

NESS INFORMATION SERVICE

NESSLETTER 152

FEBRUARY 2007

VAL SMITH

Val, a long-standing NIS member, from Cardiff, and his son have made many visits to the loch over the years. He sent a short letter with news of their latest. They travelled over-night on 27th December '05, arriving in Milton, by Drumnadrochit, at ten the next morning. They had encountered some patches of fog, but no rain, on the way. Temperatures were very low after crossing the border, and as they approached Inverness, on the A9, the windscreen washers froze.

They drove round to Dores on the 28th, and had a chat with Steve Feltham, who was playing host to a coach-load of people there and selling a few model Nessies. That evening Val and Jonathan had a meal with their friend, Catherine Handley, the former owner of the Clansman Hotel.

They went shopping in Beaulieu and visited the Muir of Ord, on the 29th. Then made their way to have a look at what is left of the Corrieyairack Pass, on the south side of the loch, and the Suidhe Chirnen viewpoint.

Drove to Abriachan on the 30th, there was snow on the road up there. Had a meal at the Fiddler's in Drumnadrochit. They were intending to drive round the loch, but struck something at the side of the road, towards Strone. It was dark by then, so returned to Lewiston. Where they found there were three holes in the front tyre.

Next day, the 31st, discovered the nut for the alloys was missing. Spent time searching between Milton and Lewiston, before finally finding it in the boot, where it had been all the time!! They then managed to get a new tyre, a great relief. In the evening they went to the Hogmanay party in Drumnadrochit. There was a pipe band, dancing, a lone piper and fireworks. Val and Jonathan met up with some Norwegian visitors, who were interested to find out what they wore under their kilts. Catherine Handley had to get back before midnight for 'first-footing'.

January 1st, took Catherine to Culachy House and to a dry-stone bridge they had come across near the Corrieyairack Pass. They have not been able to discover it's origins. Went down to Foyers, then Boleskin. They have found out, and are horrified, that some of the land around Boleskin is being sold for development.

Drove to Dornoch and Earls Cross, on the 2nd.

On the 3rd they went to Culachy to investigate the Cill Chumein burial ground; a huge, round indentation, circled with stones and tree stumps. They arrived home, Cardiff, at 04.25 on the 4th.

During the whole week of their stay the loch was flat calm, without signs of frost. On quite a few of the days, vapour was rising from the surface. They had bright sunshine on some mornings. There was a flurry of snow, about an hour, one day but that was all.

I also received a postcard from Val, dated 18th November '06. They were back at the loch and said: 'The atmosphere is quite different here in winter. The ground is golden with leaves; the trees display an orgy of colours; oranges, yellows, greens, reds and the mountains are plumed with snow. We had snow yesterday and it is a foot or more deep on the high ground but, of course, none where the loch meets the land.'

I thought I would throw that poetic piece at you, just to make you as envious as I am!

SIGHTING

While on a fishing trip near Dores, Tony Mulgrew, his friend Gordon MacDonald and Gordon's eight year old son, Ryan, had an unusual experience. Reported in a local newspaper, there was no date or time given, just a vague reference to the second week in August '06. They were near the Dores Inn, when they saw an object three quarters the way across the loch, Gordon said, 'whatever it was rose out of the water by about a few metres. It was there for five or six seconds. Ryan thought it looked like a U-boat coming out of the water. We were not scared, we just could not believe it. I was totally sceptical about stories of the Loch Ness Monster in the past, but to see something that big was just unbelievable. It was about three-quarters the way across the loch. I wanted to take a picture, but it was too far away'. He added that it was massive and the wash created was as though a boat had passed at high speed', but they were certain there was no boat in the area.

The newspaper article, Highland News Saturday 19th August '06, was headlined 'Achtung Nessie!'. Obviously to take advantage of the fact that Ryan lives with his mother, in Germany. It was also sub-titled 'Loch anglers in Dores drama'. I feel this is somewhat misleading, the witnesses were near the Dores Inn, but what they saw was well across and down the loch, which at that point is one and a quarter miles wide. I would suggest it was nearer to the Clansman Hotel than Dores. Tony said he had fished on the loch hundreds of times but had never seen anything like it. He said, 'There was something strange. There was an upsurge of water and a lot of froth came off the object, which was going towards Drumnadrochit'.

The article was also accompanied by a large mocked-up photograph of a submarine, with a silly Nessie head and neck on the conning tower. This took up more space than the story itself. Which is a shame, because the account is extremely short on important details, and a fuller interview with the witnesses may have made identifying what was seen more certain. My initial reaction is to suspect it was a boat. The Loch Ness ferry, moving fast, creates a large white plume at the stern as well as the bow wave. It is a fairly large craft so perhaps, even at distance, should have been visible to the witnesses. If a time had been given, it would have been possible to check the whereabouts of the ferry on the loch. There is also a smaller, cruiser-like, craft, I would say some twenty feet in length, which travels the loch and is very fast. This also makes a large disturbance of white water as it travels, yet does not leave a substantial wake. At a distance the white water is clearly seen while the craft itself is indistinct. Both these craft could be considered as explanations to what was seen. The way the size was referred to is a bit disconcerting, 'it rose out of the water by a few metres', a few metres? Even myself, who is of the generation that still tends to work in 'old money', knows a metre is over three feet, making two metres six feet, which is more than the average person. So when 'a few metres' (how many is a few, 3, 4, 5?) is thrown into the account? Whatever was seen must have been large, I would suggest larger than usual Nessie reports. Once again are we looking at a boat. We do not know what the witnesses were doing at the time, apart from being told they were on a fishing trip. Were they actively watching the loch, were they making their way back to the Dores beach and their vehicle, were they actually fishing? I know from my own experience, that even when I am supposed to be watching the water, sometimes craft can catch me out. I suddenly become aware of them and think were did that come from, when it is obvious that it must have been in my field of vision for some time! It is feasible that while they were otherwise occupied, the boat had passed Tor Point and travelled some distance towards the Clansman Hotel before coming to their notice.

I am fairly sure that what was seen and reported was a boat. What is good to know about the whole episode, is that it was reported. As I have asked in earlier Nessletters, where are the misinterpretations? Here I feel we have one.

MORE SIGHTINGS I

I have two other reports, or perhaps that should be three, courtesy of Ulrich Magin and his Bilk newsletter. In late January '06, that is a year ago as I write, an Inverness lady reported watching a black 'cone-like' creature circle round like a whirlpool for four minutes. Apart from saying it happened near Altsigh, there was no other information. Which once again makes it almost impossible to explain what was reported. No time of day, weather or water conditions, no estimate of size, no distance from observer. I am at a loss to even suggest a possible solution, the described shape, cone-like, is not even what we may expect of a Nessie report.

Also carried by the Highland News, 26th October '06, was the following. On 6th October Nick Thurston and Emma Jones were aboard the Jacobite Queen, they said they saw a hump, much like a bridge, dark brown in colour and relative to Urquhart Castle. I am not sure what is meant by that 'relative to', perhaps indicating it's position was near the castle. The reference to the 'bridge-like' hump, could that indicate that they thought it was a hoop, or looped out of the water, in the fashion of some early sea-serpent illustrations? Then about a week later, Nick driving the car in the vicinity of Urquhart Castle, when he spotted what he described as a dark rounded tree stump. He said it was one or two metres protruding out of the water, close to the far shore of Urquhart Bay opposite the castle. He only thought of it as something more sinister when he saw a black, or dark brown, humped, second part, some three or four metres behind the first portion. The tree trunk-like stump slowly and gracefully submerged. The sighting lasted some 5 or 6 seconds.

The first part of the account most probably was a wave, or even the wake of the Jacobite Queen that they were on. Once again there is the lack of useful information, where were they on board, which way were they facing as regards direction of travel, weather and water conditions? Important questions to be answered, to enable a reasonable, informed, opinion to be given as to what was seen.

The second encounter leaves me feeling uneasy. Nick was driving on what can be a dangerous road, which should have had most of his attention. Approaching, or leaving, the Strone corner, just by the castle, depending which way you are going, North or South, there is a short section of the road where you can see out across the bay. There was no mention of them stopping, so the time available was very limited. Yet Nick is able to give various details, including the 'slow and graceful' submergence of the object. In a time of five or six seconds, an object said to be close to the other side of the bay, which puts it somewhere between $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away. The use of the word 'sinister' also seems strange. I do not wish to say that Nick made it up, but in the circumstances I feel he has allowed his imagination a bit of free rein. Once again we have inconclusive reports, which are open to various interpretations, and even doubts as to their authenticity. Even so it is good to have them reported.

ABBEY

One day last July while in the St John's Chapel Post Office, waiting to collect my pension, my eye was caught by what seemed a familiar photograph. They have a window given over to a local estate agent, filled with the usual photographs and details of properties for sale. There is also a stand inside for promotional material, which had one or two copies of a magazine on it. This was 'In the Sticks' a rural property magazine. What had caught my attention was the beautiful aerial shot of Fort Augustus Abbey and the south end of Loch Ness. The caption at the bottom did say "On the bonnie, bonnie banks", referring wrongly to Loch Lomond. What on earth was such a picture during in the depths of Weardale. Taking a copy home, I found it filled with wonderful properties from every rural area in the land, Dartmoor, Shropshire, Norfolk and so on. Most of them conversions of barns, chapels, station houses, stables and so on, and expensive. HMS Godwit, in Ollerston Shropshire, a converted Royal Naval control tower, along with 156 acres and equestrian centre, will set you back one and a quarter million pounds.

Back to the Abbey, the blurb says, Fort Augustus Abbey has had a long and often turbulent history stretching back to the days of Culloiden and Bonnie Prince Charlie. Now the austerity of monastic life has given way to the warmth of modern leisure living. From this landmark, Grade A listed building comes the Highland Club, 80 spectacular apartments and 12 charming cottages to be sold as second homes. Set in more than 20 acres of private grounds on the southern shore of Loch Ness, the development is surrounded on three sides by the loch, two rivers and the picturesque Caledonian Canal. Each apartment has been individually designed to maximise space, light and existing architectural features, there may even be a stained glass window in the living room. It goes on to list sumptuous fixtures and fittings, and says that they can be purchased fully furnished. The former Monks Refectory will be transformed into the club lounge and part of the original chapel will incorporate an indoor swimming pool, steam room and sauna. The original wooden boathouse is being converted into a waterside restaurant; there is a tennis court and a cricket pitch. With their own private jetty, Highland Club residents will be able to enjoy many water sports on the loch. For beauty, history, quality and convenience, the Highland Club excels. Offering a real chance for an exceptional rural lifestyle, and a 21st Century sanctuary. Prices start at 160,000 pounds (I cannot get my keyboard to give me a pound sign!!)

That starting price could be for the converted broom cupboard under the stairs, but it all sounds very splendid. It also reads as if, while there are apartments ready, there is still much to be done. It is going to be private, so our ability to stroll in the Abbey grounds and down to the loch-side seems to have gone. The reference to 'second homes' also reads as if permanent round the year occupancy is not allowed. I hope that it is a success and that the old Abbey has been put to fairly good use. There is no mention of any apartment or cottage having a loch view, but it would make a very luxurious base for monster watching/hunting!!

SUBMARINE

Now to go along with the above, I read about this in the press recently. Dutch designers have taken three years to perfect, personal miniature submarines. The small C-Quester can dive to 50 metres, and cruise underwater at up to four knots, driven by battery powered thrusters. It has the ability to stay submerged for two and a half hours, under normal conditions. In an emergency, that can be extended to 36 hours. The vessel has a pressure hull, which allows the pilot to submerge in a totally dry cockpit and to surface without any problems from decompression. There are two versions, a single seat at 9ft long, and a two seat at 11ft. The makers U-Boat Worx said, "Never before has it been possible for the public to explore the underwater world with a one-atmosphere submarine." Prospective owners will need to obtain an underwater pilot's license before being allowed to purchase one. Then we come to the price tag, 65,000pounds, the article says that is the same as a Porsche. Which I suppose, if we are ready to spend 160 grand on a second home, is a drop in the ocean (sorry).

In previous Nessletters I made reference to the micro-light fitted with experimental floats. Two different natural history programmes, recently on television, featured a rigid vee-hull inflatable with a micro-light mounted on it. Both programmes were set in the Caribbean, I do not know if it was the same micro-light in both, perhaps this is a local development and there are a number of such aircraft around. In the first it was being used as a spotter-plane locating sharks. The Woman's World Champion Free Diver, we were told, is afraid of sharks and she was getting into the water with various types, aversion therapy. At one point they were looking for Whale Sharks. Fly over known areas in the Micro-light, see one, land nearby, diver slips into the water and swims around with the shark; job done. In the second; it was being used by conservationists, to help baby turtles. Turtle eggs hatch on the beach, during the night, little turtles scurry into the surf, and are safe. Some hatch that little bit late, in daylight, and are at greater risk from predators, fewer reaching safety. Along come the conservationist, gather up these late hatchlings, look after them for a while, then fly them out to sea. Using the Micro-light they look for patches of floating seaweed, where turtle hatchlings normally live, land and motor to the patch, empty the little turtles into the seaweed. Another job done. The inflatable was perhaps nine or ten feet long, the mounting of the Micro-light looked straightforward, with few bracing wires. It seemed a standard size wing, perhaps a more powerful engine, able to carry two and some payload; water with little Turtles in polystyrene boxes. Capable of landing on choppy water and able to taxi around on the surface, a very useful little aircraft.

RIP

It has taken me so long to complete this Nessletter, not weeks but months. Over recent years I have slipped into a quiet relaxed life. Although perhaps relaxed is not quite right, as I have written before the everyday tasks of the home are now mostly my responsibility. But we live in a beautiful rural area, and it can be very tempting to potter around the garden, or sit in the conservatory looking out over the valley. The walk to the village, about a mile, crossing the footbridge over the river, can become a leisurely wander. For instance on 18th October '06 I watched four Mergansers on the river, I had seen two a few days earlier. They seem to be passing through as I only see them once or twice a year. The Heron was in his usual place at the head of the pool upstream, under over-hanging trees, when a Kingfisher flew from bank to bank. I had seen two (a pair?) on this stretch of the river a few weeks before. This was a bit exceptional, so I made a note, but there is usually something to enjoy and spend time watching.

Then as I was doing the last page, Doris picked up a chest infection and was taken into hospital. No heart attack or similar, but a rather dramatic deterioration of her breathing and ability to get oxygen out of the air. She was put on oxygen and treated with steroids and anti-biotics. Thankfully that had the desired effect, but it was a couple of weeks before I got her home and, even now, she is not brilliant and is taking a little more looking after. This has slowed the process of writing the Nessletter, even further.

Postcard from Jim & Linda Thompson (NIS151) in August, APSU stands for Austin Peay State University. Also from NIS151: I said I could not remember Donald Campbell's body being recovered, it was, at that time.

As usual thank you for being NIS members and continuing tolerance. If you have a change of address please let me know. Also please remember your news and views are always welcome and needed, subscriptions are UK£3.00, the USA \$10.00. The address is still R.R.Heppele, 7 Huntshieldford, St John's Chapel, Weardale, Co Durham, DL13 1RQ. Tel. 01388 537359. Mobile 07989813963 (not always on).

Now; one luxury Abbey apartment, one two seat C-Quester, one micro-light/inflatable, but first of course, six good numbers on the lottery!

Rip.