

The River Lagan in Belfast is a wide, slow moving river, more associated with boats and rowing than anything else. But at the source at Slieve Croob in the Mourne Mountains it is a very different story.

Standing 1775 feet high, Slieve Croob is a dome shaped mountain of old granite.

The landscape is typically Mourne Mountain habitat of heather, thin soils and sparse grass, but still has its attraction to the intrepid visitor.

We follow the river Lagan from its source and the start of our story in the Mournes to its exit into the sea through the Port of Belfast.

The source of the Lagan is innocuous, even inconspicuous, just a spring in the ground beside which you can rest your weary feet but from this point it winds its way down the hillside cutting a narrow channel for itself through the peat and rock as it flows down to Dromara and the foot of the mountain.

Coming through the hills the river gathers volume from the many channels collecting rain water from the hillsides. It passes through the first and simplest bridge, Dree Bridge. Further on the stream is certainly big enough to support a healthy fish stock, otters and water fowl.

The landscape is still comparatively poor in terms of richness of soil – the yellow gorse and hawthorn indicate that the area is sparsely grazed and not heavily used for agriculture.

Beyond Slieve Croob and towards Dromara is the start of what is called the middle tract of the river, where it changes from its fast flowing hilly state into a slower flowing stream meandering through the drumlin countryside of Co Down.

Just before Dromara is a place called Massford, most of the crossing places in this part of the country were in fact fords used by the farmers on

their day-to-day business.

The countryside around Bell's Bridge is typical Co. Down fields and hedgerows with the occasional small bog in the low-lying areas and looking with Slieve Croob is still in sight.

Bell's bridge itself is a lovely arched stone structure, most probably built from local materials and dating back to the mid 1800s, indeed it is clearly marked on the maps of 1870.

The first main town through which the Lagan runs is Dromara, a small cosy town that looks much the same today as it did in the 1950s.

Below Dromara are a number of small stone bridges similar to Bell's Bridge but not all are named. The Bull's Brook Bridge is situated between Dromara and Dromore and which carried one of the many small country roads over the river.

The Lagan flows through the town of Dromore, once the market town for those living along the upper and middle reaches of the river. Unlike many of the towns in this area, Dromore is an ancient settlement, growing up on the site of an old monastery, founded about 500AD it is reckoned that this explains the poor road plan in Dromore as compared to, for example, Moira and Hillsborough.

Interesting to note that the style of the bridge at Dromara is very similar to the bridges built above and all are marked on the 1870 map. There was a weir and mill race here in years gone by which allowed the power of the river to be harnessed for industry.

The scenery below Dromara is essentially rural, grazing cattle and crops and the Lagan is still gathering width and volume from the many small streams and drainage ditches flowing into it, as it winds its way to the townland of Coolsallagh between Dromore and Blackscull.

Through lovely riverside scenery and a haven for wildlife the stretch of the river, between Dromore and Donaghcloney, the Lagan runs parallel with the River Bann for a distance of some 10 to 12 miles. Just below Donaghcloney where the river turns to the north is the townland of Banoge where another attractive stone bridge carries the Dollingstown road over the Lagan.

Around this area and slightly further downstream at Milltown was an area in the last century where there were numerous scutch mills, as part of the linen industry. Donaghcloney was famous for cambric weaving and handkerchief hemming.

Geehan's Bridge, which carries the Dromore, Lurgan Road over the river, is another fine example of local stonework with 5 arches and strong buttresses. Strangely enough, the adjacent townland is called Tullynacross, exactly the same as the area adjacent to the Lagan below Lisburn.

The river still flows Northwards towards Magheralin where it starts to swing eastwards again, forming a loop that turns back towards Belfast.

At this stage the valley of the river becomes much wider and indeed it is from the width of the plain that the name Lagan comes, from the Irish LAGAIN meaning broad plain.

It meanders towards Moira, passing under the fine three-arched bridge at Newmills before reaching one of the most famous crossing points of all, the aqueduct, which once stood near Spencer's Bridge. This was the first point of meeting between canal and river and was built by Robert Whitworth in the early 1790s. The aqueduct was the method by which the Lagan Canal crossed the Lagan River, the canal running on to Lough Neagh along its own man-made course. Of course, the aqueduct is now only a picture on a screen as the building of the M1 motorway destroyed virtually all the vestiges of

the canal between Moira and Lisburn.

The river continues its flow eastwards, running to the north of the old canal. It flows sluggishly on this stretch called Broomhedge, passing under the distinctive New Bridge on its way to the Maze and Lisburn.

On the old maps dated back to the early 1800s, the shape of the Maze racecourse has remained constant with the River Lagan at its northern edge. The river passed under the main road adjacent to Maze House, under another 5 arched bridge.

The river continues under Young's Bridge at Half-town which is the first of the Lagan Bridges to show evident dressed stonework before flowing past the factory sites at Knockmore on the outskirts of Lisburn.

It was at this point, near Sprucefield, that the river and canal met again at Sprucefield, at the Union Locks. This unique system of locks carried the canal up a distance of 27½ feet over a distance of less than 100 yards, from the level of the river, to the summit level of the canal. This was the site of the canal manager's house, 'Navigation House,' and the repair sheds for the canal. The narrow Horse Bridge carried the towpath across the river from the Blaris side to the Lisburn side.

From here to Lisburn, the canal and river were virtually the same. This is the stretch of river looking downstream from the Dublin Road or Moore's Bridge as we know it now. This was originally a turnpike road where tolls were collected from all following this route.

The bridge itself is little changed from the way it looked in the 50s, a dressed sandstone bridge with a distinctive black stone parapet, and dates from the 1830s. From the top of the bridge could be seen the Ravarnet River, which is still a popular place for fishing as it, was then.

The river and canal flowed on through Lisburn, splitting at Hogg's Weir at the Island at Canal Street and Hilden where locks were situated and quays allowed for the unloading and loading of goods.

At Lambeg, a weir controlled the flow of the water on the river, ensuring that sufficient quantities were maintained in the canal cut. Whilst the canal passed through Lock 9 the river took a different course and passed under the bridge at Lambeg. This attractive stone bridge carries the Tullynacross Road.

Below Lambeg and Ballyskeagh, the Lagan runs just below the old Charley estate at Seymour Hill. The river and canal ran separately here, only rejoining beneath the rolling grasslands as Wilmont Estate, better known now, as Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon Park.

On this stretch of the river was the No. 7 Lock, McQuiston's, with its attending lock keeper's house, built in the typical style of Thomas Omer.

Downstream past Drum Bridge, the river and canal split again, with the river meandering through rich farming and grazing land. A long thin island separated the two, with the level of the river being noticeably lower than that of the canal.

On a raised bank on the Co. Down side of the river was a narrow path, by which the mill workers at St. Ellen's Mill at Edenderry used to reach their work. The path led from the village to the Ballylesson Road near Hillhall.

At Edenderry the river and canal, again, rejoined at a point called Eel Weir running down eventually to Shaw's Bridge.

Shaw's Bridge is actually the 3rd bridge built here, on what originally was a ford in the river. The first bridge, made of oak, was built in 1655 by Captain Shaw for Cromwell's guns to cross the river and was replaced in 1698 by a stone bridge.

This however was washed away in a flood and replaced in 1709 by this stone structure, reputedly, said to be constructed from the stones of Castlecarn, the old fort at Malone.

Looking downstream, the towpath has changed to the right of the river (the horses had to cross Shaw's Bridge to rejoin it on the other side) and follow the canal as it swings right to the 3rd lock at Newforge. The river weir to the left of the towpath as you head downstream is now part of the canoe slalom and would have controlled the water, beside what is now Clement Wilson Park.

The canal itself runs through the 3rd lock with its unmistakable stone hump-backed bridge, restored lock and lock keeper's cottage, rejoins the river as it flows under the 'Red Bridge' in the distance.

Slightly further on the canal and river split once more around Moreland's Meadow with the river following a loop past the woodland of the Belvoir Estate. From this stretch of the river, Belvoir House could be seen, sitting at the top of the slope, looking out over Moreland's Meadow.

From high up on the Lagan Meadows Moreland's Meadow and the first gates of the 2nd, lock known as Mickey Taylor's can clearly be seen.

The first lock at Stranmillis, known as Molly Wards, the river ran behind the existing boat club. However, the canal meanwhile ran in front of the boat club with the first lock at the end of what is now Lockview Road.

This is where the canal started or ended depending on your point of view but the river ran on passing through the weir at Stranmillis, past the old Markets and the Gas Works.

The final bridge which crossed the river, the Queen's Bridge, beyond which lay the harbour of Belfast, one of the busiest ports in Europe.