

Salmon Fishing In Solway

Fishery Manager's Address To Rotarians

Four Methods In Use

An interesting account of salmon fishing in the Solway was given by Rotarian Alex. T. McGlasson, president of Annan Rotary Club and manager of The Loch Fishery, East-riggs, Annan, in an address yesterday at the weekly meeting of Dumfries Rotary Club in the Cairndale Hotel. The Dumfries club president, Rotarian Alex. B. Garven, presided and introduced the speaker.

At the outset of his remarks Mr McGlasson congratulated the Dumfries club on their most excellent Hobbies and Handicrafts Exhibition which was held last week and expressed his conviction that other clubs would follow the example of the Dumfries club and hold similar exhibitions.

Mr McGlasson said that salmon fishing in the Solway was rather peculiar in respect that the estuary of the Solway lay between England and Scotland and the salmon fishing laws varied on the respective sides. From time immemorial there had been a perpetual feud between English and Scottish salmon fishers, particularly because the Scottish fishers were allowed to use stake nets or other "fixed engines," whereas on the English side no form of staked engines were allowed. Salmon fishing rights in England were really owned by the Crown and licenses were granted for such fishings as haaf-net and drift-net fishing. On the Scottish side fishing rights were granted by charter and fixed engines had been in use since time immemorial. Several times the right to use such methods had been tested, but they had always stood the test.

Four Methods In Use.

Stating that he would confine his remarks to the fishing eastward of a line between Silloth and Powfoot, Mr McGlasson went on to say that the methods of fishing now in use were four in number. One of those methods was the poke net. In this district the burgh of Annan held the highest poke net rights in the Solway, having about 500 groups. In the setting of the poke nets, solid iron stakes, nine feet in length, and one and three-quarter inches in diameter, were used. They were worked into the sand at a distance of about four feet apart and a square of about two feet was formed by parallel ropes fixed on the stakes, a poke or net being hung across the square. In this method of fishing the fish were usually hung. Although the fish were considerably damaged when caught, the method was very popular, because larger fish were caught and they were always in demand by smokers.

A second method used was the haaf-net method. At the eastern end of the Solway there was a considerable amount of haaf-net fishing. Permission was given by the owners of the fishing rights, who, in return, got help from the haaf-netters in the setting of their stake nets. He thought he was right in saying that the number of haaf-net fishermen now was only about a quarter of what it was 20 or 30 years ago. At that time haaf-net fishermen were all old experienced men and they could make a living at the job. Nowadays haaf-net fishermen were chiefly part-timers who engaged in fishing to augment other incomes.

Drift-Net Fishing

A third method of fishing, the whammle or drift-net, was started, as far as was known, in 1857 or 1858, when a number of shrimp fishermen from Morecambe settled in Annan. They started under license from the Eden Fishery Board, using small boats and small stretches of net. A flag marked the end of the net farthest from the boat. The net was paid out as the boat steered its course across stream and when the full length of the net was in the water it remained drifting with the current until such time as the fish might strike. As time went on bigger and better boats were used, but gradually that form of fishing grew less and less and now he thought that only four or five boats fished from Waterfoot. He remembered as a boy when thirty or forty boats were engaged in drift-net fishing. It would appear that the cost of the drift net, which was three hundred yards long and five feet in depth, was too great.

Coming to the fourth method of fishing, the stake-net method, Mr McGlasson said he might term it the "angler's nightmare." On many occasions proprietors had been called upon to prove their rights to this method of fishing. About 1869 Mr Mackenzie, proprietor of the Newbie Fisheries, was called upon to prove his rights either by charter or by immemorial usage. Among the witnesses he brought in support of his case was Mr Thomas Macqueen, lessee of the fisheries at Dornock, who could remember that fishings were leased by tenants by the name of Lytle as far back as 1778, and he was able to prove that stake nets had been in use for a considerable period before that. A special Commission was set up in 1878 to decide the legality of the stake and poke nets on the Scottish side of the Solway from Gretna to Dornock. As a result of the Commission a number of nets were removed, but in the remaining cases certificates were granted which not only stipulated the particulars of each net in detail, but also tried to limit the position to which they could be set.

Rights Held By Monks.

Mr McGlasson went on to say that Mr George Neilson, author of "Annals of the Solway," had been able to produce evidence that in the twelfth century most of the salmon rights were held by the monks. He had found records of the monks of Melrose granting fishing rights to monks in Cumberland. It would appear that a certain number of monks were in residence in a monastery at Redkirk. About twenty years ago, when the Solway overflowed there, several relics of the old monastery were found and there were found what actually appeared to be parts of lead coffins. It appeared, too, that in that area some form of fishing was carried out by the monks. It was quite apparent that the rod fishers blamed commercial fishermen for spoiling the fishings. Sir Walter Scott, in "Red Gauntlet," referred to that, which seemed to indicate that at that time the commercial salmon fisher was just as unpopular with owners in the upper reaches as he was to-day. In "Red Gauntlet" there appeared the passage: "Joshua Geddes, I tell you in fair terms that you and your partners are using unlawful craft to destroy the fish in the Solway by stake net and weirs, and we who fish fairly and like men, as our fathers did see yearly and daily less sport and

profit. I give you fair warning, we shall be upon you one morning soon when we will not leave a stake standing on the pools of the Solway and down the tide they shall go." Commercial salmon fishers are still not popular with the upper proprietors, who thought that all the best fish were being stolen from them.

Fish Still Plentiful.

Since 1920 he had kept a graph showing the rise and fall in the fishing in the fishery which he managed which showed that the fish were no less plentiful to-day than they were thirty-four years ago. During that period 194 was the best year they had had for salmon, 1949 was by far the best year for trout, and in 1951 grills reached an all-time high. Although fish had been taken from the Solway for many centuries there were still plenty left for everyone. Blaming progress for the beliefs held by rod fishermen that salmon were less plentiful to-day than formerly, Mr McGlasson said that in the day before land drainage reached the high state it had reached to-day they found that when rivers came down in spate the rod fishermen knew that they would fish the next day or the following day again. Now a rod fisherman had to have a bicycle to reach the fishings in time, otherwise the water would be gone. He thought that rather than blame the stake fisherman or the commercial fisherman, the rod fisherman should blame the Agricultural Executive Committee. At his fishery they had kept careful statistics of the size of fish they caught and they found that the average size of salmon was only about 12 lb. Sometimes the average would drop 1 lb and sometimes, if there was a run of big fish at the back end, the average might be 13 or 14 lb, but mostly 12 lb was the average. Grills averaged between five and five and a half pounds and the average for trout was as low as two pounds.

Asked by Rotarian J. M. Thomson what was the biggest fish ever caught by him, Mr McGlasson replied that the biggest fish caught in his fisheries was a salmon weighing 54½ lb. It measured five feet ten inches long and was twenty-four inches in girth. It was caught about 1926. He thought it would probably be five years old. The following week his uncle at Newbie caught a salmon one pound heavier.

Migration.

Rotarian J. Neilson asked if Mr McGlasson had any idea where the fish went when they migrated.

Mr McGlasson: The powers that be have been trying to find that out for generations. The only thing that can be suggested is that they are deep sea feeders. We cannot trace where they go, but it is believed that they go to the very deep waters of the Atlantic for their feeding grounds. We do know definitely, however, that the salmon return to the rivers they originally left.

Replying to Lt.-Colonel J. Lindsay Drummond, who asked if fishermen with nets on the narrower reaches of the Solway got greater reward than those farther down the Solway, Mr McGlasson said that it was a difficult question to answer. It had to be remembered that as they reached each river estuary the salmon became less plentiful as a certain number of fish were caught in the Newbie and Powfoot nets. Trout, on the other hand, did not make straight up river. They spent some time at the estuary before going up and it was possible that with trout they at the narrower end of the Solway fished as well, if not better, than the Newbie fishers.

Rotarian D. M. Campbell asked if trout went back to their original rivers in the same way as salmon.

Mr McGlasson replied that they did. In July or August, 1934, he said, Mr Menzies from Edinburgh, put four thousand marked herling into the pool at the Metal Bridge and all fishermen were asked to keep a look-out for them. The weight of the trout varied from ten to fourteen ounces at that time. In June or July of the following year they caught some of those fish in their fishery and they weighed up to two pounds. That showed that the growth of the trout was very rapid.

A vote of thanks to the speaker was proposed by Rotarian J. Stewart.