

The Foyle Punt.

County Donegal was the home to three traditional Irish craft, the Drontheim, the Curragh and the Donegal Punt. The curragh was widely used in West Donegal but does not seem to have been used East of the Fanad peninsula. The Drontheim was widely used all around the coast of the county, particularly in the larger harbours and inlets.

The Donegal Punt found favour in smaller harbours and with the farming communities that supplemented their income and food by fishing seasonally. Punts varied in length from 14 feet to 21 feet with variations in beam and depth to suit local needs.

The punt had all the characteristics in build of the drontheim but had a transom stern to give more carrying capacity in a shorter hull form. All punts were clinker built and most were built with a "sandstroke" which allowed the keel to be easily dropped out for repair / replacement in the days before iron keelbands were introduced to protect the wooden keels when boats were being launched and recovered over rough beaches. The creation of the sandstroke was very technical and not every builder could make them so some punts were built with a hog on top of the keel, an easier job until the keel needed replacement or repair.

The sandstroke was better able to absorb upward movement from rough launching than the hog which tended to cause the floor of the boat to be set up by rough handling.

The art of shaping the sandstroke was a family secret and it is rumoured that no one in Moville ever actually saw Jim McDonald make a sandstroke. They all appeared magically overnight!

The Foyle Punt evolved from the generic Donegal Punt and was the workhorse of the fishing communities along Lough Foyle. Foyle Punts were raced by their owners at local regattas along the shores of the Lough and eventually some standardisation started to evolve. The main commercial builders were the Beattie's and McDonald's, in Moville, but individual punts were built by others around the Lough. The Dohertys, in Whitecastle, John Crossan and Willie Harrigan, in Drung, and the Alan Stewart and William Campbell, in Culmore, were the more prolific builders but others would have built individual one-offs.

Originally the fishing punts would have been rigged for rowing and sailing and would have been sailed with a simple unstayed mast, small loose-footed mainsail and small jib. All easily stowed on board when not in use. Some mainsails were larger with a sprit for use in fair weather but which could be removed to allow the peak to fall to reduce sail in fresher weather. These would have been known as "working" or "fishing" rigs.

When the punts were being sailed in local regattas the punts were modified by the addition of false keels and washboards. The rigging was modified by the addition of bowsprit, boom, mast stays and by fitting an iron "horse" on the transom which allowed the mainsheet block to be shifted aft, astern of the rudder and tiller. This allowed the boats to carry bigger sails which were borrowed from yachts or specially made for racing. To compensate for the larger rigs bags of gravel were carried for use as static ballast and for trimming the boat.

Considering that first prize for a punt race in 1900 was £4 and in 1916 had risen to £12 for some events it is not surprising that boats would carry all the cloth they could muster. This can be put in perspective when it is noted that McDonalds built a 16 foot punt for Patrick McKinney, Moville, in 1915, for £8 and 10 shillings.

These “Big Rigs”, and the accompanying bags of ballast, made for a very unforgiving boat and many boats capsized or simply were “sailed under” in fresh conditions. The “big rigs” and the unregulated size of punt continued into the late 1940’s when a capsized resulted in the tragic loss of a crewman in Moville in 1949.

After that incident a committee was formed which established a set of rules governing the building and rigging of punts for sailing in regattas. The Foyle Class Sailing Punt was born.

The first punt built by McDonalds under the new rules was in 1951 for Neil Gillespie, Pilot, Carrowtrasna. The price was £50, which did not include sails and rigging.

The modern Foyle Punt is built to defined straight-line measurements which achieve the required elements of standardisation and safety whilst allowing boat owners to include some personal finessing in the lines

The gunwales are lighter in strength and scantlings are lighter but the wearing has been retained for stiffness and the masts are stayed to proper chain plates. No washboards or false keels are allowed and all boats must have adequate buoyancy bags fitted and all crew must wear personal flotation devices.

Likewise the sail sizes, masts, gaffs and booms are governed by straight-line dimensions which limit overall size but permit some flexibility in design.

The Foyle Class Punt is now a racing dinghy in all but name but retains the graceful traditional lines in boat and sail.

Sailing rules are updated as required and official sail numbers are registered with the Foyle Sailing Punt Association. Records are based in Greencastle Maritime Museum.