

An Act

(for Improving the Port and Harbour of Drogheda)

By Niall O'Brien 2015

225 years ago in 1790 the world was very different place than it is today.

King George III was 30 years into his 60 year reign on the English throne. In 1790 George III was going through one of his mad spells. In a top ten of mad rulers, George III is usually somewhere between the Roman Emperor Caligula, who made his horse a member of the senate, and Charles 6th of France who thought he was made out of glass.

And although an Irish parliament had sat in Dublin since 1297, it answered to the British government in London and was forbidden from discussing any bill without the British legislature's prior approval.

Apart from being mad, the other thing that King George III was known for was losing the American colonies. America had won its independence from England in 1784 and in 1790 if you wanted to pop over to the newly formed United States and visit the its capital New York, perhaps for a bit of shopping, or to catch George Washington's inauguration as the first US President it would take you around 2 months by sea and when you got there, contemporary reports of New York said that

"the streets were unpaved, narrow and crooked, often unlighted at night and frequently impassable because of wandering pigs."

1790 was one of the only times in history that people in France looked at what was happening in America and thought it seemed like a good idea. Crowds of were peasants were rampaging through the streets of Paris shouting Vive La Revolucion! They espoused Libertay, Egalitay et fraternitay, or Freedom, equality and brotherhood. And their main way of showing this was to chop the heads off of over 40,000 'enemies of the revolution' .

In fact, in 1790, they literally couldn't chop heads off quickly enough, so a Doctor called Joseph-Ignace Guillotin invented a machine that decapitated its subject by use of a lightning-quick razor sharp blade falling onto the neck and severing the spinal column. Dr. Guillotine was opposed to capital punishment and reasoned that his invention was much more humane than hacking away with a sword or axe. Previous to the invention of the guillotine, beheadings could take up to 30 minutes

In Music News, Franz Joseph Haydn's piano concerto number 24 was tearing up the charts in 1790, Beethoven composed his 'Cantata on the Death of Emperor Joseph II' which he'd been working on since it was announced he was ill, and In Vienna, the 34 year old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera "Cosi Fan Tutte" premiered and was generally agreed to be not as good as his earlier, funnier operas.

A Mister Corbert of Sundorne Castle in Shropshire made a wager in 1790 betting his entire estate that he had the loveliest legs in all of England England ...and he won. No images of Mister Corbert's legs survive.

An item was invented in 1790, that was such a perfect feat of design that despite the coming of the industrial revolution, the steam age, the advent of electricity and the invention of the microchip, it has remained as it was in 1790 and is used now almost universally. I speak of course, of the shoelace. We don't know the name of the genius we owe for the creation of this marvel of form and function, but we do know without that person, we'd all be going around with big stupid looking buckles on our shoes today.

Sweden in 1790 was at war with Russia. King Gustav III, declared war in a bid to increase his popularity. 15 years previously King Gustav banned coffee and in 1790 he began an experiment to prove its negative health effects. The king ordered that two identical twins who had been condemned to death had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment on the condition that one of the twins drank three pots of coffee, and the other drank the same amount of tea, every day for the rest of their lives. Two physicians were appointed to supervise the experiment

and report its finding to the king but both doctors died before the experiment was completed. Gustav III, who was assassinated in 1792, also died before seeing the final results. Of the twins, the tea drinker was the first to die, at age 83; the date of death of the surviving coffee drinker is unknown.

In the nautical world, in 1790 Robert Gray became the first American to circumnavigate the globe, something everyone else had been doing since the 16th century, but we have to remember at that time that there'd only actually been an America for 14 years.

The first purpose built Lifeboat went out on her first trial on 30 January 1790 on the River Tyne. On that river in 1789 a ship named *Adventure* ran aground during a violent storm. But little could be done to save the ship's crew because the sea was too rough for the local men and their boats. Instead they had to stand by helplessly as *Adventure's* crew drowned. After that tragedy, a lifeboat design competition was launched and offered a reward of 2 guineas (around €2.68) for the best design. Among the entrants were Parish Clerk William Wouldhave and Boatbuilder Henry Francis Greathead. Wouldhave's design, modelled in tin, was for a boat made out of copper and cork that would right itself in stormy seas. Greathead's model was built out of wood and although it had some great features, it didn't self-right. Neither design was an outright winner. Instead the committee took ideas from both to produce a final lifeboat design. William Wouldhave was offered half the prize money as a reward for his efforts, which he took offence to and rejected. Henry Greathead was asked to build the lifeboat from the final design and went on to become known as the inventor of the lifeboat.

What was life like in Drogheda around this time? The medieval walls were already described as 'in crumbling disrepair' and the town itself had long since spread out beyond them. There was one narrow bridge across the river which had been built in 1722. This building, the Tholsel had been built in 1770, replacing a previous wooden structure on the same site. The average life expectancy in Ireland in the 1790s was roughly 40, but how long you lived was directly related to how well you lived.

In 1798 Drogheda's population was given in a census as 15,225 persons. It was probably about the same size as Belfast and Kilkenny and smaller than Dublin, Cork, Waterford or Limerick. The linen industry was well established by 1760, when it was valued at £50,000 per annum, and by 1783 it was valued at nearly £130,000 which gives some idea of the growth in those years. Of the 15225 population, around 900 had the right to vote and the voters of Drogheda could return one MP to parliament in Dublin. Even at the time it was difficult to get people out to the polls, with the biggest recorded voter turnout being just over 400. The corporation was composed of a mayor, two sheriffs, 24 aldermen. In 1790 they resolved unanimously that

'it is the intention of the Corporation in voting an increased salary to the Mayor that he should give five entertainments on the days prescribed in the resolution and that not having done so whatever remained of his allowance unpaid should be withheld and applied as to the Corporation should seem meet.'

The town was described in 1708 as

'a pretty large town, larger houses and every way [more] like Dublin than any one I have seen in Ireland. It stands on the famous river Boyne which is navigable within the walls to boats of 40 or 50 tons.'

In 1785 John Wesley considered Drogheda

'a large handsome town, which seemed to me to be little inferior to Waterford'.

William Wilson in 1786s 'The post-chaise companion: or, Travellers Directory Through Ireland' said

"Drogheda is a large regular and well built town situated on the river Boyne 5 miles west of the Irish Chanel. It has a good harbour and a barrack for two companies of foot. It was taken by storm by Oliver Cromwell who put all the garrison to the sword. The prospect of Drogheda is very striking from the old towers that rise above the houses at the ancient

walls that surround it. There is a handsome modern church built a very white hewn stone with a lofty spire. Many fine ruins of abbey's are to be met with here."

The definitive history of Drogheda at this time was written by John Dalton in 1844. His book 'A History of Drogheda and Its Environs' tells that at the commencement of the reign of George the Third in 1760 two stage coaches opened a daily intercourse from Dublin to Drogheda and Drogheda was promoted to be a three day post. The post continued to be carried on horseback until in 1790 when mail coaches with guards were established from Dublin - one called the southern mail to Cork the other the northern through Drogheda to Donaghadee. So in 1790 Drogheda became a daily post and by 1844 when Dalton wrote his book, the town received its letters twice every day.

In 1794 Wolfe Tone described having a pleasant evening at the Drogheda home of James Byrd the chairman of the Catholic Committee 'in the company of a parcel of girls' but he described the town as being 'a collection of mudwall cabins surrounded by ancient walls'.

I'm not sure if that's better or worse than the 2010 Lonely Planet's description of Drogheda as a 'Charmless Limbo'.

One thing you would definitely find different was the River. One of the main reasons that early man settled here was because the River Boyne was so shallow at Drogheda crossing was easy, Hence the name Drogheda or Bridgeford. But it also made it difficult to access by boat or ship. In his 1844 book John Dalton records that

'It was formerly very difficult of access being very narrow and having also a bar lying across it over which vessels could not pass except at high water'

So as early as 1703 a committee of Parliament was appointed to prepare a bill for making this river navigable and it was ordered that all the representatives of the adjacent counties and boroughs should be of that committee. Little seems to have been achieved and in 1729 the Corporation of Drogheda petitioned the Irish Parliament

'with the object of having the channel harbour and river cleansed and a Ballast Office erected.'

This Act of parliament made the Mayor, Sheriffs, Burgesses and Commons of Drogheda keepers and conservators of its river and port with

'powers to make by laws for cleansing of the harbour and security of the shipping'

'powers to erect a ballast office'

'powers to raise ballast'

'powers To impose duties'

'And that all monies levied under the powers in this Act , once all salaries and all necessary expenses were deducted, were to be applied to the improvement of the harbour and the overplus if any to support a workhouse for promoting the linen manufacture.'

So the idea was to raise money to improve the harbour through levies. All well and good, but little seems to have actually happened. Maybe after all the 'necessary expenses' had been deducted there wasn't much left over to improve the harbor. Several more petitions were made to parliament

In 1759 £2000 was granted from parliament

In 1761 £2000 was granted to the Corporation for promoting inland navigation.

The money was to be used for deepening the harbour from the pile work below the bridge to the bar of the river

In 1781 £1000 more was granted

In 1783 £1000 more.

And in 1785 an Act was passed to amend the former act for cleansing the port and erecting a ballast office as no ballast office has been since erected.

Basically, from the turn of the 18th century, there were more than 6 acts of parliament and £6000 allocated to improving the port and not much seemed to have been achieved. But in 1790 in consequence of repeated petitions from the Corporation, merchants and inhabitants of Drogheda, a Parliamentary grant of £600 per annum for the twelve succeeding years was given and an Act was passed whereby the Mayor and Recorder of Drogheda the representatives in Parliament for Meath, Louth and Drogheda and six Aldermen and seven members of the Common Council were to be constituted Commissioners for improving and cleansing the river and harbour and certain duties on the tonnage of vessels were thereby imposed to be applied for such purposes.

“Whereas the improvement of the port, harbour and river of Drogheda will contribute to the advancement of trade of said town, and be of use to all ships which shall resort to the said port, and a great and continued expense will be incurred to accomplish and carry on the works necessary for improving and cleansing the same: be it therefore enacted by the king’s most excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lord’s spiritual and temporal, and commons in this present parliament assembled, and by the same.”

“That from and after the 25th day of March, the year of our Lord, one thousand, seven hundred and ninety for and during the term of 12 years from thence next ensuing, the following rates and duties shall be paid by the master or owner of every ship and vessel entering the port of Drogheda, that is to say, for every ship or vessel entering the said port.”

“The sum of six pence for every ton of the burthern of such ship or vessel, except the ships belonging to his Majesty, and those of the revenue, and all coasters or coasting vessels, and also all ships and vessels belonging to the subjects of his most Christian Majesty, which shall enter or arrive in the said port, and for every coaster or ship, or vessel entering the said port, from any other port in this kingdom, the sum of three pence for every ton of the burthern of such coaster of vessel.”

“And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that the said rates and duties shall be paid to the collector of his Majesty’s revenue for the time being, in the port of Drogheda, who is hereby authorised and required to demand, take, and receive the same, and is hereby authorised and empowered to deduct, and detain as a compensation of his trouble in receiving the same, any sum or sums of money not exceeding six pence for every pound sterling, which shall be so received.”

“And in the order to put this act more effectually and immediately into execution; be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that the commissioners to be chosen and appointed from time to time to carry this act into execution, or any nine or more of them, and hereby empowered from time to time, and at all times, as to them shall seem convenient, by writing under their respective hands, and their common seal, to assign over the said rates and duties, or any part or parts thereof imposed and made payable by virtue of this act, for any time or times during the continuance of this act.”

“And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that the major and recorder of Drogheda, the representatives in parliament for the time being of the said town, also the the representatives in parliament for the time being for the counties of Meath and Louth, and six Aldermen, and seven members of the common council of the corporation of the said town, shall be, and they are hereby appointed commissioners for improving and cleansing the river and harbour of said town, from the bridge of said town to the sea, for preserving and maintaining all works which are or may be

erected for the improvement of said harbour or river in proper and constant repair.”

“And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that within one calendar month after the passing of this act, the major, sheriffs and burgesses and commons of said town, shall elect and appoint six Aldermen, and seven members of the common council of the corporation of the said town, to be, together with the major and recorder, and the representatives in parliament for the said town for the time being.”

That Act proscribed that the corporation had one calendar month from 25 March to hold their first meeting and on April 19th 1790 here at the Tholsel in Drogheda the inaugural meeting of the Drogheda Harbour Commissioners took place.

Now, we stand here in the very same building 225 years to the day to mark that first meeting. We know what was discussed at that meeting because the minutes survive. And although we don't know exactly who said what, we know who was there. The main business of that first meeting was the taking of the oath and in this recreation, I shall be playing the part of the brilliantly named 'Graves Chamney, esquire', Mayor of Drogheda at the time.

“Whereas by an Act passed to the present year of his Majesty's Reign, entitled an Act for the improvement of the Port and Harbour of Drogheda and the better regulation by the Police of the said town, it is enacted that the Mayor and Recorder of said town, the representatives in Parliament for the time being for the Counties of Meath and Louth, and six Aldermen and seven of the Common Council of the Corporation of Drogheda shall be and are hereby appointed Commissioners for improving and cleansing the Harbour of said town from the bridge of said town to the sea.”

“And that within one calendar month from the passing of said Act, the Mayor, Sheriffs, Burgesses and Commons of said town should elect and appoint six Aldermen and seven Members of the Common Council to be

together with the other persons, wherein named Commissioners for carrying the said Act in Execution."

"And whereas in pursuance of said recited Act, the said Mayor and Sheriffs and Burgesses did at their General Quarterly Assembly held on Friday, April 16 elect the following six Aldermen and seven Common Council men of said Corporation Commissioners for the purposes aforesaid – that is to say:

George Schoales
Edward Hardman
Sir William O'Dogherty
Oliver Fairtlough
Roger Forde
William Gibbons
John Fairtlough
Samuel Martin
George Evans
Burton Tandy
Ralph Smyth
James Schoales
Robert Pollock

"And the said Commissioners having been appointed this day for meeting at the Tholsel of Drogheda for the purpose of taking the Oath prescribed by the said recited Act.

Please repeat after me **"I do solemnly promise and swear that I will faithfully and impartially according to the best of my skill and knowledge execute the several powers and trusts committed to me in and by an Act of Parliament in force in this Kingdom entitled an Act for improving the Port and Harbour of Drogheda and the better regulation of the Police of said town without favour or affection, prejudice or malice."**

So help me God.

The Commissioners then unanimously elected Mr Thomas Collins to be Treasurer. They also appointed Mr Robert Collins to gauge and ascertain the tonnage of all foreign ships arriving in the port at a salary of 10 pounds per annum.

It was decided that the sum of £500 be borrowed on bonds of £100 each paid into the hands of the Treasurer.

It was ordered that the coping and the walls of the bridge on the Track Road at Greenhills be repaired under the inspection of Alderman Roger Forde.

It was ordered that any notices to be issued for any meetings of the Commissioners should be served at least four days previous to the meeting.

It was ordered that a meeting of the Commissioners would be held on Monday, June 7, 1790 for the purpose of taking into consideration, the state of the harbour and the works that had been carried out for the improvement thereof to make such orders for the further improvement of the harbour as shall be deemed expedient.

When John Dalton wrote his history of Drogheda in 1844, the Harbour Commissioners had been in place for around 55 years. He reported on some of the improvements that had taken place in his book

'the quay has been widened to an extent of about ten feet on the north side of the river from the bridge to a point opposite the custom house.'

'New quay walls have been constructed and the river deepened four feet so that vessels of 400 tons by discharging part of their cargo below can come up to the bridge'

'The port is more adapted to vessels of about 200 tons drawing from ten to twelve feet of water while above the bridge the river is navigable for lighters of 70 tons'

'Three lighthouses have been recently erected on the sand hills at the entrance of the harbor.'

'The exertions of the Corporation for yet further improvements are indefatigable'

(possibly the last time the 'exertions of the corporation' would be described as indefatigable)

He also added

Being as Drogheda is embouchure of all that the fertility of Meath and Louth can produce and situated nearly opposite Liverpool it maintains the most extensive commerce not only with England and Scotland to which five steam packets of about 350 tons each are constantly plying from thence but also with Canada Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. About sixty years since, the shipping interest from this town gave employment to but a solitary vessel, the Mary Anne whose landings, departures and returns were at the time a source of reiterated excitement to the merchants and are now traditional themes of wonder and diversion among their descendants. Drogheda linens were then a principal export and were entitled to a bounty under the revision of the Linen Board. The principal Exports now are cattle sheep pigs corn flour oatmeal salt eggs butter wool cotton.

So we learn that in those first 60 years since the Harbour Commissioners were set up, Drogheda's port trade grew from one vessel, to hundreds.

According to the records for the year ending in the January 1835 there were shipped from the port of Drogheda

126,380 loads of meal
42,500 bushels of wheat
3000 barrels of peas

37,000 sacks of flour
2500 barrels of barley
22,000 of oats
13,000 crates of eggs
600 firkins of butter
4100 cows
12,000 sheep
39,000 pigs
and 500 barrels of ale.

The work of the Harbour Commissioners from their inception in 1790 made Drogheda ready for the advent of the steam age and the coming of the industrial revolution.

Since then, the town has grown and expanded in ways that would have been inconceivable to the men who met here in the Tholsel 225 years ago, but the port has remained a constant, defining feature of our town.

In 1997 the Harbour Commissioners became the Drogheda Port Company and today, vessels carrying up to 5,000 tonnes of cargo and up to 120 metres in length now use the port with over one million tonnes of cargo being handled annually. I'm not sure how much of that is firkins of butter or barrels of peas.

Drogheda's port has always been an integral part of the town's economy and has played a major role in its development. This was recognized way back in the 1700s and it's just as true today as it was then. There is no doubt that whatever the future holds for Drogheda in the next 225 years, our port will continue to play a vital role and and continue to define us.