

Currach Racing in Salthill in the 1950s

In the early 1950's a group of people got together to come up with ideas for extending the tourist season. They decided to focus on traditional Irish cultural events throughout the country, often with a local flavour and they called the project 'An Tóstal'. A committee was set up in Galway and they came up with the concept of an All-Ireland Currach Racing Championships. Nothing like this had ever been done before, so it took quite a bit of organisation.

It proved to be an inspired decision as these races became one of the top sporting attractions in the country. In 1953, the course was set up off the Claddagh, and every year after that, the races took place in Salthill. The Promenade was an ideal viewing platform for the huge crowds it was estimated that 80,000 people turned up one year. They came by bus, coach, train, even by donkey and cart, from all parts of the country. Conamara was almost emptied of people for the event. The Irish Times reported in 1959 that the throng included visitors from Nigeria, The United Arab Republic, Scotland, England, Trinidad, Brittany and the Netherlands. Our photograph of some of the crowd listening to the Guth na n-Óg Pipe band gives one idea of the numbers.

A Tóstal parade usually started proceedings. There were lines of people four and five deep for more than a mile all along the prom, many dressed in báinín and bréidín and beautiful criosanna, mountainy men and island men and women, most of them speaking Irish in various beautiful accents from Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Kerry, Clare, Conamara and the Aran Islands. There were currachs everywhere, on trailers, on grass verges, at the water's edge, and always people around them discussing how they were made. These were not normal working boats, they were built especially for speed. Platforms were built at intervals along the prom where one could listen to traditional music and sean-nós singing, or watch Irish dancing. Bands played at 'the ladies' and at Blackrock, there was a cluster of bookies at Blackrock, many different stalls, 3-card trick men, hawkers, a marquee for food and another for visiting crews, a festival dance at the Hangar, empty stout bottles and lemonade bottles everywhere. Loudspeakers were put up on poles so that everyone could listen to race commentaries. I don't know what the 1950's equivalent of the word 'craic' was, but it was tangible in Salthill.

The racing was a very serious affair. In 1959, a gale force wind and mountainous seas forced their postponement. Two weeks later, an estimated 60,000 people turned up on a sunny day to witness the event. Ten crews from different parts of the country took part in the senior race. The legendary Joyces from Inis Bearacháin were favourites, having already won it twice, but they broke a pin in the rowlock just as their heat started, and had to withdraw. There were 2 Clare crews in the final, one from Horse Island and one from Scattery Island; 2 crews from the Maharees in Kerry; one from Carraroe and one from the Aran Islands. For a long time no one could tell who was going to win the Horse Island crew led at the beginning, but they were eventually overtaken by the Carraroe lads who held on to win by the narrowest margin in any race held at Galway since the championship began. Réamonn Mac Donncha, Beartla Ó Flatharta and Mícheál Mac Donncha were Ireland's premier currach crew. The Rosses from Donegal were crowned as junior champions that year.

In 1957, there was an equally dramatic final as five crews were disqualified for going the wrong side of a marking buoy, and the race was awarded to the Mayo champions, Clare Island.

For some reason, this annual festival in Salthill stopped in 1959, but the good news is that it is being revived again this weekend with a two-day festival of Galway Hooker and Currach racing taking place on the prom on Saturday and Sunday. There will be all kinds of family entertainment and traditional music and an RNLI fundraising dance in the Galway Bay Hotel. Racing will start at 1pm on Saturday and continue until 6pm, and on Sunday it will run from 2.30pm until 6pm. It looks like being a brilliant weekend which will hopefully become an action-packed annual event, so please support it if you can.

TK

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