

NessInformation Service

Nessletter 89

August 1988

Holidays '88

Late afternoon Saturday July 23rd and we were back at the old pier at Abriachan, on Loch Ness, we being myself and wife Doris, daughter Heather, and sister-in-law Audrey on her first visit to the loch. We had visited our son and daughter-in-law and first grandchild in Fort William on the journey up. We were to return on Sunday 31st for Neil Alexander's christening, after which I left the family there for three days, returning to the loch on my own. But enough of the proud grandparents, back to our arrival at the loch. The whole country had been through a very wet spell, we learnt later that it had been the wettest July in Scotland since 1869. The loch level was much above normal for the time of year, almost as high as July 1980 which was as high as I have ever seen it at holiday time. It was dry when we arrived but as we settled in it started to rain, which it did for the next hour and a half, very heavily, 'stair-rods' as we say. This was to be the worst rain of the holiday, we experienced showers but usually managed to stay dry. The worst aspect of the weather proved to be the wind. It had blown up fairly strong by the Sunday morning as we set out to drive round the loch, pulling into various lay-bys as we drove from Dores to Foyers to look at the views, we were presented with a very rough loch with the wind blowing the tops off the waves in little clouds of spray. It is a year or two since we were round the loch, and I took the opportunity to call at the Foyers Hotel and say hello to Mrs McDougal. The McDougals have been NIS members for some years and the Nessletters are available to hotel guests. Over the years a number of NIS members have stayed at the hotel, all of them recommending it for comfort and service, along with understanding for the loch watcher's early morning habits. This, along with the elevated position, giving good views of the loch, make the Foyers Hotel a suitable base for monster hunters. The wind increased by Monday, when we went into Inverness some of the side roads were blocked by tree branches and other debris, and gusts of 70 miles an hour were recorded in the area. For the rest of our stay the wind proved a nuisance, being fresh to strong for most of the time, there only being calm conditions for limited periods. I only took the canoe out perhaps half a dozen times, as I prefer calm conditions for paddling around and it takes very little in the way of waves to make photography, or safe photography impossible. I called on the Loch Ness Project who have their headquarters at the Clansman Hotel this season, in what used to be the petrol station at one end of the parking area. I talked to David Martin who gave me some news on their work this season with the vessel Simpson Echo. This is the demonstration craft of the Norwegian firm Simrad Subsea, as reported in NIS 83. It is a substantial boat of 90 tonne, overall length 80 feet, beam 18 feet, draft 8 feet, with a speed of 12 knots. It is used by the company to demonstrate their products, and spends its days touring various places around Europe where potential customers can see the equipment operating under normal working conditions. The Project had negotiated with Simrad that the Simpson Echo should be located at Fort Augustus on Loch Ness for about eight weeks during July and August. It would be engaged in work for the Project while still being available to the company for demonstration purposes. It was fitted out with a number of various echo sounding/sonar units; it also had a side scan sonar towfish and a ROV (Remote Operated Vehicle). This submersible is provided with lights and both black and white and colour television; it is controlled by cable from the parent vessel. To enable Simpson Echo to maintain station while the ROV is deployed, or any activity that requires a precise position being held, without the problems of anchoring, it is equipped with the Artemis Positioning System. This consists of shipboard receivers and shore-based transmitters (in this case mounted on a Land Rover), or in a tethered buoy, co-ordinates are entered into the system, the boat picks up the beacon signal and uses built-in thrusters to maintain the given position. A very impressive set-up. During our stay there was a CBS TV film crew around, with Selina Scott, and they spent a day on board, as well as around the area, although I do not know what programme they were making. Earlier David told me they had been conducting sonar sweeps of the loch, looking at the seiche effect caused by the gales of the weekend. Back in the 1970's the National Institute of Oceanography had studied the seiche effect in the loch using strings of thermistors in the loch. They had established that such an effect did exist. That is during spring and summer (?) the top layer of water warms up by a few degrees giving rise to a definite thermocline, a steady wind blows for a few days and the warmer layer of water becomes much thicker at the end of the loch, when the wind eases this 'heap' of water rolls back along the loch, and can even oscillate back and forth for some time. The N.I.O. had arrived at these conclusions using mathematics and their thermistor readings. When the newspapers heard of their work one used the headline

'Giant Wave at Loch Ness', however with seiches nothing is to be seen, it is all internal. Now, the Project have produced sonar charts illustrating this effect, and using the Simpson Echo have been able to track it along the loch. I had the chance to have a short chat with Aidrian Shine while at the Clansman Hotel. He outlined their operation with Simrad, and went on to explain how complex they are finding sonar. The more experience the Project builds up over the seasons, the more it brings to light the problems of interpreting the results. The sonar signals can be affected by various things, in a way similar to light, giving rise to results that can be likened to mirages, reflections, and similar phenomena. Which is why experiments such as that conducted on the seiche are valuable, not only does it increase their knowledge of the loch, but provides the opportunity to add to their expertise with sonar in Loch Ness, in which, because of its topography and peculiarities, it is difficult to obtain unambiguous results. Conversation turned to what may be in the loch, in view of Aidrian's remarks about 'jurassic reptiles' during Operation Deepscan. His view seems to be that evidence supports the existence of something large in the loch, but that the most probable explanation will be some type of large fish. Perhaps not as exciting as some would like, but it must be the truth we are seeking not a fantasy. As a follow-up to 'Deepscan' the Project hoped to be able to re-locate the tethered targets they found and investigate them with the ROV. Speaking to one of the 'pilots' of the ROV I was told how it had been taken down the underwater slope of the Horseshoe Scree, the scree is a prominent feature of the southern shore between Foyers and Fort Augustus. From the road on the opposite side it is a huge upturned horseshoe shape scree made up of large rocks, getting closer by boat, the larger rocks are seen to be as high as small cars, dropping into the water almost vertically. The Simpson Echo was positioned 70 m off the scree, the ROV motored across and then taken down the steep slope, what showed on the TV monitor was described as a winter snow scene. The rocks appeared black and were covered, draped, in a thick layer of silt, looking like snow, the slope continued down in the same steep manner until levelling out at 183 m. The silt was very fine and disturbed by the ROV's thrusters if it went too close, if a second look was wanted at an area a long wait was needed to let things settle. While at the loch I enquired about the old tree stump which had been located by Operation Deepscan in Urquhart Bay, filmed/recorded, and subsequently retrieved. The stump had been in the area where the Academy of Applied Science placed a camera on June 20th 1975, and was said by some to be the object photographed in the 'Gargoyle Head' shot. I was told that the stump, itself, was not important, but I was given the chance to have a look at it. There it sat on the floor, covered in a layer of dried mud and silt, craggy, rough, two and a half feet high about the same across various angles of the base, roughly conical, rib-like protrusions running down and out, to end as the stumpy remains of roots, an unremarkable lump of old tree. There is a not too good photo of it in the latest issue of Fortean Times (50) with the instruction to look at it upside down. However I was told to look closely at an area some 9 inches square up on its 'shoulder', through a camera. I did this, but could not find the 'Gargoyle', however the lighting, angles, distance from object, are all very critical. I was shown a slide that had been taken with all these variables reproduced as well as they could be. When projected it was quite startling. Once more I could not see the exact 'Gargoyle', but the texture, colour, shapes, were very much too close for comfort. I agree the stump is not important, it has a curiosity value, no more. What is important is that a slide taken of it in the correct circumstances should be so similar to that taken by the AAS's camera in 1975, considering the stump was within possible range of the suspended camera beneath a swinging boat. That places such a large question mark after the 'Gargoyle Head' to render it unacceptable as evidence. Having reached that conclusion while looking at the stump and slide, I was thinking but what about the 'body, neck, head' picture. That had been interpreted by Professor Roy Mackal as showing: "the upper third of the body of an animal, including an elongated head-neck and two anterior appendages". Before I had chance to form the question, I was shown the answer. Now I have a problem, how to describe adequately, in words, that which is best done with sketches/drawings, which I am sorry the Nessletter format does not allow. To overcome the problem of suspended peat particles reflecting light in underwater photography, in 1972 the AAS built a ladder-like framework to mount the camera and strobe light. By spacing the camera and light some 3 or 4 feet apart it was possible to have the camera 'looking' into the light beam, rather than along it, cutting the amount of reflection. Back to 1975, this structure is suspended 40 feet below the stern of 'Hunter', which is moored in 80 feet of water, however it was only tethered by the bow and thus free to swing. At the ends of the swing it was in water as little as 10/15 feet deep. The tree stump was found in about 25 feet of water within that arc. How do you get the photograph? The boat slowly swings, the framework grounds

and lying on its side is pulled along the bottom, eventually coming to the stump, which has rough ridges running down it. The camera is on one side of one of these ridges, the strobe light on the other. The light illuminates part of the cloud of silt the framework has stirred up, the camera 'sees' this, but is in the shadow of the ridge, which is in silhouette. It is the dark of the shadow which gives the blackness of the 'water' close to the camera, while the lighted cloud of silt gives the 'body, neck, head' images, the edge of the stump giving the definite line between the two. Breaks in the stump ridge allowing light through, give the appearance of anterior appendages. Light coming under the end of the ridge, produces the head. However, what seems to be the solid object is illuminated silt, and what seems to be dark water is shadow. There are a number of publications which have the AAS photographs, one is 'The Monsters of Loch Ness' by Roy Mackal, where it is on page 113. Although it is on its side, the bottom is the outer edge. When I was shown how the photograph could have been taken, and the circumstances were explained to me, it suddenly came to me very forcefully when I grasped what had been said. It was easier to see the 'body, neck, head' than the 'gargoyle'. The question of scale, size, distance from camera, should be raised. It was, in a conversation about a different subject after I had returned home. It seems that the housing used by the AAS for the industrial 16 mm movie camera had a flat glass plate over the camera lens, this limits the field of view and makes judgement of range very difficult, the object could be anywhere from right on the glass to the maximum range of the camera. It is a great disappointment but it seems certain that the 1975 AAS photographs were of the tree stump recovered by the Project in 1987. Alastair and Sue Boyd arrived at the chalet at Strone on our middle weekend. They were to be there for about five weeks. Alastair does watch the bay in a serious manner, spending much of his time with his equipment on the grass in front of the chalet even in unpleasant weather, wrapped up against the chill winds, for even though the chalet windows give a very good coverage of the water, he knows it is easy to be distracted. We also met Doug Macfarlane and family, briefly as we returned from Fort William. His work has curtailed the time he had been able to spend at the loch this season, even though he is based at Invergordon and Nigg Bay. Doug has recently acquired a second-hand catamaran which he intends to fit out for his efforts on the loch. It is a useful boat some 25 feet long and almost as wide, with good cabin space and a large cockpit (13' x 13') weighing 3 tons it should provide Doug with a good working platform. I heard of only one recent sighting while at the loch. Some time in July a doctor and three lawyers were out in a boat somewhere in the area of the Clansman Hotel/Marina, when they saw a large hump, they reported no water disturbance. It would seem to be an example of the classic 'upturned boat' type of sighting. Since returning home I have made further enquiries about this report. The people involved did not want any publicity, and no other details were available. They have been interviewed by someone who has knowledge of the subject, and the impression given was that it was an acceptable sighting. Bob Rines, Academy of Applied Science, was at Tychat with his family. Even though the Academy has done no fieldwork for some time, Bob does visit the loch whenever possible. I was able to spend a little time with them. Bob still has hopes of being able to bring some US Navy equipment to the loch. He had not seen the 'tree stump' but it was hoped that he could manage to in the time available. The Project had offered the use of the Simpson Echo to an Academy team, but it proved impossible to bring personnel together at short notice. We saw nothing of Nessie, as usual. There were not even as many mergansers about, perhaps the rough water had put them off the usual pattern. Although we did see two different groups crossing the loch. One group of three crossing, during one of the calmer periods, from the Whitefield area towards the Clansman, giving very similar wake patterns to those photographed by Crosbie in 1987. I took some pictures of them from one of the A82 lay-bys, some 150 feet above the surface. We were not bothered by midges this year, which was surprising after such a damp season, but I have heard that midges were a menace earlier. We enjoyed our visit, poor weather and lack of Nessie included, and look forward to next year.

Loch Ness Project

I have a little more news about the Project's work. The paper that Adrian presented at the Edinburgh Symposium, which was the essence of their work over the seasons, is to be published in a special edition of Scottish Naturalist, this autumn. This issue is to celebrate the 100 year anniversary of the Society for Natural History, the Scottish branch of which were co-sponsors of the symposium. Of their work this season they have conducted fish counts and have found a surprisingly large char population. Of the tethered targets picked up on Operation Deepscan, they re-examined them and found debris on ropes. In one instance, at least, it was some form of instrumentation,

probably lost by a previous expedition. The side scan sonar had shown that there were areas which seemed to be of a different texture, on the loch floor. When they were looked at by the ROV, they turned out to be patches of clinker. A possible explanation would be the old paddle steamers plying the loch cleaning out their fireboxes. The patches are at regular intervals, and it would seem some form of mechanical dumping was involved. Also investigated was gas rising from vegetable debris, this was found in fairly shallow water in the bays, such as off the mouths of the rivers Enrick and Coiltie, in Urquhart Bay, where debris is deposited on the bottom during spate conditions. It was also found in an area off Fort Augustus, the surprising thing about that is that it was rising from a depth of 100 mt. This season's work has been carried out with very few Project members, that would seem to be the way it is to be in future. Adrian says they have a very good pool of expertise, and hopes to be able to make use of it in longer expeditions. He still hopes to be able to arrange more comfortable accommodation, to take the 'roughing it' out of expeditions. There was nothing said about unusual targets being picked up, but if there were, I think it correct to investigate them before publishing results or findings.

Whales

While not Loch Ness, and the monster, I think the next reports are interesting. The first from the Inverness Courier of May 13th 1988. Gordon and George Skinner, from Easter Ross, say they have seen an extremely rare Beluga or White Whale swimming in the Cromarty Firth. This is the stretch of sea to the north of the Black Isle, which is opposite Inverness over the Beaully Firth. George took some video film of the pure white, 14 foot long Beluga, it had no dorsal fin but they saw its tail. It was obviously taking air as it came to the surface a number of times, but they did not hear any noise. Belugas are normally found in the polar seas of Siberia and Arctic America, and are extremely rare in British waters.

In mid August a female bottle-nosed whale strayed into the Beaully Firth and became stranded on the mud flats near Kirkhill, where she died. Being 21 foot long it was the council's responsibility to bury the body, anything of 25 feet, or more, is Crown property. It was hauled above the high tide line to a field, where it was buried. It is such a shame when a beautiful animal ends up like that.

Andreas Trottman

Andreas wrote concerning the reports in NIS 86. He said that due to a translation error, he wrote to Ulrich in German, he would like to correct two points in connection with the first sighting. He stated that the witness 'most probably' slammed the car door, and in parenthesis that the shore is quite steep at this place. He reported the sightings as told to him by the witnesses without personal commentary, except for the steep shore. He agreed that it was correct to point out the negative side of any strange occurrences in Loch Ness. Andreas was at the loch from May 10th to the 21st undertaking a surface camera watch. He will be back again in October with sonar (X-16), no information about what type of boat he will use.

Odd Ends

The British distributors of Henry Bauer's book, The Enigma of Loch Ness, are: University of Illinois Press, c/o Trevor Brown Associates, 26 Charing Cross Road, Suite 7, London WC2H 0LN.

Richard Frere's book 'Loch Ness' is published by John Murray, coming out in September 1988 it is priced £12.95.

Jayne Mitchell, from Manchester, spent a few days at the loch in early July. She was equipped with a new camera and zoom lens, no Nessie but midges.

Number 89 at an end, please remember your news and views are always needed. My address is still: R. R. Hepple, Huntshildford Cottage, St. Johns Chapel, Bishop Auckland, Co. Durham, DL13 1RQ. Tel: (0388) 537359. Subs U.K. £2.75 U.S.A. \$9.00.