

Ness Information Service
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Holidays

22nd July 1989, 5.30 pm; we were back at the lochside, a quarter of an hour earlier than last year - very much creatures of habit. I know we are more fortunate than many; we do manage at least to visit the loch, but a year seems very long sometimes. Once again the 'we' were my wife, Doris, daughter Heather, sister-in-law Audrey and myself. As we rolled down the track through the trees on to the small strip of ground by the old Abriachan pier, we were met by a strange sight. There was a large bank of shingle stretching from the concrete end of the pier along the top of the shore into the trees. A gap had been dug through it down to the water. We learned later that Neil Borland had used a JCB to do the job, so he would be able to launch his boat as he wished. The shingle had been deposited by the floods of February, and was a clear indication to the maximum level the loch had reached. As the loch level fluctuates normally it is difficult to say exactly how much above normal it had been, but somewhere between five and six feet would be right. Neil had levelled the tail end of the shingle bank out, so we were able to set our awning and tent up on a fairly flat area with room for the van hitched on to the awning, as usual. Along with most of the country, Loch Ness and the surrounding area had been enjoying the dry warm summer weather. It had been a long time since they had had any significant amount of rain, although we did have the 'obligatory' shower as we settled in. The loch level was very low. I have never seen it so far down. The old pier consists of a concrete base on the shore, two walls that are filled in with rubble with traces of what seems to be tarmac on the top, along with grass. This reaches into the water, where it is some seven feet above the beach. It is about 12 feet wide and perhaps 40 feet long. Then there are the wooden remains, which are large baulks of timber standing up from the bottom through the water. There are a number of these, the outer ones being in about 10 feet of water, with a number of cross members left but no sign of the decking. This timber portion will be about 50 feet by 50 feet. I can usually collect water by dropping a bucket on a rope from the concrete portion into about 2 feet of water. This year when we arrived it was just possible to get round the end with dry feet. Thus the loch level was two feet below the normal for the time of year. So here we had the extremes of high and low water. Talking to some of the local people during our stay they all said that no one had seen it higher/lower. For most of the first week the weather continued very good, but then changed to overcast skies for much of the remaining time, although it stayed warm with just a few rain showers. The rain was sufficient to lift the loch level by about a foot. We enjoyed a fair amount of calm conditions and I was able to take the canoe out more this year than last, which was very pleasant. On one of my early trips along the shore I came across the classic piece of Nessie shaped driftwood. It had been cast high up on the shore, almost under the trees, by the storms. A tree trunk with the bark worn off, about a foot in diameter tapering along its length, some twelve feet being straight then with two or three feet curving up into a lovely head and neck. It was lying on the shore with the 'head/neck' raised, the perfect pose, but I think that if it had been in the water it would have floated on its side. I took a photograph of it for my collection. We saw some mergansers, but the group was not as large as last season, and we did not see them as often. We did see two black throated divers pass close by our camp and I got a photograph. Later in our stay we saw two, presumably the same birds down the loch crossing towards Aldourie Castle. We did not go round the loch this year, but we did take a trip on Scott II. It had been many years, on one of our earlier holidays, since I took the two boys and eldest daughter out on Scott II. So we all went on one of the longer afternoon trips. There is rather a long time spent travelling along the canal from Muirtown, interesting in itself, but the view as the boat emerges at Loch End is beautiful; then the run along to Castle Urquhart gives a very different view of the loch to that obtained from the road. One slight change to the run was the turn at the Castle. We slowed right down and came in very close to the castle as the boat turned; the old trip used to turn further out in the bay. Scott II makes a very good outing giving a wonderful view of the loch. One of the lasting impressions is looking back and noting the huge size of the stern wave as she cruises along. No wonder the wake is so powerful and long lasting. Sue and Alastair Boyd arrived at the chalet at Strone on our middle weekend. Alastair had been unwell for some time, but hoped that the tranquility of the loch would help, although he did realise that he would have to limit the time he spent watching and try to relax more than he usually does. By way of making this possible they had a VCR and player along with their camera equipment. Allowing for the limitations of video it did at least mean that some form of check could be maintained on a selected

portion of the bay for most of the time. Sue said it was strange but she found it easier to watch the loch when it was on TV than actually looking at the water. Perhaps something to do with it being framed, and the expectation that on TV things happen, she thought. We saw them three times during the week; it was good to see them again. We were disappointed that Doug Macfarlane did not arrive before we left. We have met up with Doug and family, for a few years while at the loch. Once again it is good to meet up with friends and catch up on news, and note how youngsters are growing. I was sorry to miss Antony Sharratt, an NIS member, who with his father were on their annual trip to the loch. He had been watching from Foyers Point, but had not seen anything unusual. They had taken a boat trip from Ft Augustus and found it very pleasant, and that afternoon had stopped by the old pier to say hello. It was our last whole day and we were out doing the rounds of saying good-bye to our friends in the area. We missed Antony by three hours, and must have passed them along the road somewhere. Dick Raynor dropped into the pier one evening and we had a good chat, and hoped to get together again but did not manage it. Dick is working in the photographic field, and has been helping in the setting up of the new Exhibition layout at Drumnadrochit. We had a look round and found it very interesting, although there was a display or two still to be finished. Adrian Shine has been very involved with the new exhibition, so as can be imagined, it is very much the Project's viewpoint that is presented. To some Nessie hunters the exhibitions are something of an affront, sideshows cashing in on 'our' mystery. I can understand such a view, but feel that it must be remembered that people need to make a living, and tourism is well promoted, not only in Scotland but all over the British Isles. Here at home in Weardale, a rural area short of work opportunities, the Wear Valley is being promoted as 'The land of the Prince Bishops', which harks back to the centuries following William the Conqueror, when County Durham was a County Palatine, and the Bishop had almost as much power as the king. Many of the local people are not in agreement with that image being put forward. In the Loch Ness area, with the exhibitions, I think that perhaps all we can ask is that they are well produced, give a fair representation of the facts and the work done by the various parties over the years, and present good value for the entrance charge. We should also remember that most of us have read many of the books on the subject, and in fact know as much about it as the people mounting the exhibitions. With the new exhibition it is proposed that the average visitor should take 45 minutes to pass through the displays, although it is possible to stay longer and have a better look. That is not a long time when you consider the vastness of the subject, and all the various facets of the mystery. So for us there is perhaps not too much to be gained from a visit, but for the tourist it could be very useful, and in a small percentage of cases lead to a greater, longer lasting interest. Talking to Adrian about the Project's work, he said they have plans for an extended programme in future seasons using very sophisticated 'state of the art equipment'. However the cost of such equipment is very high and the funding of such an effort could be a problem. This season they had been doing a series of sonar experiments using their old gear and just a few volunteers, in a very low key manner. He also said that earlier in the year he had met with Bob Rines, of the Academy of Applied Sciences, and he hoped that they would be getting together in a combined operation some time later in the season. Bob was expecting to be able to obtain some declassified US Navy equipment to use. Perhaps it could be said that it would be obsolete, but I would think that even not too old naval gear would still be very good. I hope that such an expedition will take place, but at this time I have no further information. While visiting Adrian I had the chance to see and examine a perspex barrel which the Project had retrieved from the loch. This object is something of a mystery, as there is no indication who put it in place or why. The Project first detected it on their sonar in 1983; it showed up as a stationary target in deep water in the general area of the Horseshoe Scree. In following years it was still there, seemingly tethered to the bottom, and they monitored it every season. During Operation Deepscan it did not show up, but when they took another look a day or two later the sonar showed it was still there. This, by the way, is an indication of how far down the sensitivity scale the Deepscan equipment had been during the sweeps, showing how big a target was needed to register, because as you will see the 'Perspex Barrel' would give a strong echo. It was decided to have a look at the Barrel using the ROV, and eventually the Project went a step further and brought it to the surface. It is about 15½ inches long and 9 inches in diameter, with compartments inside. It had been tethered fairly close to the bottom, in some 600 feet of water, by a chain and weight, with a buoyant rope just floating from the top. Both these were fastened with little shackles which had been Araldited to prevent accidental loosening. The main body of the barrel was constructed out of one inch thick perspex, inside were three compartments/tubes; the centre one was

two inches in diameter and empty; the divisions between tubes were half an inch thick; the next compartment was one inch wide, and the outer one half an inch wide, concentric circles. These two spaces were filled with a fine white powder. The only marking on the unit was a small arrow, of sticky plastic, to indicate up. There was no label or notice stating whose experiment/equipment it was nor a contact address - nothing. Adrian said the standard of construction would indicate a Technical College or University department, not the kind of thing easily thrown together in the back kitchen. Seeing the powder raised questions of drugs, so the Customs and Excise authorities were called. When they came they drilled a hole into each of the sections containing powder and took small samples. Conclusion: the powder was not narcotic. Adrian had the powder analysed and he was informed it was 'an inert silicon powder'. While I was looking at the barrel at Adrian's place I noticed there were four metal bars spaced at equal distances around the inside of the outside compartment, buried in the white powder. I thought they looked like bar magnets, although I could just glimpse their ends. When I did a simple test with a compass it seems certain that they are magnets. It would seem that here we have an experiment of some kind, but all it consists of are concentric tubes of inert silicon powder and bar magnets. There does not seem to be any wiring, power source, connection to the outside and it has been 600 feet down in the loch for at least six years. No one, or organisation, has come forward to ask about it, and after all the Deepscan operation received a great deal of publicity. You would think that someone should have contacted the Project to say, 'while you are poking about down there you should find this barrel, it is ours!'; but no one did. Anyone any ideas as to who or what? Another mystery in the loch.

Once again I did not see anything unusual in the loch, but it is very good to be by the loch and meet up with our friends, and soak in some of the atmosphere. The weather was kind and we all had a good holiday and now as usual look forward to next year.

Nessie on Video?

At the end of NIS 94 I briefly mentioned that a Canadian couple had videoed something in Urquhart Bay. John and Judy Chaffin, from Vancouver, were walking from Drumnadrochit to Urquhart Castle on the afternoon of Sunday 25th June 1989. At 4.45 pm they were on the road some 200 yards from Strone, where there is a good view across Urquhart Bay. Judy was taking some video of the bay when John saw 'something' swimming across the bay. He shouted to Judy who then saw the object and recorded it for a minute and a half. It was well out in the bay when first noticed, and swam towards them in a series of slight zig-zags, until it disappeared from view behind the trees at the lochside below them. The head was out of the water for the duration of the sighting, and was rounded, about the size of a basketball. No back was visible, but from the wash behind the head they thought a body of eight to ten feet was causing it. They were sure they were watching an animal and it was moving at the speed of a fast walker (about 5mph), making a bow wave that was clearly visible, although the surface was choppy. Using an Ordnance Survey map they later calculated the animal had been some 300 metres from them. With the assistance of their landlady the next day they contacted Dr Gordon Williamson, a marine biologist who takes a great interest in the loch. He photographed the seal in 1985 and now operates a mini-bus tour to the loch. He visited them, but because the American video is not compatible with the British, he was unable to do more than see the video, in black and white, through the camera eye-piece. Even so he was sure that it was an animal swimming in the loch but because it seemed to hold its head so high and for so long, out of the water, he did not think it was a seal. Mr Chaffin, also said, it was bigger than any seal he had seen around Vancouver. Gordon said that the only non-monsters he could think of that would give a similar effect would be either an Alsatian dog or a roe deer that for some reason was swimming well out in the loch. As they left for home the Chaffins were reported to have said that it may or may not have been Nessie on their video, but it was alive and swimming in the loch. They were satisfied as that was what they had come for. Some time later the BBC obtained a copy of the tape which they showed in a programme from Glasgow. They had Adrian Shire and Gordon Williamson on the same programme and had a telephone link with the Chaffins in Vancouver. Adrian had also assisted in obtaining video for comparison, from the same place and using the same power lens as the Chaffins. The targets were a 17 foot motor cruiser which was 4½ feet tall from the surface, and a model mallard duck. Unfortunately, the Chaffin's video is not perfect, being for the most part slightly out of focus and suffering from camera wobble. There is something in the water making a wake. It shows as a dark lump moving steadily through the water on a weaving course.

Comparing it with the cruiser, not the best as it is white and really stands out, the lump at times seems about a foot high. The 'mallard' is almost invisible at the range. The BBC had blown up part of the sequence but the results were not of much help, one of the failings of video as a medium. Judy had used the zoom lens but that made the camera movement more apparent. We should all make note of this and take the advice of camera manuals, etc., that is, to take advantage of walls, fence posts, or any solid object as a support for a camera when using telephoto equipment. The 'out of focus' element is more difficult. I have talked to a number of people and it appears that most video cameras are self focusing. What Judy was trying to record was a fairly small indistinct object in a stretch of featureless water, not the easiest problem for the camera; also there was the line of trees at the water's edge and a bush in the left foreground. I think that with the camera movement it had been searching for something as the centre of focus, at times seeing the trees and then the bush coming in from the left; this coupled with the water gave rise to the problem. Both Adrian and Gordon were sure that it was some type of animal, but could not say exactly what. They both also said that they were fairly sure that it was not a hoax. There was a commentary with the tape, which gave the Chaffins' immediate reactions to what they were seeing. John's first was that they were seeing a bird, at one point he said it had flown away, showing that initially at maximum range the object was not too apparent to the naked eye. The early reaction seemed to be that it was a bird or a group of birds, then as it came closer came disbelief. Could it be Nessie? As it neared the trees, or the point where the trees would obscure it, Judy said: "John it can't be" with that tone in her voice saying of course it can't be. John answered "Nahh", with similar tone. Traffic could be heard in the background as cars and coaches passed by; the verge is quite narrow there, not the best of situations for trying to concentrate on filming. On the video the object is well out from the shore but not really towards the centre of the bay. It could have been coming from the inner shore of the bay, or the area off the north of the River Coiltie, crossing the corner of the bay. The weaving nature of its path is rather unusual, reminiscent of the track filmed by Tim Dinsdale. During the television programme as I said, there was a telephone link with the Chaffins. One of the questions Adrian asked was: what did you do after the object disappeared behind the trees? They said they had waited and watched for some time to see if it would reappear, which it did not. Adrian made the point that perhaps John should have gone down the hill to see if something was swimming along the edge or had come ashore. John said that the grass was very wet, the hill steep and that he was not dressed for such a scramble. Adrian said that he thought that if he had been there he would have been down the hill to try to find out more. I agree and find John's answer a little off-putting. In many cases the witnesses make an effort to get closer, to see more. So here we have what could be the first video showing one of the Loch Ness creatures, but it has the failing of the other filmed and photographic evidence. It does not provide the answer to the mystery we all hoped for: WHAT IS LIVING IN THE LOCH?

Well at last that is NIS 95 finished. I must apologise to all because it is very late. I have had a great deal of trouble putting it together, finding almost any excuse rather than settle down and write. Writer's block, is it? That with shift work and general lack of time. However here it is at last. Please remember your news and views are always welcome. My address remains:- R. R. Hepple, 7 Huntshildford, St Johns Chapel, Bishop Auckland, Co Durham, DL13 1RQ. Telephone: (0388) 537359. Subscriptions: North America \$9.00 U.K. £2.75.

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