

Bringing heritage to life in an engaging story

Waterways Ireland

The Challenge

- Make archived information more engaging and accessible to the public

The Benefits

- Heightened public interest in the Grand Canal
- Stronger connections with local heritage
- A powerful resource for education
- Optimum use of archived resources

It is now possible to journey along Ireland's Grand Canal and explore this waterway through the eyes of a boatman. Waterways Ireland has brought this fascinating story to life using Esri's ArcGIS StoryMaps, heightening public interest in the heritage of Ireland's navigable rivers and canals.

The Challenge

Flowing through the cities, towns and countryside of Ireland and Northern Ireland, there are 1,100 km of navigable inland waterways. As well as managing and maintaining these canals and rivers for recreational purposes, Waterways Ireland also safeguards and shares precious heritage information about them. It has an archive of thousands of historical documents, maps and photographs and an online catalogue of 7,000 digital resources including podcasts and videos.

Looking for new ways to leverage its wealth of heritage materials, Waterways Ireland discovered Esri's ArcGIS StoryMaps, a geographic information system (GIS) app builder that enables users to design and build interactive experiences combining maps and multimedia content. It realised that a storymap would be an exciting new way to connect its disparate resources and ignite greater public interest in Ireland's waterways.

The Solution

Waterways Ireland secured Heritage Council Stewardship Funding and appointed Land Use Consultants, a multidisciplinary land use consultancy, to design and deliver an engaging story using ArcGIS StoryMaps. Waterways Ireland then formed a project team to inspire and drive the initiative, bringing together staff from its archive, education and heritage teams. The initiative was a flagship deliverable of its Heritage and Biodiversity Plan.

From the outset, the project team wanted to have a strong narrative to link its varied resources together. It settled on the idea of recounting a boatman's journey along the Grand Canal, a 130 km waterway that crosses Ireland, connecting Dublin's docks in the east with Shannon Harbour in the west. LUC then used the available templates in ArcGIS StoryMaps to build the app, using Esri's 'Modern Antique' map layer to show the route of the boatman's journey.

In the story, the boatman travels on a barge called 31M, a prototype, designed specifically for the canal in 1925. Along the way, he passes a variety of locks, bridges and aqueducts, as well as the Guinness Brewery, bustling towns and serene countryside. Users of the storymap can click on points along this journey to bring up boxes that reveal information and links to fascinating historical documents, old photos, podcasts, oral histories and video clips relating specifically to each location. The app is interactive with an accessible and intuitive design, making it very easy for people to use.

The project team carefully curated the resources for the storymap, deliberately selecting a wide range of formats to add to the interest. Highlights include a 3D animation of the 31M barge, video clips about the building of the Grand Canal and amusing verbal anecdotes, such as the tale of the policeman who used a bathtub to cross the canal (unsuccessfully!)

The completed story, fittingly titled 'A Boatman's Journey', was first revealed during National Heritage Week in August 2024 and then formally launched in October of the same year. It is hosted by Waterways Ireland on its ArcGIS Online platform and can be expanded with new and additional content, in-house, in the future. The organisation now hopes to develop further digital stories using ArcGIS StoryMaps, relating to the other waterways it manages.

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Martina McCarthy, Heritage Officer, Waterways Ireland

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Nuala Reilly, Archivist, Waterways Ireland

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Manus Tiernan, Education Officer, Waterways Ireland

The Benefits

Heightened public interest in the Grand Canal

Widely promoted at events and via social media, ‘A Boatman’s Journey’ received more than 4,300 views in the first year, heightening public interest in the heritage of the Grand Canal. Martina McCarthy, Heritage Officer at Waterways Ireland observes, “People who might not otherwise engage with heritage information are really intrigued by the storymap and quickly become caught up in the narrative. ArcGIS StoryMaps has undoubtedly enabled us to bring Ireland’s Grand Canal heritage to a wider audience.”

Stronger connections with local heritage

Because the storymap is, by its very nature, map-centric, it helps people to see where waterways are in relation to their local communities and their own family histories. Seeing the app has led several people to donate their own pictures and stories to the project, supplementing Waterways Ireland’s archives. “The storymap enables people to visualise where events took place in their communities and improves their sense of connection with the local heritage on their doorstep,” explains Nuala Reilly, Archivist at Waterways Ireland.

A powerful resource for education

Waterways Ireland is now actively encouraging teachers to use the app and has created lesson plans that link the storymap to the curriculum. The organisation has also showcased the storymap at educational events and in schools, receiving enthusiastic feedback. “The storymap brings to life what it was like to work on the canal a hundred years ago,” says Manus Tiernan, Education Officer at Waterways Ireland. “It is amazing to see how the story draws young people in and gives them a new appreciation of their local waterways.”

Optimum use of archived resources

Through the use of ArcGIS StoryMaps, Waterways Ireland has achieved its goal of making better use of its extensive—and growing—archives. The storymap presents the material in a new and engaging format, making it easier for audiences to explore and understand, and some of Waterways Ireland’s most fascinating materials are now more accessible. Waterways Ireland is the steward for Ireland’s waterways heritage, and ArcGIS StoryMaps is clearly supporting it in this valuable role.

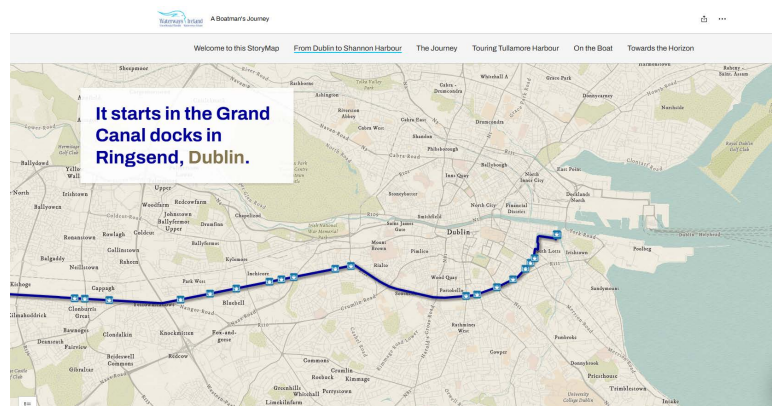
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‘A Boatman’s Journey’, built using ArcGIS StoryMaps