

NESS INFORMATION SERVICE

NESSLETTER 135

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VIDEO

Mid September '98, a piece of video taken by Geoff Mitchinson, on holiday with his wife and young son, hit the headlines. The family from Newcastle, had been on board the trip cruiser 'Nessie Hunter' for a trip round Urquhart Bay. Geoff said he was checking through the camera to make sure to make sure it was the way he wanted it, when something caught his eye. He zoomed in on it and got the piece of tape. He said he had never seen anything like it before. It was only there for a few seconds, moving slowly leaving ripples, it looked like the bow of a boat going through the water. He hoped his footage could take scientists a long way towards proving the Loch Ness creatures exist. Newspaper reported 'experienced Loch Ness Monster spotters' as describing the video footage, apparently showing the head of Nessie, as the most exciting breakthrough in recent years. Gary Campbell, Loch Ness Monster Fan Club, was quoted as saying it was the best video he had seen. Saying, "this is fantastic moving footage and we are very excited by what we have seen. The pictures show the head of something moving along in the water, which initially looks like a seal." But he thought the more he looked at it, it was not behaving like a seal and did not even look like one, as he could not see the body. However there were others who said they were certain it had been a seal. Dr David Waugh, director designate of the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, and director of the Edinburgh Zoo, said "We have a very high level of confidence that this was a seal. The next logical option would be an otter. However, there is always room for doubt."

The Mitchison family were from Newcastle, fifty miles from home, perhaps I could arrange a meeting and interview. Before steps could be taken, our local TV station featured them in an evening news programme. Their account was more or less as reported in the press. The video was shown, of course. It is of fairly good quality, for a home video. It seems to start as a general shot of George Edwards at the boat controls, then swings past Mrs Mitchinson's head to something in the water. This is travelling in the opposite direction, out of the bay, between the boat and the steep shoreline. As the camera zooms in we see, a seal. There is no doubt, what is on the video is a seal. After a very brief time it puts its head down and submerges. Also interviewed was Neil Willis, a marine biologist, from the Sea Life Centre, at Tynemouth. His opinion was that undoubtedly it was a grey seal on the tape. It was a disappointment, but we are looking for the truth, aren't we?

THAT SINKING FEELING

Staying with seals for a moment. In late January, the North East coast had a rare visitor, an Arctic Bearded Seal. It took up residence at the Hartlepool Fish Quay for a while. We learnt later that it had been reported from other places further up the coast as it made its way south. Sporting impressive arrays of grey whiskers, they are the largest of the true seals; adult males grow to eleven feet and weigh over a quarter of a ton. Usually straying no further south than Iceland and north Norway, one was reported off the Norfolk coast in 1892. This latest specimen was over eight feet long and an immediate attraction for local animal lovers. Local TV covered its progress with a number of reports. Fine, but what does that have to do with Loch Ness?

One of the characteristics attributed to the Loch Ness creatures, is the ability to sink straight down. A number of witnesses report, a hump which sinks without any forward motion. Over the years theories have been devised to explain this 'unusual' ability. Having watched the Bearded Seal on T.V., with the benefit of long lens to bring it closer, I wonder if the 'sinking' is really an unusual ability. At times it lay on the surface displaying 'a hump', which became smaller until it disappeared under water. It seemed to be going straight down, however it was not. It was rolling forward in the water, the movement was not obvious, because there were no fins, flippers or other protuberances to be seen. The 'hump' became smaller as the thinner tail-end of the body moved through the arc, until the water closed over it. This smooth forward movement was only apparent through the telephoto lens. It would seem this action could be common to a number of aquatic animals, in fact the Marine Biologist from Tynemouth described it as the behaviour of the Grey Seal he was seeing. While not suggesting all we have in Loch Ness are seals, perhaps they have similar characteristics, movements, behaviour.

ABBEY CLOSURE

It came as a great surprise to read in November '98 that the Fort Augustus Benedictine Abbey was to close, after 120 years of prayer and devotion. It was a greater surprise to find that it was not owned by the monks, or Benedictine order, but leased from the Lovat Estates. When it was founded in 1876, the remains of the old 18th Century Hanoverian Fort were owned by the 14th Lord Lovat. He leased it to the monks for the minimal rent of one pound a year, which it is said has never been collected. The monks saw to the construction of the monastic buildings, including the large Abbey church. Over the years they also amassed some 10,000 books in the Gaelic and theological sections of their library. These have been sold to the Sabhal Mor Ostaig Gaelic College, on Skye, and the Highland Theological College in Dingwall. There were also 10,000 other volumes in their library, dealing with a range of subject including history, art, and architecture. When these were auctioned in May, they raised £147,000. An early 18th century atlas of London which was anticipated to make £4,000 on its own, went for £7,000, and an 1832 map of Scotland which made £6,400, had been expected to fetch £1,500. For many of the years the monastic community ran a boys boarding school. This was closed in 1993 due to lack of pupils, and falling demand for that style of education. Perhaps that was the beginning of the end.

In July '94 the Abbey opened its doors as a Heritage and Tourist Centre. As bursar, Tony Harmsworth, put in a great deal of work to achieve this. It seemed to be successful as over the next few seasons he introduced a number of attractions, such as the monthly Highland Games, during the summers. I understand that right from the beginning the monks had been adamant that the Abbey should not be turned into a Loch Ness Monster Exhibition.

That is understandable, but almost a shame, after all, if anywhere could lay claim to be the home of Nessie, it is Fort Augustus. Alex Campbell, whose early reports triggered the modern day mystery, was water bailiff there, and with its loch-side setting and the number of sightings by the monks, the Abbey would be the central point. Last season Tony opened a very good Monster feature, in the administration building; slides, videos and commentaries, Father Gregory, Father Aloysius, all there. It was given the 'sturgeon' slant, which seems to be the growing point of view at the moment. This seemed to be rather an 'anti' approach, but to finish there was a punch line. Father Gregory Brusey quietly telling of his sighting. No fuss, no dramatics, just a quiet recounting of what he witnessed in October 1971, then the forefinger, now misshapen with age and arthritis, held up to show how the creature's neck was held above the water, that made the hair on the back of the neck bristle, and brought tears to the eyes. A sturgeon with a neck?? I was going to recommend this presentation to you, but I do not know what has become of it.

As to why the Abbey closed?. The '98 season visitor numbers were down, and staffing levels had been reduced. However Father Paul Bonnici said the decision to close was not based on any failure of the commercial side. He said it was simply a lack of monastic monks, of men opting to live as devoted monks in Fort Augustus Abbey. Their numbers had reduced to ten, four over seventy-five, two others in ill health, leaving four in solemn vows. It is a huge building and monastic rounds cannot carry like that the Abbey had to close and when the monks left, the property reverted to the Lovat Estates. It will be a serious loss of amenities in Fort Augustus, for locals and tourists alike. For many years I have recommended the calm and quiet of the Abbey and its grounds to our members, along with the walk down to, and the view of, the loch. We have always visited ourselves, and benefited from the tranquillity. Father Paul was a 'wow' with the ladies and, having an eye for a customer, could sell ice-cream to Eskimos. A delightful man.

What becomes of it now? The whole complex would seem too large for a hotel. For a number of years there has been talk of a new university, the University of the Highlands. It has been suggested that the Abbey would make a very good campus. Whatever happens, I doubt if the quiet, and free, use of the grounds will ever be the same.

Mentioning amenities at Fort Augustus leads me nicely into telling you of Alan and Mandy Smith. They are NIS members who decided on a change of direction and lifestyle. With a love of Scotland, and a keen interest in the Loch Ness mystery, it was obvious Scotland was the place to be. They looked at many properties in the Highlands, however it was one in Fort Augustus that they settled on. I was able to visit them last August ('98). They have a B&B establishment that leans towards Monster hunters, and those with an interest in Nessie and the loch. Although not totally devoted to them. They have a good collection of Loch Ness videos, and a library of books on the subject. They are a very nice couple. Anyone visiting the area and looking for accommodation, could hardly do better than contact them. Address is :- The Bank House, Station Road, Fort Augustus, Inverness, PH32 4AX, tel.01320 366767. The 'bank' in the address is not the river or canal bank, but the Bank of Scotland. That perhaps indicates the style of the property.

NIS AT THE LOCHSIDE

I have reports from a number of NIS members who have, or are to, visit the loch. During June '98, Peter Davenport, from Wirral, spent five days there with his wife and seven year old son. They stay at an Old Pier, but it is the one at Fort Augustus and they usually rent Jenny McKenzies cabin. He tries to be up and about by 6.30am, or earlier, as he believes it is the quietest and best time for watching. This is possible to about 8.00am, when the first boats start leaving the canal. Then it is family time. Had a good stay, but his '82 'hump' sighting is still the only one he has.

Roger Acraman, of Stevenage, wrote a long letter in March '99. The bad news was that he had been laid off work. On reflection he thought that it may have some benefits. He had been working very hard with long hours, and realised that his two young children had been growing up without him. So he is re-assessing his life. Part of the leaving deal was use of company car for three months. In November they decided to visit Scotland, Shiela, his wife, had never been. On the way stopping of at Hadrians Wall, first visit, then Edinburgh, Perth, Inverness. With two toddlers it was not a Ness expedition, but they circled Loch Ness a few times, lapping up the autumnal colours and keeping an eye on the water, no sightings. A very relaxing break, Roger again being overwhelmed by the loch's size, rugged beauty and colours. They stayed at Inverness Youth Hostel, a new one which only opened in May '98. Scotland's YHAs do not normally take toddlers, but the place was empty and the manager made an exception. Roger certainly recommends it. He had some very good points to raise about Richard Carter trying to reproduce Tim Dindale's film, with a boat. I hope to return to that in a later Nessletter.

Dave Turner, from Stockport, with his partner Tracy, spent two weeks at the loch from Saturday 23rd April '99, staying in Dores. They had eight continuous fine days from the start of the holiday, spending a lot of time around the loch, as well as general sightseeing. The day after arriving Sunday, they walked through Fangaig forest, up to the top of the hill over-looking the loch. The visibility was good, clear view of Urquhart Castle off to the right. Below and slightly to the right, were the white cottages of Inverfarigaig. In front of, and again a little to the right, of those, was a large patch of smooth black water. Tracy was using 10x50 binoculars, and became convinced she could see something under the water. She said, "A large dark patch of water caught my eye, so I started looking more closely at the area. I could see the large dark area of water, and then a separate area to the right that appeared to be travelling independently from the stationary large area. This looked like an animate object moving slowly, as if basking, but with jerky movements of what appeared to be four limbs. It was these limb-like shapes that made me think that this was more than just a dark patch of water. This shape did not break the surface. It was difficult to judge the size, but I would say that it was larger than a small boat. The sighting lasted for only a few minutes." Tracy told Dave what she was seeing, and where. He used his camcorder, but could find nothing to focus on. Nothing showed up when they played the tape back, Dave thought he had been looking too far to the left. Time recorded on the tape was 11.25am, sunny weather, light wind, rippling most of the loch surface.

This report can hardly be classed as a 'good' one, very exciting for Tracy but there are too many vague aspects. Could she have been seeing just a smaller patch of rippling water, or a reflection of some kind? A point of interest are the similarities to the account of the four young men reported in NIS134, same area, elevation above the water and 'shape' below the surface.

Gordon Strang, of Cupar, Fife, spent a week at the loch with his family, mid-May '99. He managed to get some early morning watches done. He noticed peculiar disturbances on a couple of occasions, these were relatively small and he attributed them to fish and/or otter activities. However the following day, at about 11.30 he saw quite clearly what he believes (anyway 95% sure) to have been a seal, at relatively close quarters. He says he is sure many would have been fooled into thinking this was the monster. He did not say where they stayed, or where he saw the seal. He did send a sketch. The 'wriggles' were seen opposite the 'Horseshoe Scree' at 0600 on the 18th and same time place on the 20th. Judging from the sketch the seal was closer to Fort Augustus (Inchnarcadoch?). 'Football' seen bobbing in two places for about 30 seconds a time, previously saw more, overall length 4 or 5 feet, head clear of water.

James Kitwood, from Leeds, was at the loch for a week from 29th May '99. He was also to return for another week, from 23rd July, staying at the Invermoriston campsite. He expected Richard Carter to be there, along with a few others, who after meeting on the internet got together to do some monster hunting.

Henry Bauer, USA, author of 'The Enigma of Loch Ness', wrote to say they planned to be at the Ross chalet, Strone, again this summer, three weeks, beginning 19th July '99. With reference to the long

sighting of a light brown, huge object, in NIS134. He thought it very reminiscent of the late '30s film described in Maurice Burton's 'The Elusive Monster' as "very animal-like", though Burton was sure it was not, while not revealing his reasons for that. I believe that Henry was to be part of the International Cryptozoology Symposium in Drumadrochit, over weekend 10/11th July '99.

STEVE FELTHAM

Steve was in touch as I was putting this together. He has recently been able to spend time in the air over the loch, with his micro-light owning friend. He was hoping to be able to get some flights down at the Fort Augustus end, before too long. He said that taking the fish farm cages, moorings and ropes etc, as reference, it is possible to see some ten or twelve feet below the loch surface. This could be a major step forward, being able to watch a volume of water in three dimensions, instead of a single surface, in two.

He said he was aware of no good sightings this season. I had heard of some unsubstantiated accounts. In late February '99, it was reported an American tourist had seen something out of the water. It was said he was between Dores and Foyers, at about 8.30pm. when a long necked creature between 10 and 15 metres in length emerged from the dark and 'scurried' into the water. He was that surprised, he forgot to take a picture!! Different month but very 'Spicer-like'. No names or other details, extremely questionable. At the end of May '99, a tourist, from Wiltshire, who did not wish to be identified, said she had seen a 'large black object' rising about 10ft from the water, near Urquhart Castle. It was about 9am and she is said to have observed it for two minutes. Once again lack of details, also 10ft tall is very large, too large. It is obvious that if anything was seen, it's size was grossly overestimated.

However he did have news of a creditable one on New Year's Eve afternoon, '98. Lorien Cameron (23) and fiancée Kevin Ross (35), were driving down the road towards Dores from Kindrummond. There is a corner from where there is a very good panoramic view over the loch. Something shining brightly in the low Winter sun caught their attention. The loch was calm and the weather clear. About a quarter of the loch's width out from the far shore, in line with the shingle beach at Abriachan Pier, was a hump shape, reflecting silvery light. They both likened it to an upturned boat, a yacht without centreboard. It was in their view for 10 to 15 seconds, before quietly submerging. It did not seem to move. Their view was obstructed by trees for a few seconds, on regaining sight of the area, no sign of activity was to be seen. They are students and live in Aberdeen, but I believe Lorien is a local girl and has some knowledge of the loch and it's moods. Kevin has some military background and could be said to be level headed. They said they thought the object was some 2½ miles from them. Checking the map I would say it was just over 1½ away. This report is one of the better ones, I think.

Adrian Shine had collected Steve from Dores and taken him around the newly opened exhibition. The entirely re-vamped exhibition, Loch Ness 2000, had been officially opened by Sir Ranulph Fiennes in late June. It had taken three years to design and tells the story of the loch, from creation, 600 million years ago, up to recent explorations such as Operation Deepscan. Steve said he half expected it to be almost 'anti', but judged it to be very good. Being very informative on the biology and ecology etc. of the loch. He said it, of course, reflects Adrian's views, eventually getting round to the Sturgeon. About the only quibble Steve had, was that the eye-witness accounts of Monster sightings, seemed to be dealt with in a rather brief manner. As they are the base on which the whole Loch Ness mystery is founded, he felt perhaps they could have been given more prominence.

Steve also told me he had copies of the Internet photograph and said without doubt it is a bird flying through frame, similar to the 'Bruce Photograph' (NIS 54 & 130). As it happens the particular camera is mounted on the chimney stack of the cottage across the road, and overlooking Temple Pier. Very close to the place from which the 'Bruce Photograph' was taken. I hope to return to the 'internet cameras' looking at Loch Ness at a later date.

At last NIS 135 finished. I have a stack of material from Dick Rayner, for the next one I intend. As you are reading this, it means I was able to get the printed word out of the 'bits' and 'bytes' of my new, well second-hand, PC/WP. The old Plus-4 finally expired, after fourteen years. Thank you for your continued support, and tolerance, your news and views are always welcome and needed. My address is still;- R.R.Heppele, 7 Hunshieldford, St John's Chapel, Weardale, Co Durham, DL13 1RQ. Tel:01388.537359. Subscriptions per year,(or at least six issues), U.K. £2.75. N.America, \$10.

Rip.

As I was duplicating this Nessletter, I was reading ,and checking the pages, and I thought where is that piece about Alastair and David's book? I could remember writing it but it was not there. Checking through my scrawled longhand pages, there it was. It had been lost in among all the corrections. I feel it is important so I am doing, what amounts to a postscript.

BOOK

while visiting the loch last August I met David Martin once more. I enquired how the book he and Alastair Boyd were writing about 'The Surgeon's' photo hoax, was progressing. David said the book was ready but having contacted over twenty publishers, he had been unable to get one to handle it. nothing wrong with the book, apart from size, length. He had been told it was a little too long for a booklet, and too short for a book. Most asking for another 25.000 words. David felt that was not necessary and would be just padding. He said he was looking into self publishing.

Earlier this year he phoned to tell me that he had gone down that road and was awaiting the results from the printers. In mid-May he sent me a copy, 'Nessie, The Surgeon's Photograph Exposed'. It was worth the wait. This small book, 100 pages, A5, 35 photographs, is a gem. It is set out rather like a play, with a cast list, stage set, players, etc. it explains the whole intriguing affair, dots the 'eyes and crosses the 'tees'. I am sure it leaves no doubts that the 'Surgeon's Photograph', that 'icon' to many Nessie believers , was indeed a fake. Saying that I must stress that neither David or Alastair claim that it disproves the existence of something very unusual, 'a monster!!', in Loch Ness. This little book is a must for anyone with an interest in the Loch Ness mystery, especially those seeking the truth. It is available by post from :- David Martin, 71 Ridgeway Avenue, East Barnet, Herts, EN4 8TL. Cost in UK. £6.00, outside UK. £7.00, including P&P. cheques in £ sterling to David Marten.