

Row the Erne



In 2014 the Row the Erne Project began with the building of a 33ft, 10 man, traditional Irish boat called a Curach. This is the kind of boat in which Irish people traded with Britain and Western Europe for more than 3,000 years, bringing back not only goods but also new ideas, technologies and fashions.

There is only one curach of a similar type in Ireland, called the *Colmcille*. This is a sea-going craft (like most large curachs) based on the North Coast and is mainly used for an annual expedition to Iona, so the general public have limited access.

Row the Erne named its curach *The Menapien*, after the Menapi tribe, who first came to Fermanagh in the Bronze Age. The project is unique in Ireland as the curach is used all year round (weather permitting). It rows in the evenings, at weekends (for picnics, day trips and overnights) and on longer expeditions throughout the Erne system, often staying overnight on uninhabited islands that it can easily reach because of its shallow draught. It is an ideal platform for observing wildlife.

Over 60 people volunteered 2,500 hours in all to build the curach. We researched across the island of Ireland to develop skills that would be of use in the future and to share with others. We invited a wide range of groups to help design, build and row the curach. Our youth section designed and built our website.

The curach was launched by walking it up through the streets of Enniskillen led by a procession of the oars, carried by the Emergency services, funders and supporters. The streets were lined with well-wishers, many seeing it for the first time. It was blessed by Fr Brian Darcy and Rev Ruth Watt and made its maiden voyage with a flotilla that included Waterways Ireland, the RNLi, The Police, Erne Paddlers and Local tour provider, the Kestrel.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/7R0II_PyI0k

Over 700 local people have rowed with us on Lough Erne, many getting out on the water for the first time. Rowing a 10 person, 33ft long, 8ft wide boat is very empowering. People with disabilities, or who are simply 'scared' of the water can instantly enjoy it. Surrounded by fellow crew members of similar levels of inexperience (with a core number of experienced crew), they are supported, yet they are pulling together, enabling the curach come alive

on the water.

The Curach has something for everyone. Young children from two-and-a-half years old love to go pirate-hunting and mermaid-watching while retired elderly folk, up to 94 years, have realised they can row and get exercise in a social environment.

Row the Erne led the celebrations in Fermanagh commemorating the St 1,500th anniversary of the death of Saint Columbanus. The Saint, widely regarded as one of the most influential individuals of his era, began his monastic life on Cleenish Island on Upper Lough Erne and not in Bangor, Co. Down, as many believe. *Friends of Columbanus*, a group from Bangor, joined us in a day of celebration that involved re-enacting the life of his day. Participants dressed as monks rowed to Cleenish where they enjoyed the foods of that time cooked on an open fire and storytelling in the ruins of the Abbey.

We have taken part in several events on behalf of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. These included providing rows at food festivals and building an outdoor cinema on the curach that allowed us to row participants to unusual locations in the dark of night to enjoy a movie.

The *Menapian* is docked at the secure jetty of Waterways Ireland Headquarters in Enniskillen, and they have provided funding to run open days and events, opening the building to the local community.

Row the Erne has now inspired and is mentoring another group in Belfast to build a boat of their own. They are calling themselves *Row the Lagan*.

Like the curach, Row the Erne is a living breathing thing. As we continue to develop and push the boundaries of what is happening on the local waterways, so too will attitudes to accessing and enjoying it change and grow. We look forward to that challenge!

Olivia Cosgrove is Chairperson of Row the Erne

Featured Image: Mark Marlow/pacemaker press