

Cables and Links to Bere Island and the New World: The Barge and the Great Eastern

Joe Houlihan's recent radio item recalled the role of Brendan Murphy's barge in laying the underwater electric cable to the Island in March 1958. The iconic photograph of it hangs in the Bakehouse Cafe in the village, and in the Bere Island Hotel. The ESB's Rural Electrification News had several photos of the event. An earlier edition told its readers how in one 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. day in August 1957, the Dutch mv. Whitsun under Capt. P J Janzen had, despite the tides and the small pier at Lawrence Cove, delivered "the mundane but precious cargo of construction materials (plus a tractor and a Commer van) in one all-embracing run." It went on to report that the island network was "now completed" and that the submarine cable was "on its way from Germany." The ESB clearly appreciated the local history and related how

Some of the almost centenarians on the island recall that another cable ship, "The Great Eastern," anchored with her convoy between the island and the mainland before setting out on a July day in 1866 to lay the first transatlantic telephone cable from Valentia to the New World.

The great Eastern had also spent time in the harbour in 1865. Because of its importance and newsworthiness, that 1857-1866 Atlantic Telegraph project was extensively documented and the news 'shared' with an eager world, but not at the viral speed and millions of views it would have today. To record and report on the cable-laying expeditions of 1865 and 1866, a prominent artist was chosen, and a London Times correspondent selected as the sole journalist aboard. On board the Great Eastern (which had a complement of 500), they together composed the first-ever ship's newspaper, and its eager readers can be seen in the painting reproduced below. Cyrus W. Field of the Atlantic Telegraph Company eventually donated the art works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Today, we can all enjoy the large online collection of in-the-public-domain images from the expeditions, as well as the accounts available in the digital archives of the Times. This newsletter piece is limited to two paintings, and one excerpt from the Times about that week in July 1866; the links given at the end contain considerable additional material that can be enjoyed online over the rest of the winter.

The landing point in Newfoundland was Heart's Content in Trinity Bay, since the Bull Arm harbour used in 1857-1858 was too small to accommodate the Great Eastern – by far the biggest ship in the world at the time. Accommodation was not a problem for Berehaven harbour, where she spent a week being 'coaled' before heading, with her entourage, for Valentia and westwards. A pen sketch of the Cable Fleet at Berehaven, with Hungry Hill prominent, appeared in the Illustrated London News. It is slightly different from the watercolour (shown below) made for Mr Field. The text identified and described the roles of the frigate (HMS Terrible), the three screw-steamers, and the two collier steam-vessels. That newspaper also recounted an amateur dramatic production, involving Neptune, tritons and mermaids, put on for the Company and their guests as the Great Eastern headed from Sheerness to Berehaven. It was mostly humorous but hinted at data security concerns that are still very relevant for cable companies and governments today.

The Times was lavish in its praise for the local area, and the harbour, giving it the equivalent of a 9 on the Trip Advisor scale (see the full account on the website to see where it took off one point). While in Berehaven, "a great many visitors and others connected with the expedition had gone up to Glengariffe to enjoy the rare beauties of its lake and mountain scenery - beauties

which are equal to those of Killarney itself, and therefore have nothing to surpass them in Ireland.”

But the correspondent was also impressed by the local people, their business sense, and their religious values.

After the Great Eastern had moored at Berehaven, where she is still anchored, the peasantry were allowed to come on board, and they availed themselves of the privilege by hundreds. It was a mutual advantage to them and to the crew, and, indeed, to all on board the ship, for, while the country people were delighted to see the vessel, they brought great quantities of fresh provisions, such as poultry, eggs, fish, &c., which they sold to both the sailors and stewards at ridiculously low prices. Thus there was any amount of fine live fowls at 5d. apiece, new-laid eggs 3d. a dozen, trout 1d. each, new milk like cream 1d. a quart, large live crabs 1d. each, and immense lobsters 2d. Stranger still to say, these prices were considered so remunerative that the supply soon exceeded the demand, and of course a further fall took place, and in many instances sales were gladly made at most half the sums we have mentioned.

The labour of the men employed to coal, however, was by no means so cheaply got. Seeing that their services were urgently required, they soon agreed among themselves to extort, on commercial principles, the highest terms obtainable, and eventually succeeded in getting 5s. a day and their keep for nine hours' work per diem. It is needless to remark that such wages were never heard of in this part of the country, and apparently the men themselves could not work for thinking of them, for what they did was unquestionably the very minimum of a labour test; yet on Friday, when the dinner of bread, meat, and potatoes was offered to these men, not a single one of the 200 or so employed would touch it, as it was a fast day, and accordingly biscuits and coffee had to be served out to them instead.

The Times told its readers that Berehaven Harbour was “placed by nature where it is most wanted, and one of the finest and safest harbours of refuge in the world.” So, it is no surprise that it and the island that guards it are linked to many key events in world history. But just as it did with the London Times and the ESB correspondents, its well informed and determined people also made a strong impression.

Further reading and viewing

ESB's Rural Electrification News

<https://esbarchives.ie/2016/03/09/rural-electrification-of-bere-island-co-cork-in-1958/>

This has photos of the laying of the Bere Island electric cable, as well as excerpts from written accounts at the time.

<http://www.medicine.mcgill.ca/epidemiology/hanley/BereIslandGreatEastern/>

This website has links to written accounts, paintings and other background material. These include two video orientations to the massive and momentous Atlantic project, and a link to a BBC piece on the Great Eastern itself – by far the biggest ship in the world at the time.

Seamus Hanley

October 21, 2020

James.hanley@mcgill.ca



SOCIAL/NEWS MEDIA IN 1866 !!

News Received Through the Atlantic Cable From All Parts of the World, etc.

Artist: Robert Charles Dudley (British, 1826–1909)

Date: 1866

Medium: Watercolor over graphite with touches of bodycolor

Dimensions: Sheet: 9 5/16 × 12 5/8 in. (23.7 × 32 cm)

Classification: Drawings

Credit Line: Gift of Cyrus W. Field, 1892

Accession Number: 92.10.84

New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (see website)

Editor: please shorten/edit caption as you see fit



At min. 10.35 in the Newfoundland & Labrador Video, and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art which holds the original (Accession Number: 92.10.74), this watercolour is described as being “The Heights over Foilhummerum Bay, Valentia, the William Corey Heading Seawards, Laying the Shore-end of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable, July 7th, 1866.” It matches quite closely but not exactly the (black and white) pen-sketch in the London Illustrated News, which specifically said it is the Cable Fleet at Berehaven.

Editor: please shorten/edit caption as you see fit