

History of the Shannon Airport Lagoon

by John Rattigan



The Shannon Airport Lagoon and marshland © John N Murphy

Early History

Located in the townland of Rineanna, or Rinn Eanch “the wet headland”, the area around the present Shannon Airport lagoon has been since the last Ice Age, a flat marshy place. An alternative translation is Rinn an Éanaigh “the headland of the birds”, which certainly today, would seem like a most appropriate translation.

In the wake of the receding ice sheets, stone-age man moved into the area during the Mesolithic period, about 9,000 years ago, attracted by a rich source of food. It was a time when wild boar and wolves, now extinct, lived cheek by jowl with these hunter-gatherer bands, all tied to seasonal shortages and abundances. Evidence of human occupation in Rineanna during the Stone Age comes from a number of hammerstones found in the area, now in the National Museum of Ireland.

It is likely that there was continuous human occupation in the area over the millennia, but little of this survives on the landscape today. History does record that during the early medieval period, Rineanna was probably under the political influence of the Vikings of Limerick, indeed tradition has it that it was the Vikings who first reclaimed land from the river in this area.

The rabbit was first introduced to Ireland by the Normans. Their political influence in the area can be traced back to 1277. In that year, Thomas de Clare took over the manor of Bunratty and installed many of his kinsmen in the locality, with the Rineanna area given over to a Norman called Bagot.

Airport and Urbanisation

Little changed in the area for centuries until, in 1936, Rineanna was chosen by the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Sean Lemass, as the location for a proposed Trans-Atlantic airport. Trans-Atlantic flying boats began to arrive at Foynes in 1937, but it was only a matter of time before the first long-range land plane capable of crossing the Atlantic would be introduced.

In 1939, two Irish Air Corps Anson planes became the first aircraft to land on the new airfield. However, it was not until the end of the Second World War that commercial Trans-Atlantic flights resumed, with the first such flight into Shannon occurring with the touching down of an American Export Airlines DC4 on September 24th 1945. In 1947, Shannon became the world's first duty free airport.

In the late 1950's, a new 10,000 foot runway was built. The airport was developed to increase freight and passenger traffic and an Industrial Free Zone was established which increased employment in the area.

Shannon Free Airport Development Authority (now known as Shannon Development) was created, to promote the industrial potential of the area, leading to the development of Shannon town, the first "new town" in Ireland, to house employees of the new industrial estate.

Today Shannon is the second largest urban area in the County Clare with a population of about 8,500.



Looking towards Rineanna Point and the Shannon & Fergus Estuary © John N Murphy

The Lagoon



The embankment which helped create the Shannon Airport Lagoon © John N Murphy

The development of the lagoon is entirely linked to the creation of the airport. In the 1940's, when the airstrip at Rineanna was first built, it was necessary to build a seawall out into the estuary to protect the new airport from flooding. Rain water drained from the airport area into the space between the seawall and the shore. When necessary this runoff was released into the estuary via a sluice gate in the seawall.

It was not until the early 1970's, through the work of Limerick priest Fr Willie Trodden, that the lagoon was first identified as an important and unique habitat and efforts were made to protect it through agreement with Aer Rianta, the Irish Airports Authority.

From the mid-1970's on, the bird life of the lagoon was studied closely by local ornithologist Phil Brennan, who carried out a long-term ringing study of Sedge Warblers. The importance of the lagoon as a wintering site for Black-tailed Godwit was also realised at this time, but vagrant species, such as Ireland's first Savi's Warbler and the second Irish record of Laughing Gull have also been observed at the lagoon

Today, due to reclamation, the lagoon is about 25% smaller than it was three decades before. It is nonetheless still an important stopping-off point for migrant waders and waterfowl and is listed as a special area of conservation, complete with a hide that has been built to facilitate the public.

The lagoon is regularly included on the itinerary for outings of the Clare Branch of Birdwatch Ireland, or by birders from all over Ireland, on their way to or from the Bridges of Ross in the autumn.

Habitat

by Catriona Brady and Philip Brennan



Marshland scrub at the Airport Lagoon © John N Murphy

The area usually referred to as the Shannon Airport Lagoon and its surrounds contains a variety of natural and man influenced habitats. These consist of mudflats, tidal creeks, salt marsh, drainage ditches, reed swamp, large sedge swamp, tall herbal swamp, fresh water marsh, rich fen, calcareous grassland, amenity grassland, scrub, ornamental non native scrub, exposed sand gravel or till, stone walls and other stone work and earth embankments. Out of these 17 different types of habitats, there are three distinct habitats. These subdivisions are;

- (a) The brackish lagoon.
- (b) The reed-beds, marsh and willow scrub which surround the lagoon and extend to the boundaries of the golf course, fuel depot and airport car parks.
- (c) The tidal mudflats enclosed between the breakwater and causeway to Dernish Island.

The lagoon was created in the early 1940's when Dernish Island was connected to the mainland site of the then infant airport. A sluice gate on the west bank was installed. During the following forty years, the enclosed site was more-or-less undisturbed and it developed into the plant complex that exists today.

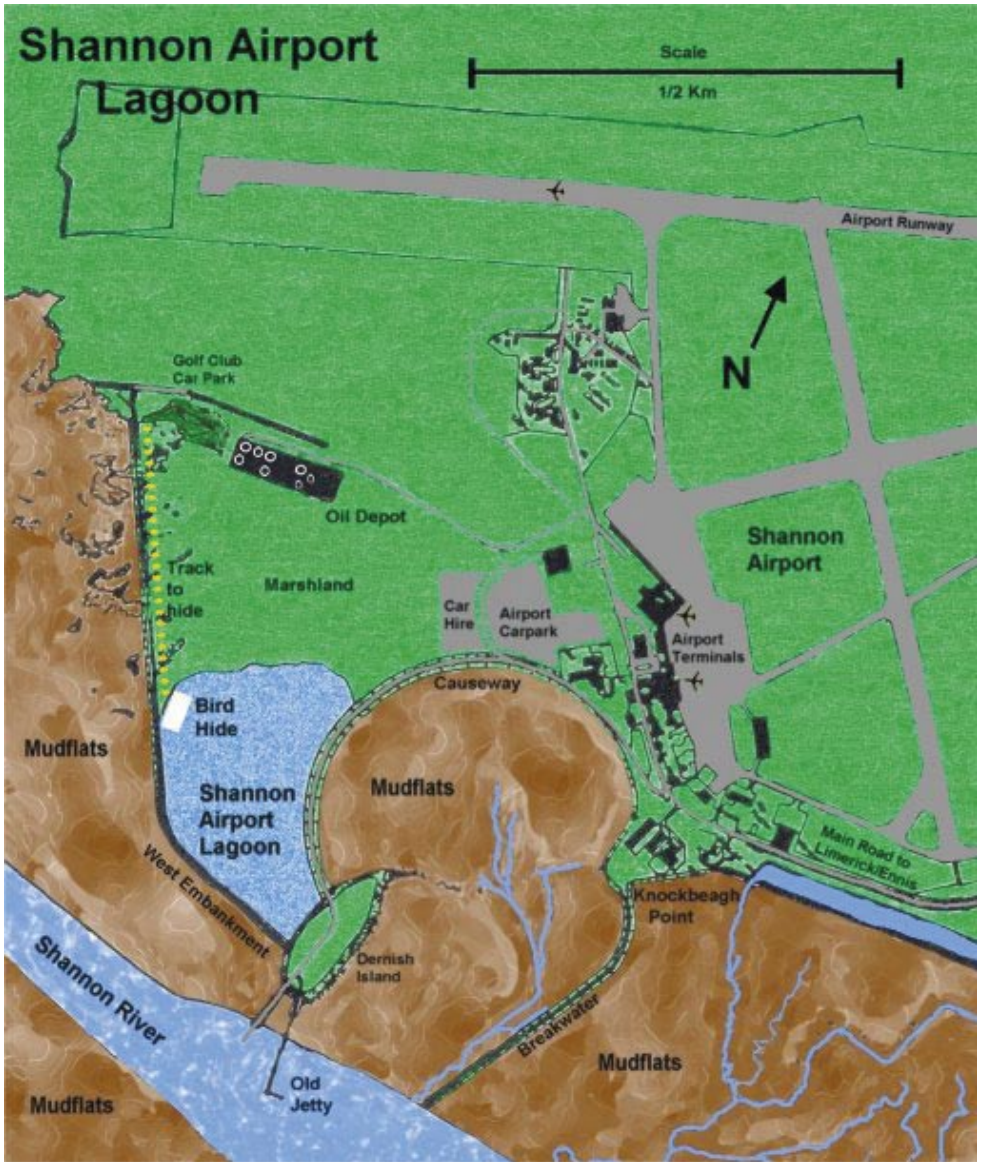
Vegetation

The Lagoon is surrounded by beds of common reed, *Phragmites*, and of the rush *Scirpus maritimus*. The marsh has quite a variety of plants, depending on water depth, soils and the result of human activity. The north and east of the marsh is dominated by willow, salix and reed. The process of colonisation is continuous here and in the open marsh and new species appear frequently. Of particular interest and beauty are the Marsh and Spotted Orchids (*Dactylorhiza*) of which three to four species occur and many colourful hybrids exist also. Another orchid, the Marsh Hellobrine, *Epipatus palustris*, is also present in a strong colony. This is a rare species in south- west Ireland. The Marsh Cinquefoil, *Potentilla palustris* is common at the lagoon.



Marsh at the Lagoon © John N Murphy

About a quarter of the marsh that existed in the 1970's has been lost to human development. The main loss has been to the airport car parks and the golf course driving range. This vast area of mudflats is being rapidly lost to the hybrid *Spartina* grass. In 1970 it was only found in small patches along the causeway. By the year 2003 it covered about half the mud flat and it is reasonable to assume the complete destruction of this mud flat unless intervention takes place soon.



Shannon Airport Lagoon © Christopher Mark Murdock

As can be clearly seen from the above map, the Lagoon was created when two embankments were built between the mainland and what once was Dernish Island. The causeway to the island now has a road built upon it to service the jetty, while the west embankment has the remains of an old rail track that runs the length of this seawall. Permission is required for driving to the jetty at Dernish Island. Visitors must park their cars in designated areas.