

NESS INFORMATION SERVICE

NESSLETTER 154

FEBRUARY 2009

RIP'S PIECE

Hello there, remember me, by now you may wonder what had happened to me and the Nessletters. This is the first time this PC has been switched on this year, so I had to coerce my machine and eventually it accepted a new password. Then while trying to sort out the Nessletter heading, my wonderful PC put the full date on it, that is '08/08/08, I wonder if that has any significance. One thing it does show is that over half the year has passed, and you have not had a single Nessletter. How many times over the past months have I written that opening, or something very similar, in my mind, while I have been busy around home.

In NIS153 I said that Doris' health was not good. In the run up to Christmas '07 it gradually became worse, she has severe breathing problems, as the result of various bronchial conditions, and gets lung infections very easily. She has a very low percentage lung function, one of our doctors, Dr Dendle a lovely lady, told her some time ago while searching for the best way to put it, 'well Doris you know your lungs are rubbish'. Christmas is a real family time for us, especially Doris, and she managed to hang on over Christmas and we had all the family at home, as usual, four of us on Boxing Day. Next day I had to get the doctor in and it was a hospital job. Doris was taken into Weardale Community Hospital, our local cottage type hospital in Stanhope, 7 miles down dale. She was in for six weeks, one weekend after about four weeks, she had a very bad time, they needed to rush her to Bishop Auckland General, the High Dependency ward. Where she was on specialised oxygen equipment for some time, they did stabilise her, then she was transferred back to Weardale CH. The doctor quietly told me, should Doris have another similar episode, the chances were they might not be able to do that much for her. More or less saying, in a sympathetic way, that it may be as well to check out our insurance policies. We had an oxygen concentrator installed for her when she came home, she is on oxygen for at least 16 hours in the 24, but usually round the clock. Sister in law, Audrey, has been on oxygen since the beginning of '07. It was a relief to have Doris home, although she is almost chair bound and needs most looking after, of a personal nature. Things went along fairly well for about six weeks, and then she contracted another serious chest infection, and was back in Weardale Community for another two weeks. I have had her home since then and she is doing fairly well, although she has had more lung infections. From the above, I hope you will understand that I have had my hands full, unfortunately this has meant that my obligation to you, and the Nessletters, is rather low on my list of priorities. Just to help things along I went into hospital on the seventh of May, to have my left hip replaced. The operation went without a hitch and I was home after a week, although walking with a stick, and somewhat limited in what I could do. I am now about back to my usual self and getting round fairly nicely, which is as well because, as I have said, I am looking after Doris. Our youngest daughter Heather, now 34, was invaluable, she stayed with us for a few weeks, looking after Doris whilst I was in hospital, and then both of us until I was able to take over. I am almost expecting a call from the BBC's Natural History department, to ask if they can film at the bottom of the garden, looking for jungle creatures.

I wrote in NIS 153 that our trips to Loch Ness would no longer be possible. So we were not there in '07 and of course this year '08. As I started to write this it did come to mind, looking at the date, that we would have been at the loch side if all had been well. It also reminded me that our last trip to the loch in '06 had been my forty-first consecutive year visiting the loch. It was also the only time we have suffered a complete vehicle breakdown. After getting the old van back on the road it then failed the MOT. We have a fresh van now, another Transit a dual fuel vehicle at that, petrol and gas Ford factory build ('02). I did manage to get half the furniture into it, from the old van, but I doubt it will ever be used as a motor-caravan again. Last year as the season passed I did miss going to the loch, this year with so much going on, I hardly noticed that the usual time for our holidays had arrived, and gone.

TIM DENESHA

Tim looks after the individual posting of Nessletters to our American members. I send them to him in a small package, it is much cheaper that way. I receive letters from him from time to time, to keep me informed of address changes etc. In his latest he had a piece of sad news, he had heard that Barbara Baker one of the stalwarts from the early years of the LNI had died, aged 90. Barbara was a special character, I met up with her on expedition once or twice and corresponded with her from time to time. She lived in Foyers for many years, after the LNI days, though Tim, who kept in better contact with her over the years, says that for several years she had lived in Norfolk, her native county I believe. Sad news, but I suppose at 90, not too bad.

He also commented on the new film 'the Water Horse'. Saying, "The film 'The Water Horse' is quite good as a film, though quite fanciful. It draws heavily on certain aspects of the Kelpie Legend, such as that here is never more than one alive at one time, that it is both male and female, and that it's size can increase tenfold in a single night. That said, the presentation of life in the Highlands during WW II was well done, I thought. The subject of the fabrication of the famous 'Surgeon's Photograph' was right up to date. The film was shot on location in the Highlands, and in New Zealand. Knowing the Ness area fairly well, I did find it a bit jarring when the scenery would shift between Scotland and N. Z., but it seemed necessary because of a plot angle involving submarines coming into the Loch from the sea. Some of the footage of the Beastie swimming along in Loch Ness, especially by Castle Urquhart, was a pleasure for me, as I'd always longed to see it swimming dramatically along so. The computer graphics were excellent, though one could quibble about the shape of the head, size of mouth, plenitude of teeth, loud roaring etc. the body shape was about as commonly agreed upon by Loch Ness research. The music and acting were both fine. One curious note: at the beginning of the film, these words appear across the screen: "A true tale it is....". All in all a good film, though I can't see it will do much to either advance or damage the efforts to find the truth about the Loch Ness 'Phenomena' ". Thanks to Tim for that, it would seem an enjoyable film to see.

STEVE FELTHAM

Received a letter from Steve this week, that is an event in itself, as they are not that common. However I look forward to getting them, and am always delighted when one arrives. Opening it I found a postcard which was half written. It said, as I write this it is 9:30 PM and I am sitting at the table outside the van, it is a flat calm loch, all is quiet, lovely. A short time ago I had written to Steve to tell them of our present situation and to comment that I had seen his Video Diary on the BBC programme Countryfile, and thought at the time that he did not look as fit as usual. He said he was sorry to hear about Doris' poor health, and about my new hip. He said the Countryfile people had just caught him on the bad day. He went on to say that it been very quiet season Nessie wise, he had heard of nothing until yes---. That was how the card finished, not even mid sentence but mid word! I wonder if someone came round the van saying 'Hi' Steve, or did he see a large Nessie back out in the loch, or perhaps he just drifted off in reverie lost in that dream-like landscape of flat calm loch and mountains. Honestly I am not envious, the green colour you can see is just a trick of the light.

There was also a letter in the envelope, which was dated the second or third of November. He is obviously not sure what the date is. Steve apologised for not being in touch sooner, that he had just found the postcard in a corner of the van, he thought he had finished and posted it. He went on where he had left off on the postcard, saying:- "I have heard very little of note on the Nessie front this year, apart from one report from Norma Morrison, of Dores, and her daughter Anna Marie (in her twenties). Norma had been in my video diary talking about a sighting she had in 1991. Anyway, from the same upstairs window of her bed and breakfast they both watched a bow wave in Dores Bay for a few seconds, never quite breaking the surface but creating a definite wake. When I told a Swedish journalist about this, they were quite horrified and definitely did not want a talk about it publicly, once bitten twice shy, maybe. But I find it very interesting due to two tantalising things that I have seen here Dores Bay, this summer. The first would have been round about the same time, I am not good with dates, a very sunny Saturday. Myself, and Hilary, sitting outside the van, lots of people on the beach. I became aware three youths seemed to be throwing stones at a duck. It was on the water ten to fifteen feet in from the nearest buoy, I watched for their next shot just to make sure of their crime, before launching a verbal attack, only to see they were in fact aiming at the buoy. I looked off, out on to the water towards the castle, and in that split second, out of the corner of my eye the duck disappeared under water. Moderately unusual in itself, waited for said duck to reappear, only it never did, no ducks nearby, nothing, just vanished. Bloody odd that, I thought. The same afternoon Dick Raynor came by with an American Cryptozoologist, do not remember his name,

who has done a lot of work on Irish Lake monsters I told them this story, postulating there may be Pike in this corner of the loch. The American, who seemed to know a lot about fish, dismissed Pike as the culprit, because a duck would be just too big a target for one. Due to the fact that they seem to prefer to swallow their catch to kill it, rather than pulling it under to drown it. However, the most likely candidate that he could think of was --wait for it--, Catfish, interesting. Taking a duck straight off the water like that, is seemingly very like them.

Now move on to the end of September, early October, about 5-6pm, myself and Rob Mullen from Inverfarigaig, again sitting outside the van, calm loch, nobody else about, 6-8 ducks on the water just at the end of the slipway. Suddenly, there is a very large splash about 20 feet from the shore, we both immediately look at the disturbance, only to see the back of a large fish breach the surface in a surging manner, pushing towards the shore, then almost in a continuous breach again. Just the back on both these occasions, clearly large, maybe 4 or 5 feet would be my guess at the size of the animal. What really surprised me was how the little flock of ducks reacted. As one they all splashed to the shore, and on reaching the shingle, they all started quacking like mad towards this 'thing', really kicking up quite a fuss and did not go back into the water for quite some time. Now this is not a 'Nessie', the size of a car, this is something much smaller, but all three incidents sound like the same thing; and a Catfish could be what caused them. Since around this time the ducks have totally stopped visiting this corner of the bay. So it has my blood pumping a wee bit, which is good after all these years.

Apart from that, life is still great. I still want to be nowhere more than sitting outside my van, staring at one of the most beautiful of views in the world. The van continues to be my home, it is still warm and leak free, the fire is still doing its job, and I am a contented man. I do miss your annual visits, hopefully they will be continued sometime. I am very steady in my relationship with my beloved Hilary, which means that at weekends, when she is not working, I must leave the loch and do other things. You know the stuff; shops, visits, etc, but I get all the weekdays to watch and wait; which I will continue to do."

As I said earlier it is always a joy to receive one of Steve's letters. It is good to know life is treating him well, and he is still watching the loch, on our behalves, as well as his own. Yes I know what a 'Hilary' does to your life style, I have my Doris. Our visits to the loch were always family holidays, not expeditions. Spending the days doing the rounds as a tourist, shopping, visiting places, finding things for the children to do, but always being by the water in the evenings and early morning. I doubt I will ever do that again, if I get back to the loch it will be on my own, after much organising. The 'Catfish in the bay' is interesting. Quite a few years have passed since Dick Raynor put forward the European Catfish, the Wels, as a possible cause for some of the sighting reports from the loch. He also connected them to the growth of interest in the Highlands, during Queen Victoria's reign. Therefore, not just plucking a creature out of the blue, to answer some of the questions, but also giving a plausible explanation for them being in the loch. Now all Steve has to do is get his angling gear out, and catch one. As it happens there was a report in the national press a while ago, of a record sized Catfish being caught in England. I forget the details right now, but it was a very big one.

ANDREAS TROTTMANN

In mid-July Andreas Trottmann, our Swiss member, sent to a little note about his latest monster-hunting trip, accompanied as usual, by his wife Angela. This was not to Loch Ness, but to Loch Morar. Early in June they returned from an intriguing, as well as rewarding, reconnaissance week at Morar. Perfect weather and a cosy cottage overlooking the sea, but a lot of midges, the Scottish black pest! They spent several hours on the water undertaking hydrophone trials. Due to the many large rocks, some just below the surface, navigating is rather dangerous in the Western part of the loch.

He also interviewed some local residents who had personally observed an unidentified large creature in Loch Morar. Having a chance to speak to Willie Simpson concerning his famous, and well publicised, encounter with Morag in 1969. Besides Willie Simpson another local also confirmed that he had taken a single shot, with a rifle, at one of the creatures. As opposed to 'Nessie', 'Morag' would be well advised to keep her head down! Andreas said that unfortunately, they had just missed a presentation on the subject of 'Morag', pronounced 'Vorag' by the locals, given by Adrian Shine at Mallaig.

On several occasions locals mentioned to him, the persistent rumours of large, hairy eels, or with a kind of mane, living in the loch. After consulting the literature on eels available to him, in vain, Andreas contacted Dr Alan Butterworth, an expert on eels and a member of the early Loch Morar expeditions, for his professional opinion.

Being convinced that Loch Morar has nowadays a greater potential for in-depth explorations, Andreas says that he shall, in future, concentrate his efforts to find answers to this enigmatic water.

An interesting report, I visited Loch Morar on a number of occasions while with the LNI, and once after the LNI, in later years. My first trip was from the HQ at Achnahannet, in August 1969, when I drove over to Mallaig, and Loch Morar, to interview, for the LNI, Duncan McDonell and Willie Simpson after their extraordinary encounter. It is a truly beautiful place, very different to Loch Ness. It seems Andreas is doing what Adrian Shine did, but in reverse. In the early days Adrian researched and hunted in Loch Morar, before turning his attentions to Loch Ness.

ADRIAN SHINE

I had a phone call from Adrian, some time ago now, a pleasant surprise, I do not often hear from him. He was seeking an address, and some details, which I was able to provide. He was able to give me a very brief rundown on some of the Project's operations in the '08 season. The Academy of Applied Science had mounted another expedition. The best news about that, for me, was that Bob Rines had been over directing things. Bob had a stroke some time ago, not good news in itself, and the last time we talked, he reckoned that his age alone, would possibly prevent him returning to the loch. So I was very happy to know that his health was good enough for him to get back to the loch. Not up to scrambling about in boats out on the water, but having his hand on the tiller, directing operations. Marty Klein had also been back at the loch, with his own expedition. I met, and assisted, Marty when he was at the loch with the Academy expeditions in '70/71. He designed and built the towed side-scan sonar used then, which at that time was deemed to be 'state of the art'. So I think whatever he had at the loch in '08 would have been very good.

For some time now, the Academy's expeditions have been largely aimed toward seeking a carcass on the loch floor. After so many years, and so much time and effort, put into trying to obtain underwater photographic evidence, without adequate results; I suppose it is logical progression, with the improved technology available, to extend the search into other areas. Using up to date ROVs, it is now possible to look at fairly large swathes of the loch bed, checking areas indicated by using Sonar. With the use of GPS it is also possible, with quite a high degree of accuracy, to return to an underwater artefact, for further examination, or to try to take samples. Underwater photography, a needle in a haystack; looking for remains, more like looking for a six inch nail in the haystack. Still not easy but I would think much improved odds. As I was writing this, a possible drawback occurred to me. What is being searched for? Our beloved, but now possibly discredited, Plesiosaur, they would leave large bones, and lots of flesh, a good target. Present day theories point toward, Sturgeon, Giant Eel, Catfish; these contenders have the mass of flesh, but not the large bones. Fish having finer, cartilaginous, bone structure, not such a good target. Does that matter? Over the years we have always cited the fact, in the deep cold water of the loch decomposition is very slow, the reason dead bodies do not come to the surface. Now I thought, what about the large population of scavenging, bottom dwelling, Eels in the loch? Wouldn't they be attracted to any carcass, devouring the softer, fleshy, parts, so diminishing the size of our 'target'? Perhaps this would not happen very quickly, but it shortens the available time for anyone to find, and identify, any remains on the loch floor.

Marty Klein had picked up a number of targets with his side-scan sonar, not huge in scale but of significant size. Some of the 'footprints', located by the Simrad expedition some years ago had been re-examined using the ROV. Adrian said one looked very much like a discarded trawling 'warp', a great tangle of wire ropes etc. That would make some sense, the canal was very well used by fishing trawlers at one time. If a boat had some old gear top get rid of, better dropping it in Loch Ness than out at sea, where it could foul up another set of nets when anyone was fishing. I seem to remember someone looking at a 'footprint' using underwater cameras, a few years ago, and not daring to try to get very close, because of the ropes they could see.

This Nessletter has taken me so long to write, I had the date 08/08/08 at the beginning, I am now into February '09. I apologise and thank you for your tolerance. Thank you for being NIS members. If you have a change of address please let me know. Also please remember your news and views are always welcome and needed, subscriptions, if you are good enough to continue to subscribe, are UK£3.00, the USA remains \$10.00. The address is still R.R.Hepple, 7 Huntshieldsford, St John's Chapel, Weardale, Co Durham, DL13 1RQ. Tel.01388 537359. Mobile 07989813963 (not always on).

Rip.