

1t was Sionnan, granddaughter of Manannán mac Lir, god of the sea, who created the Shannon River. It was she who came to a particular spot in Northern Ireland, at the foot of Cuilcagh Mountain, to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. But eating from the Tree of Knowledge is strictly forbidden—especially for impressionable young women—so a pool of water sprang up and engulfed her. The water then overflowed over the surrounding area and created the longest river in Ireland and, indeed, the British Isles.

The Shannon River flows 224 miles from its source at the Shannon Pot on Cuilcagh across the border into the Irish Republic, cutting a deep vein across the western part of the country, before taking a westerly turn and emerging in the sea at Limerick. For land-dwellers heading east or west, this great waterway presents an obstacle to be overcome. For sailors, it presents an opportunity to sail two-thirds the length of Ireland in relatively benign conditions. It was a feature taken full advantage of by the Vikings, who pilaged their way up the Shannon many times from around 800 A.D. until they were finally defeated in 1000.

A thousand years later, it wasn't a mob of bloodthirsty Vikings who were planning to launch a raid on the Shannon, but a hand-picked cast of sailors taking part in the first Lakeland and Inland

Waterways Ireland Sailing Raid. They came from seven countries to take part in the seven-day, 140-mile event and included eminent names in the sport.

There was transatlantic record-breaker Patrick Morvan, Swiss Olympic sailor Albert Schiess, Japanese Tornado champion Koji Ikeda, world speed windsurfing champion Jochen Krauth, Whitbread veteran Sylvie Viant and transatlantic race veteran Martine Gahinet-Charrier. Even the race organizers boasted some impressive sailing resumes, with former Whitbread skipper Jymmy Viant taking the role of race director, ably assisted by his wife (and former Whitbread sailor) Bénédicte. It was the sort of cast you might expect at a major ocean race rather than an obscure dinghy gathering miles away from anywhere.

The fleet of boats was equally eclectic. The stars of the show were the two local one-design classes: the Water Wags, celebrating their 125th anniversary in 2012 and thought to be the oldest one-design class in the world, and the Shannon One-Design, a long, slippery eel of a boat with a far bigger sail area than would be deemed safe for coastal sailing. The oldest boat was Water Wag No. 37 at 100 years old, and the youngest was Shannon One-Design No. 178, built by Cathy McAleavey (herself a former Olympic sailor) and launched only a few weeks before the start of the race.



Alan Alego's Shannon One-Design and Ian Malcolm's Water Wag are part of the scenery during the pre-start in front of Enniskillen Castle, above. A winding waterway connects Lough Erne to the Shannon River, right.



In the open class, there was Patrick Morvan's recently restored 1938 Solent sloop *Gars du Lin*, the Iain Oughtred-designed Ness Yawl *Albannagh*, a Drascombe Dabber (a smaller variation of the famous Drascombe Lugger), a Wayfarer (the most modern boat in the fleet), a Dory-Plume (a French take on the classic American dory, trailed all the way from Holland for the event) and a cat-rigged sharpie designed by Gilles Montaubin.

Raids are an interesting mix of all out racing and adventure sailing. Typically, they take place in relatively wild terrains, where competitors can enjoy looking at unspoiled scenery while navigating unknown waters and racing against some top-notch sailors. Previous raids organized by Charles-Henri Le Moing, the mastermind behind the Irish raid, have taken place in the Azores, Portugal, Scotland and Sweden, and the concept has spread. A recent raid organized in Maine boasted more than 50 entries.

But make no mistake, these events are not for the inexperienced, the cowardly or the sloppy. Capsizing when you're racing around the cans off the local yacht club is one thing, but capsizing in strange waters a long way from onshore facilities is another matter. And, while there is always a large support team with safety boats on hand in case of emergency, raid competitors are expected to be as self-sufficient as possible. If you haven't noticed a hazard on

the chart, don't expect a safety boat to step in and shepherd you to safety. It's up to you to work it out.

"Racing in these inland waters presents a different type of challenge," said Sylvie Viant, more accustomed to sailing high-tech racing machines than the 100-year-old wooden Water Wag she had been allocated. "It's tougher than I expected. These old boats can go surprisingly fast, but there is a lot of tacking because the wind changes all the time. And you can never be sure of your place; even if you are very far in front or very far behind, conditions can change suddenly and reverse everything."

The Irish Raid started, symbolically, in Northern Ireland at the Loch Erne Sailing Club, a few miles north of Enniskillen. The idea was to sail south into the Republic of Ireland in a gesture of conciliation between two regions that, until relatively recently, were at war with each other. Once in Ireland, the race would visit two more loughs and two more sailing clubs, bringing a neat three-part symmetry to the event.

There was certainly plenty of beautiful scenery to be had north of the border, with great expanses of open, empty countryside being the dominant theme as it was for most of the week. Racing was more sporadic and limited by the narrow waterways beyond Lough Erne, meaning that the fleet had to be towed for several parts of the first leg in order to make the first stop before nightfall.





Irish weather be damned; it's all smiles aboard a Water Wag.

Crom Castle, with its stone visitor center and old castle ruins by the side of the lake, made a romantic first stopover. The landscape of the area was radically altered in the late 19th century when the water level was deliberately dropped by 10 feet, thereby adding hundreds of acres of previously submerged land to the estate. Now managed by the National Trust, the expanded estate has a collection of self-catering cottages which make an ideal base for weary crews. At night, it has the deep quiet and profound darkness that you only get in really deep countryside.

While the north-south route sounded great in theory, there was one catch: In order to ascend to the top of the waterway that feeds north from Sionnan's pool into Lough Erne and south into the river Shannon, the boats would have to cross some 18 locks. Given the time constraints of a seven-day event this was clearly impossible, so the organizers decided to bypass the problem by loading the boats onto trailers after Lough Erne and transport them overland to the Shannon.

Far from being anything new, it turned out that this laborious process had been done by Viking sailors centuries before. Back in 936 A.D., the notorious Olaf Ceancaireach (aka Olaf the Scabby-Head), who had already plundered most of Lough Erne, decided to move his operation to Lough Ree. Rather than make the long journey down to the sea and around the coast to the Shannon, he simply dragged his ships overland from one lough to the next. His route must have been very similar to the one taken by our modern-day raiders.

Once on the other side of the "summit," a new element of this raid came into operation. Unlike previous raids where overnight accommodation was organized at a variety of hostels along the way, this raid had a fleet of powerboats following the race from a discreet distance and providing sleeping berths at night for the Irish part. Although a couple of hardy souls opted to camp, most of the competitors slept on the cruisers from Carrick-on-Shannon onwards, creating a veritable floating community at every stop.

The first proper day of racing in the Irish Republic showed the extraordinary beauty and variety of the area as well as the difficulty of racing in these conditions. Although a popular tourist destination, the Shannon River retains much of its natural character and an abundance of wildlife—you really do feel as though you are well away from the madding crowd. The concrete sprawl that seems to have enveloped much of Ireland since the building boom of the 1990s is largely absent here, and the old image of rustic cottages and cozy pubs prevails.

But the area's geographic features create their own particular challenges for sailors. One moment the boats were racing across an open lough, the next paddling through the leafy idyll of the Jamestown Canal. Weatherwise, they had to contend with sudden squalls brought by periodic thunderstorms (usually over in a matter

of minutes), as well as the unpredictable effect of trees and hills. And that's not to mention shooting bridges and negotiating locks. Le Moing claimed the course took in four locks and 15 bridges, making this the most technically difficult raid yet. And the competitors seemed to agree.

"I've sailed in more physically challenging conditions, but these conditions are extremely tricky," said former windsurfing world champion Krauth. "It's all about anticipation and being prepared for anything to happen at any time. It makes the sailing very technical, which I like. The Shannon One-Design looks simple, but they are very alive and very fast. They make you work hard."

After an overnight stop at Tarmonbarry, with the inevitable sing-song at the Purple Onion pub, one of the most spectacular legs of the raid was the 25-mile race down Lough Ree to the Lough Ree Yacht Club, which hosted the next overnight stop. Soon after the start of this leg, a 25-knot northerly picked up, pushing up a small chop and scattering the fleet across a wide area. Some competitors revelled in the conditions, such as local Water Wag sailor Ian Malcolm who hung on to spinnaker, main and jib for most of the way.

Others weren't so lucky. Viant and Gahinet-Charrier lost the mast of their Water Wag halfway down the lough. They had to be towed most of the way to the Lough Ree Y.C., where a team of volunteers led by boatbuilder Patrick Lobrichon glued the spar back together. With a little help from their friends, the mast was rerigged and the pair were back on the start line the next morning.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crews enjoyed a helter-skelter ride in brilliant but windy conditions. Competition was particularly stiff in the Shannon One-Design class where Ikeda and Krauth vied with Lough Ree Y.C. Comm. Alan Algoe. Despite starting last, the Japanese skipper—taking part in his eighth raid—overtook almost the whole fleet to finish the leg in second place overall, and first in class. The only modern Vikings in the event—Lars Palm and his crew of merry Swedes—actually lowered sail and steered their Shannon One-Design under bare poles so impressed were they with the Irish fury.

It was certainly a baptism of fire for McAleavey's brand new Shannon One-Design, which McAleavey had spent the previous 18 months building. But she and her two crew, daughter Claudine and friend Amy Whickham, loved every minute of it.

"That was without a doubt the best moment of the raid for us: sailing our new boat in 25 knots of breeze, in sunshine with two reefs in our sail," Cathy later said. "My daughter Claudine was helming, I was sheeting and Amy was trying to keep the nose out of the water. We set a record for crossing Lough Ree in a Shannon of 2 hours and 3 minutes. It's about 24 miles, so we averaged 12 knots. Now that was exhilarating!"

Watching the fleet flying across Lough Ree, it wasn't hard to see why the Vikings chose to settle in there. Up to six miles wide and peppered with about 50 islands, the lough is more like a small inland sea than a river or lake. From about 800 A.D., the Vikings

The crew on John Kronin's *Albannagh* dips the mainsail to pass under the bridge into the Jamestown Canal.



used Lough Ree as a base to plunder the surrounding countryside, and even built fortifications there. They must have been successful, judging by the valuable hoard of gold and silver found on Hare Island, close to the Lough Ree Y.C., which was said to have been worth almost a thousand guineas when it was discovered in 1804.

From Lough Ree, the fleet sailed down the narrows toward Banagher, narrowly avoiding losing halyards to grazing horses. In fact, with an unhelpful southerly on the nose, some of the racing had to be abandoned in favor of towing to stick to the raid's schedule. On the way, there was an opportunity to enjoy a bit of culture

towed to shore, bailed out and resumed racing half an hour later. After an exceptionally warm welcome at Lough Derg Y.C., the fleet set off on a final blast down Lough Derg in brilliant conditions and with a fresh breeze from behind. It was a last chance for the crews to improve their standing, and the racing was predictably competitive with all boats finishing within 25 minutes of each other after nearly three hours racing.

Anyone who assumed local knowledge would be the deciding factor in this event was mistaken. Ikede and Krauth enjoyed a narrow win in the Shannon One-Design class, while Schiess was triumphant in the Water Wag class. It was left to local sailor Monica Schaefer to preserve Irish pride by clinching a first in the Open Class.

"These old boats are slower than modern boats, but they are just as exciting to sail," Schiess said after blasting down the lough. "We've been lucky to have mostly northerly winds coming from behind, whereas the usual wind is from the southwest. In these strong winds you can sit in the back of the boat and they surf down the waves very well."

Killalloe was not only the end of the 2012 Irish raid, it also represented in many ways the end of the Viking raids. For it was in the nearby village of Kincora that Brian Boru, the first High King of All Ireland and the man who finally got rid of the Norse raiders for

good (or for a few hundred years at least) was born. Brian learned to fight on his father's and brothers' ships on the Shannon, and he later used the river to transport his own forces into battle. By about 1000 he had managed to drive the Vikings off the Shannon, and after a last bloody battle near Dublin in 1014, out of Ireland altogether. Brian died during the fighting, however, and was unable to realize his dream of a united, independent Ireland.

A thousand years later, Ireland is still divided, this time into north and south. But the Shannon River, which has its source in the north and flows south through the Republic, still links the two sides. For the sailors celebrating the end of the raid at Flanagan's bar in Killalloe on the banks of the river, national boundaries were irrelevant. All that mattered was the magnificent waterway that had carried them across 140 miles of fabulous countryside and thrilling competition. The spirit of Brian Boru lives on. 



Lars Palm and his crew, who traveled from Sweden for the raid, have a good time even when they are rowing.

by visiting the impressive ruins at Clonmacnoise. Once the busiest crossing point on the Shannon, Clonmacnoise was for a time the epicenter of Irish religion and education until it was burned down first by the Vikings, then by rival Irish clans and finally the Brits. The ruins visible now date mostly from the 10th to 12th centuries, and are well worth the visit.

For those of a more secular bent, Killeen's bar and grocery store in Shannonbridge was the place to go. An authentic taste of old Ireland, Killeen's serves as an off-license pub, grocery store, fishing tackle shop and, should the needs arise, undertakers. It's also one of the most welcoming establishments this side of the Shannon River.

After the narrows of the middle Shannon, the fleet shot into the open waters of Lough Derg. The gusty 15-knot breeze caught some by surprise, and the raid suffered its first capsizes. The boat was soon



Ian Malcom and crew sail his Water Wag through the high winds of Lough Ree.





John Keogh's Drascombe Dabber sails up Lough Erne. The first two days of the raid were spent in Northern Ireland before crossing the border into the Irish Republic.