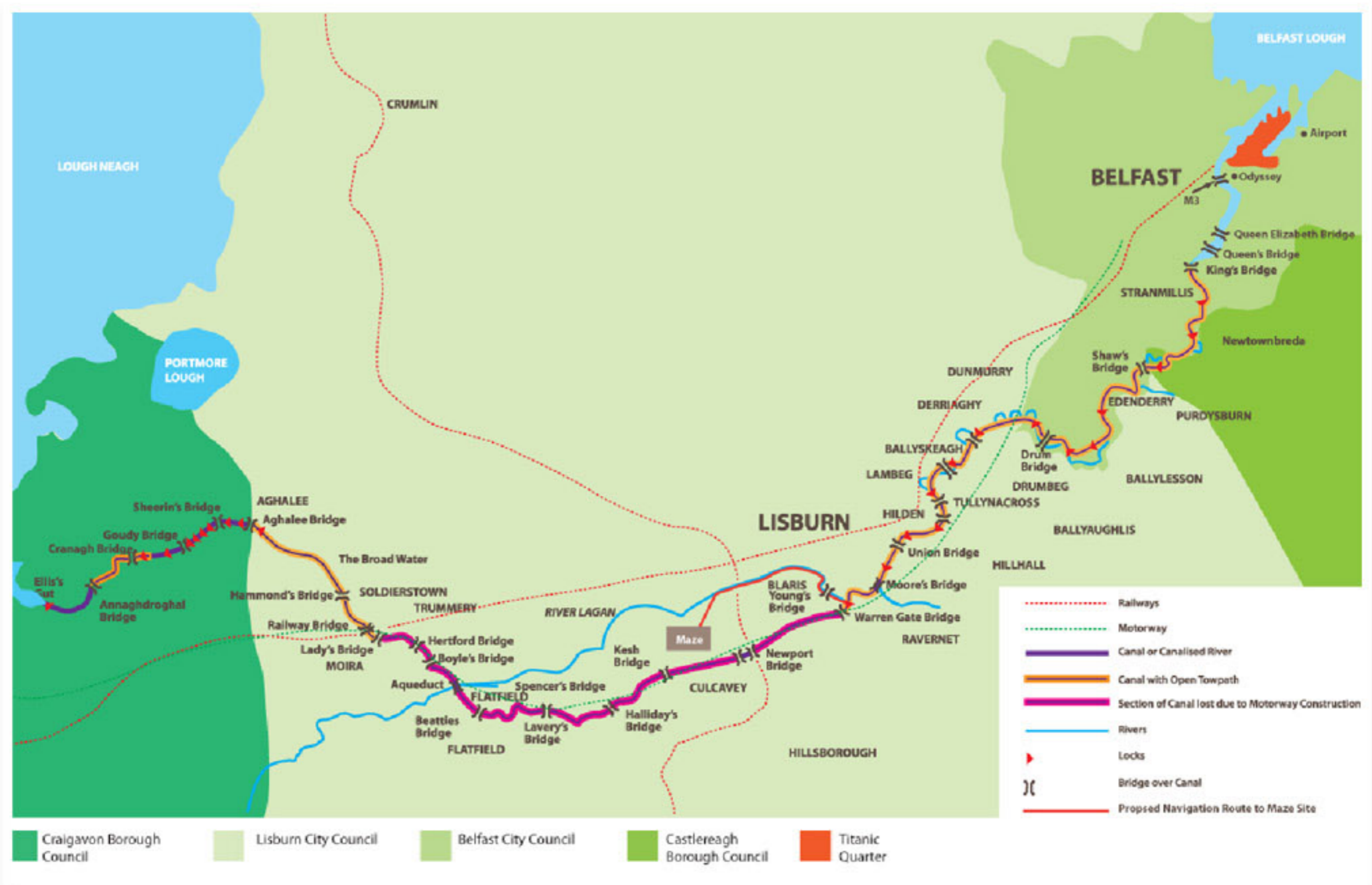


The Lagan Canal stretches for 27 miles from Belfast to Lough Neagh passing through 27 Locks. Built in the 18th century, it was one of the most successful commercial navigations in Ireland.



Map Courtesy of Lagan Canal Restoration Trust

Increasing industrialisation during the eighteenth century brought great changes to the Lagan Valley. The rich and fertile lands of the Lagan Valley had for many years exported agricultural produce helping turn Belfast into a leading port, while developments in the linen industry during the 17th century saw increasing industrialisation of the Lagan Valley.

The industry depended on the fast movement of supplies and produce. Transport by road was frequently slow and inefficient whereas transport on rivers, lakes and seas was faster and more efficient where they were navigable. On rivers and canals one horse could pull a sixty foot long barge, or "lighter" as they were known in Ireland thereby transporting much more produce. Lough Neagh, because of its size and location, became the "hub" of the waterways. The Lagan Canal, Newry Canal, Ulster Canal and Coalisland canal

all connected into it. This meant travel of goods and people across Ireland was vastly improved and more profitable.

At that time, Newry was larger and out-competing Belfast as a port. The Newry Canal opened in 1742 as the first "summit level" canal in the British Isles, connecting with Lough Neagh. Belfast therefore had to compete to grow as the major city in Ulster.

During 1741, General Arthur Dobbs began to survey a route for the canal between Belfast and Lough Neagh. In 1753, legislation was passed which allowed work to begin on the canal. The lighters needed straight stretches of river with enough depth and adequate water level. Most of the River Lagan was navigable between Belfast and Lisburn. Where the river meandered or was not deep enough Thomas Omer, the first



engineer, would make a new “cut” which would avoid the bend in the river while locks and weirs kept the water at the correct level.

Construction started in 1756 and the stretch to Lisburn was completed by 1763. This stretch was opened in September of that year. The Lord Hertford was the first boat to travel along this section of the navigation and was greeted by bands and cheering crowds. The stretch between Lisburn and Lough Neagh was more problematic as the river diverged from the route and therefore this stretch had to be manmade according to recommendations in a survey carried out by Robert Whitworth in 1768. Construction of the Canal ceased until the ‘Company of Undertakers of the Lagan Navigation’ with the Marquis of Donegall as the main contributor was created to oversee and fund the section from Lisburn to Lough Neagh. Work on this stretch started in 1782 under another engineer, Richard Owen, and completed in 1794. Tolls were placed at Stranmillis and Ellis’s Gut, Lough Neagh with each lighter name and cargo recorded.

The Lagan Navigation, linking up with Lough Neagh, was a very important link in the Ireland-wide network of waterways. It played a vital role in the development of the industries, towns, villages and countryside along its banks. Coal, grain, and general merchandise were transported upstream towards Lough Neagh from Belfast while sand, timber, fire clay goods and bricks were the main cargoes to Belfast. In 1842 legislation was passed creating a new private Lagan Navigation Company. By the turn of the 20th century, the canal was still going strong with reports of over 150,000 tonnes being transported on the Lagan Navigation in 1893. However the canal suffered problems of water supply and the local linen mills which used the water for manufacturing processes objected to the extraction of water from the River Lagan. In 1888 The Lagan Navigation Company took over the Ulster Canal and Tyrone Navigation, this was to prove a drain on resources and contributed to the

demise of the Company.

The railway provided a faster and more efficient means of transporting goods (the Belfast to Lisburn line was the second built in Ireland and opened in 1839) and eventually became competition for the canals. More rapid road transport in the early twentieth century meant that competition would prove too much and the mid-1930’s saw a decline in tonnage and revenue and by 1940 traffic fell to under 30,000 tons. In April 1954 the Inland Navigation Act dissolved the Lagan Navigation Company. The last lighter delivered coal to Island Mill quay in Lisburn of that year. In 1958 the final section from Belfast to Lisburn was closed.

The Navigation became abandoned in the 1950’s and a central section of Canal extending over approximately 12.5km between Sprucefield and Moira was lost when the M1 Motorway was constructed in the 1960’s.

The responsibility for the canal; drainage channels to control flood prevention and public safety fell to the Department of Agriculture. It then passed to the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure who now own the canal and towpath. John Gilchrist founded the Lagan Valley Regional Park in 1967 and it is Northern Ireland’s first, and to date, only Regional Park. The Park runs from Stranmillis to Union Locks above Lisburn with the Lagan Navigation running through the middle.