

Paradise



Lough Neagh does not have many islands, but it does boast one of the most beautiful heritage sites on our waterways. However, it will take some hard work and hard cash to preserve the beauty and peace of Ram's Island, as Michael Savage explains

The River Bann and Lough Neagh Association (RB&LNA) is worried about the declining condition of Ram's Island, the largest and most beautiful island on Lough Neagh. In 2003, after discussing the island at a branch meeting, it was agreed for members to approach the owner Lord O'Neill, to see what could be done to sort out the problems.

The bird population seems to have fallen, and there does not seem to be as many nesting birds as in former



Ram's Island FACT FILE

- Ram's Island, the largest island on Lough Neagh, is located approximately one mile offshore from Lennymore Bay and Sandy Bay on the eastern shore of the lough.
- Notable features of the Island are a round tower, and the ruins of the O'Neill's 19th century summer house.
- The island was last permanently inhabited in the 1920s by the Cardwell family who were caretakers for the O'Neill's.
- The island has a number of mature deciduous trees including oak, ash, alder, willow, birch, beech, sycamore, lime, horse chestnut, and unusually, walnut.
- There are yew, snowdrops, bluebells, primrose, butcher's broom, lords and ladies (Jack in the pulpit), wild mint, wild garlic, lesser celandine, ferns and a carpet of daffodils, depending on the season. Fungi such as scarlet elf's cap and jew's ear can also be found. There are also various mosses and lichens.
- Although overgrown, there are remains of a carriageway along the elevated central spine of the island. There are overgrown paths along the entire length of the island.
- Ram's Island is mentioned in the annals of the four masters. Cumaighe, son of Deoraidh Ua Floinn, lord of Durlas, was drowned in Loch-Eathach (Lough Neagh), after the island of Inis-Draicrenn (Ram's Island) had been taken by the Ui-Eatach, where forty-four persons were slain.
- Human bones including several complete skeletons and remains of coffins were occasionally dug up in the vicinity of the round tower during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries
- A number of brass fastening pins, probably for monks' cloaks, were found in conjunction with the burials, and amongst the coins discovered was one of Edward I.
- The round tower which stands on top of a steep eminence near the east shore of the island is constructed from small rounded stones which may well have come from the island's shores, and is forty three feet high, but was probably somewhat higher when it was originally built.

lost?

years. The mature trees have been suffering and some have fallen over. The O'Neill summerhouse and the round tower are in need of urgent attention. The jetties have fallen into disrepair and the once flower-lined paths have practically disappeared. The only things that seem to be thriving on the island are the predators and the sycamores. The pre-McMahon waterline stone wall is under threat from visitors removing stones. This wall is a very rare example which marks the natural shoreline of Lough Neagh. It survives, while most other natural shoreline marks around Lough Neagh have disappeared.

After much discussion, it was agreed for the association to look at the possibility of taking on the island on a long-term lease. The objectives of the association are:

- to make it safe and freely available to all,
- to seek funding to replace the jetty,
- to repair the path network, and
- to enhance the natural and built heritage of the island.

The association has lodged various funding applications for the capital works on the island with the Lough



In June 2003, a tree fell on the O'Neill's summer house and caused considerable damage. After discussion with Lord O'Neill and the Natural and Built Heritage of the Environment and Heritage Service, it was decided to remove the tree from the house, and the trees growing out of and around the house. This was all done by volunteer members, among them was vice-president Brian Cassells, seen here on the right



'The only things that seem to be surviving on the island are the predators'



Davey and Tracy Galloway (RB&LNA and IWAI members) walk through the trees on Ram's Island. Davey is a very useful member of the Ram's Island team, as he works in the forestry service, and is a great source of information about caring for the trees on the island

PHOTOS: MICHAEL SAVAGE



During the 1960s, a jetty was built by the McGarry brothers, who had leased the island from Lord O'Neill, to facilitate visits by the passenger vessel the Maid of Antrim. The McGarry jetty, which is located at the south-eastern end of the island has now fallen into disrepair, but to facilitate repair operations to the summer house, members carried out temporary repairs to the jetty

Neagh Partnership, and other funding bodies, and is negotiating with Antrim Borough Council for long-term support for the upkeep of the island.

Some of the funding for the island will have to be raised by members, and so the RB&LNA has produced a River Bann and Lough Neagh Calendar which will be on sale around Lough Neagh, from tourist information centres, from the Ram's Island website (www.ram'sisland.org) and from various IWAI branches. The

printing costs for the calendar have been met by sponsorship from branches, councils and other organisations. All proceeds from sales will go towards Ram's Island. The RB&LNA is also converting a dumb barge, JK16, which has been donated to the project by Readymix NI Ltd. The barge will be used as a floating interpretive centre, having a minimal impact on the island.

Work on the island will also improve safety for users of Lough Neagh. The need for rough weather safe-havens for boaters on Lough Neagh has been identified by the Safety and Navigation Working Group of the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee. The refurbishment of the jetty at Ram's Island will fulfil part of this need.

Islands make loughs and lakes much more attractive places to visit, but Lough Neagh has only one island suitable for visitors at the moment. The late Jim McGarry once said 'half a dozen good islands would have made all the difference'. Unfortunately, Lough Neagh does not have half a dozen good islands, but if access to Ram's Island was made safer, it would undoubtedly increase the tourist and educational potential of Lough Neagh. ■

Michael Savage is a member of the RB&LNA.