Iarnród Éireann’s Strategic Planning Manager, on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

On May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007 the Abbeyfeale-Barnagh section (8¼ miles) was officially opened by an t-Aire Gnóthaí-Pobail, Tuaithe & Gaeltachta Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D. who unveiled a commemorative plaque made at Inchicore Railway Works, Dublin by master craftsman Conor Murphy. The Abbeyfeale-Barnagh works were carried out over a 2 year period by Declan Stack, Contractor (of Devon Road).

Barnagh Tunnel is accessible from the lay-by on the N21 where the colourful, informative and attractive signage designed by Austin Bovenizer (Rathkeale) and funded by the Heritage Council is located at the entrance to this 1km. ‘stand alone’ section.

In July, 2008 the GST received a massive boost when funding of almost €600,000 was provided by Fáilte Ireland and Limerick County Council to link Barnagh with Newcastle West. When this section of the railway was built in the late 1870s it proved to be the most challenging and a similar experience was encountered over a century and a quarter later.

The metal bridge at Madden’s, Garryduff – known as Ferguson’s Viaduct – was restored by the Iarnród Éireann’s Bridge team from Heuston Station, Dublin under the supervision of engineer Michal Majka and foreman Jimmy Hickey. The other 8km. of work was carried out by Jons Contractors in late 2008 and the

early months of 2009. Tadhg McGillicuddy of Tralee was the Consulting Engineer. Anthony Coleman of Limerick County Council was also integral to the success of this major extension to the Trail.

As 2010 dawned, attention was directed towards the Ardagh-Rathkeale section with Declan Stack effecting the initial clearance of the route. The new Minister for Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, Pat Carey, T.D. visited Ardagh Station on Friday, 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2010 accompanied by Iarnród Éireann and other public officials. Further funding from his Dept. has made this five mile section accessible to the public and in excess of 100 people traversed it on National Trails Day, 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2010. It is hoped to further upgrade the surface presently.

The co-operation of the landowners adjoining the Trail is greatly appreciated. The GST understands that its neighbours have reasonable concerns about security, privacy etc. Vigilance has to be maintained to ensure that the Trail is a safe and peaceful oasis in our noisy, speedy world. It is the fervent wish of the GST that the positive reaction to the developed portion will hasten the day when the entire route will be benefiting locals and visitors of all ages and abilities in both West Limerick and North Kerry.

Close to €1m. has now been expended on the Trail development. The GST is most grateful to Dept. Social Welfare; Heritage Council; Limerick County Council; Shannon Development; West Limerick Resources; Roinn Gnóthai Pobail, Tuaithe & Gaeltachta; FÁS; Rural Social Scheme (RSS); Fáilte Ireland; Foras na Gaeilge. Their funding has been augmented by the GST's own fundraising events (which have included group visits to rail-trails in the North of Ireland, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Italy).

Two further short sections, one at Rathkeale Station (the Matrix Way) and the other near Listowel Lartigue Railway (the Sive Walk), have been developed independently of the GST.

The purpose of this essay was to record the happenings of the two decades which have passed since the physical destruction of the railway line that once served Newcastle West. I trust that it will be useful to future researchers. I have named but a few of those who have been very supportive of the Trail and have deliberately refrained from naming those who are long term activists. I will however include the current Officers of the Great Southern Trail organisation.

Cathaoirleach: Liam O'Mahony (Action Group)/Mike Mac an tSaoir (Limited Company).  
Vice-Chairman: Denis McAuliffe, Templeglantine

## RATHKEALE AND NEWCASTLE JUNCTION RAILWAY.

### OPENING OF LINE!

#### NOTICE.

NOTICE is hereby given, that this Line will be Opened for Traffic (Sundays excepted) on and after TUESDAY, 1st JANUARY, 1867.

#### TRAINS WILL RUN AS UNDER:

			A.M.	P.M.
Leave Newcastle	...	...	7:45	1:0
" Ardagh	...	...	7:53	1:3
" Rathkeale	...	...	8:0	1:21
Arrive Limerick	...	...	9:5	2:20
			A.M.	P.M.
Leave Limerick	...	...	10:0	4:35
" Rathkeale	...	...	10:9	5:44
" Ardagh	...	...	11:13	5:58
Arrive Newcastle	...	...	11:30	6:5

(By Order)

HENRY JACOB,

Superintendent.

Limerick Terminus, 24<sup>th</sup> Dec., 1866,

(2832)

Rúnaí: Mike Mac Domhnaill, Gortbuí, Caisleán Nua Thiar, Co. Luimnigh (069-62597)

Treasurers: Pat Condon, Newcastle West; Máire Ní Chearmada, Teampall an Ghleanntáin.

Works Officer: Tom McCoy, Newcastle West.

Walks Officer: Eileen Woulfe, Cratloe, Abbeyfeale.

#### Summary

- Twenty years after the tracks were ripped up the rail-trail is firmly established.
- The three main West Limerick towns and four neighbouring parishes have a safe off-road recreational facility to enjoy.
- The entire Ballingrane-Tralee route is included in the new National Cycle-Path plan launched in August 2010.
- Work has just started on the Tralee end in developing the cycle-way along the Fenit Line. (This parallels the GST route for a couple of miles).
- Local groups in Listowel and elsewhere in North Kerry are seeking extensions to the GST to include their areas.

In conclusion, twenty worthwhile and fruitful years for the many selfless and dedicated volunteers who made the once seemingly impossible happen. Ní neart go cur le chéile!

Further information on the GST is available on the internet at [www.southerntrail.net](http://www.southerntrail.net) where publications/maps/photos/information leaflets may be viewed and downloaded. The website also provides links to rail-trails worldwide as the recreational re-use of old railway routes is now extremely commonplace.