

LOOKING AFTER NUMBER ONE

Andrew Graham-Stewart reports on the rise and rise of Scotland's foremost angling association

POSE THE SIMPLE question – “Who are now the two largest proprietors of salmon fishings in Scotland, in terms of rod catches?” – and I would venture that few if any anglers would be able to name both. Those familiar with the Tay might well correctly identify Scone Estate (owners of four lower-river beats) as one of them. The other is far less obvious. It is in fact Aberdeen and District Angling Association (ADAA) – a remarkably dynamic club that has grown expeditiously over the past 60 years.

ADAA was formed in 1946 with the modest aim of giving the citizens of Aberdeen the opportunity to fish. During the

ADAA'S PURCHASES OF FISHINGS

	RIVER	BEAT	COST
1954	Don	Upper Parkhill	£2,000
1966	Ythan	Methlick	£1,150
1967	Ythan	Machar pool	£4,750
1973	Feugh	Feugh fishings	£1,500
1976	Don	Upper & Lower Fintray	£20,000
1978	Don	Lower Parkhill South	£13,000
1988	Dee	Garthdee	£63,500
2001	Don	Kemnay	£45,000
2001	Don	Cruives & Nether Don	£42,000*
2006	Ythan	Ardlethen	£180,000

*Purchase of the majority shareholdings.

war years options had been very limited and many local anglers resorted to “poaching” upstream of the Brig o’ Dee, where the Garthdee club was limited to just 20 members. The private beats further upstream on the River Dee were simply too expensive. One legitimate alternative was to purchase an angling ticket (£1 per season for adults and 10 shillings for juniors) from Powries, the netting company, which held the rights on the Pots and Fords beat downstream of the Brig (the old netsmen’s bothy is now ADAA’s well-appointed HQ and boardroom). However, the restrictions placed on anglers were somewhat onerous; wading was not permitted on much of the beat when the nets were on (which was most of the time) and access to the upper beat was limited to 12 hours per week (after the start of the weekend “slap” for the nets at noon on Saturdays).

ADAA took on the responsibility of negotiating and dealing with Powries, with members gaining access through the club rather than direct with the head netsman. In the early years this water, together with trout fishing at Loch of Loirston, was the extent of ADAA’s fishings. However, in 1953 an opportunity to expand presented itself when the Parkhill beats on the Don were offered to the club – at £2,000 for Upper and £1,500 for Lower. As the club did not have the



Evening light on Dun Cow pool, Lower Parkhill, River Don.

necessary funds, a meeting was convened at which members were asked for donations or loans; sufficient monies were immediately forthcoming to secure the Upper beat (at the time the Lower beat was considered a bridge too far). The loans were quickly repaid and then over the next decade the club deliberately accumulated a significant and enviable war chest; since the mid '60s this policy, that sets it apart from the great majority of angling clubs (which generally aim to break even with a little in reserve), has enabled it to add to its portfolio of fishings on a regular basis (see panel, left).

Apart from the initial purchase, every single one of these acquisitions has been entirely funded from the club’s own cash reserves – testament to some very shrewd financial management and

planning. It is worth emphasising that ADAA is a big club. As it grew (and in order to maintain value for money for its members), it needed more water and by definition there is a limited amount of fishings available for lease in the Aberdeen area; and of course the most secure way of obtaining additional water is through outright purchase.

Almost certainly the critical factor in the development of the club has been the continuity, drive and expertise of its office-bearers. In 1964 Duncan Wilson and Alastair Hume (both founding members in 1946) were elected president and vice-president respectively. These contrasting characters complemented each other perfectly, with Duncan’s outgoing personality backed up by Alastair’s maintenance of a tight ship behind the scenes. This towering duo held office for an

astonishing 39 years (elections for both positions are held every year). When Duncan, awarded the MBE for “services to angling in Aberdeenshire”, stood down finally in 2004, Alastair became president. He in turn relinquished control in 2008, handing over the presidential reins to Bob Dey. At this time Alastair was appointed honorary president.

ADAA has always drawn upon the talents and professions of its members; the current committee includes those with expertise in financial, insurance, legal, contractual, planning, consulting engineering and IT matters as well as numerous skilled trades and even professional diving. The all-important Finance Committee has been chaired by Alastair Hume, a highly astute banker of the old school, who has masterminded the expansion of ADAA’s assets and

reserves with very considerable acumen. His philosophy regarding the club’s finances is simple: “With money you can do things”. Despite Alastair’s profession, ADAA has never borrowed any money from a bank!

Perhaps the lasting legacy of the club’s long-term officers is a really fine portfolio of fishings. They are valued at an astonishing £5m, representing an admirable return on an investment of less than £375,000, the great majority of which has been expended in the past eight years. There is no prospect of the assets being sold to give a windfall to the membership, as the club’s constitution states that no member shall ever benefit financially from the club’s assets; in the event of the club’s dissolution “its net assets will be given or transferred to the sports’ governing body for

use in community related sport ... or a charity”.

In line with its assets, ADAA is indeed a big club, accommodating 1,100 members. There is currently a waiting list of 100 (not long ago it was 500) and entry is usually achieved within a year. Before being accepted as members, applicants must attend an evening induction course, covering all aspects of the club, including fishing methods and etiquette. Membership, available to those living within a 25-mile radius of Aberdeen, costs £180 per annum for adults (plus a £250 joining fee) and £40 for juniors (no joining fee) – astounding value given the amount and variety of fishings.

There are 50 junior members. In addition, in order to encourage further juniors, an adult member may be accompanied at any time by two youngsters under the age of 12 – at no charge. There is a very strong ethos within the club of encouraging members to enjoy being a part of it; as the ADAA website confirms, a huge array of activities are organised – it aspires to be a complete community.

In the past five years the membership has changed markedly. It is now far more salmon-orientated, reflecting the massive decline in sea-trout numbers in the past decade. Prior to this decline the sea-trout lobby within the club was very powerful indeed. This was reflected in the considerable amount of criticism by the membership as a whole of the committee's decision to purchase the Garthdee beat in 1988. This opposition evaporated when the beat produced 400

TALES FROM THE CLUB

In the early 1960s, before the banning of the selling of fish, a 42 lb salmon was landed on a Devon minnow in the Streams at Upper Parkhill. The name of the angler (he was a “scaffie”, Aberdeenshire Doric dialect for street sweeper) has been lost in the mists of time, but the episode was witnessed by Jock Tait (now 87). When at the bank it was caught with a tailer, which promptly broke because of the weight. The captor had to rest three times before he made it up the very steep slope to the car park. He sold the fish for £100, a fortune at the time – equivalent to more than two months' wages for a street sweeper.

One October in the early 1980s the late George Grant, then in his 70s, struggled for a mile to reach the top beat at Methlick on the Ythan. When he arrived (exhausted), the anglers waiting in the hut told him that it was unfishable (it was dirty as hell). He elected to fish anyhow. As soon as his first cast hit the water, his worm was taken. The fresh-run salmon weighed 33 lb. His audience was so upset that they declined to help George carry the fish back to the car!

On their first visit to the Machar pool (before it was bought by ADAA), current president Bob Dey and David Smith saw fish rising just out of reach. They began cautiously to wade out. David then tripped over (unseen by Bob) and disappeared from view. Bob was then suddenly confronted by a terrifying and filthy black apparition (minus waders) erupting from the deep. Incidentally, the technique for much of the Machar is to have one foot in the mud and the other on the surface, constantly reversing positions.

In the early 1950s ADAA produced a quarterly magazine – some of which are now available online; for a fascinating insight into the club's early years, visit www.adaa.org.uk/magazines.php

salmon and grilse the following season! Incidentally, Dave Gordon dived and videoed the fish stacked up in the Pumphouse pool in the low water of August 2004; the total number of salmon and grilse present was estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000.

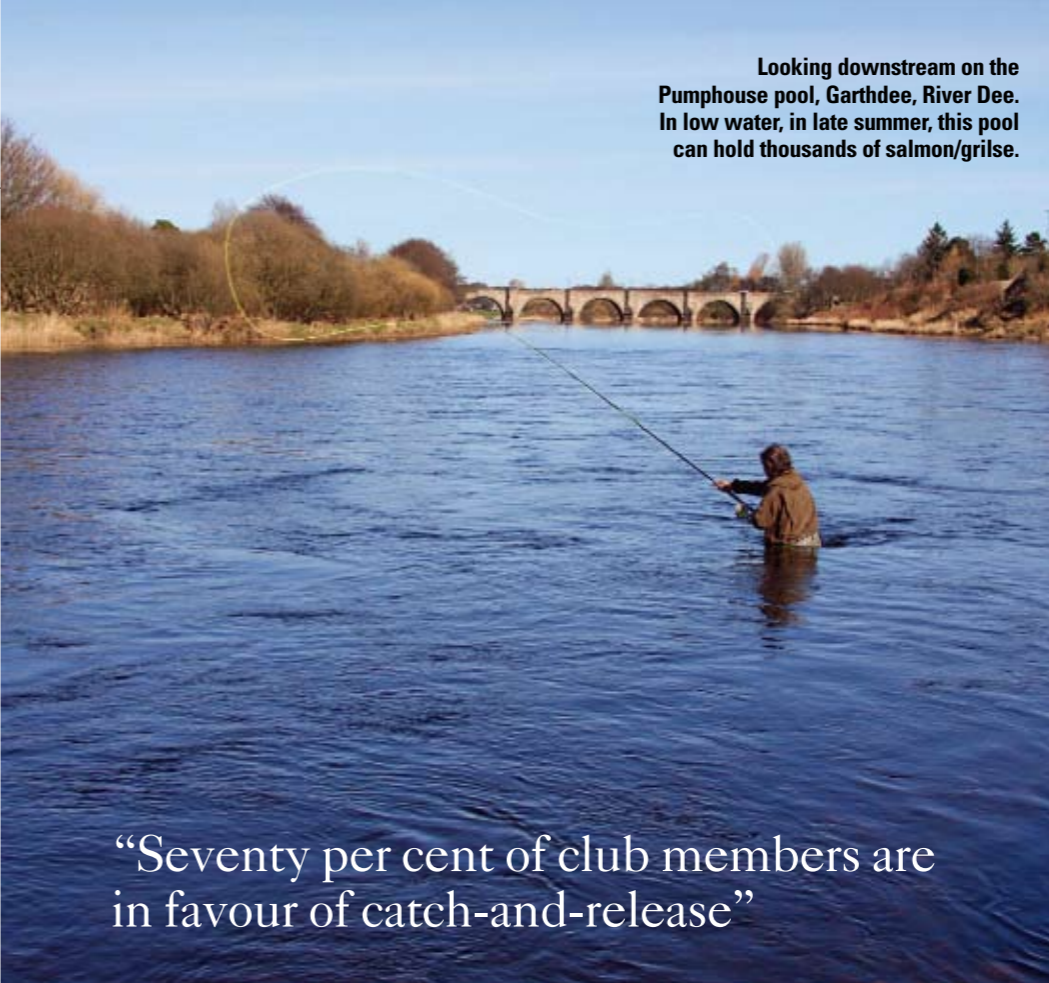
There had also been a build-up of fish in the low and hot conditions of 2003 (some fish died); the club

ceased all fishing to avoid causing further stress, gaining ADAA much respect in wider fishery circles.

On the sea-trout front the purchase of the tidal Machar pool on the Ythan in 1967 was a tremendous coup, given that this was then one of the very best (and most prolific) migratory trout fisheries in Europe. From 1985 to 1987 the average annual rod catch for this stretch of rather less than a mile was an astonishing 1,182 sea-trout and 2,212 finnock. The average catch in the past three years (35 sea-trout and 94 finnock) exemplifies the desperate slump in their numbers.

Despite the demise of sea-trout, ADAA's annual returns still make enviously impressive reading.

Over 80 per cent of the salmon and grilse catch is taken on the club's own (rather than leased) waters and accordingly (as indicated in this article's opening paragraph) the club can now lay claim to one of the top two positions in the league table of Scottish salmon fishing proprietors. However, as the figures confirm, ADAA is not salmo-centric. In particular, the club's Don beats offer brown trout fishing of the highest calibre; these are wild fish of exceptional quality – the biggest in 2007 and 2008 were 7 lb 8 oz and 6 lb 8 oz respectively. There is no doubt that the clean-up of the lower Don has greatly benefited trout fishing. Before this happened decent trout in the area were scarce. One exception was at Lower Parkhill,



Looking downstream on the Pumphouse pool, Garthdee, River Dee. In low water, in late summer, this pool can hold thousands of salmon/grilse.

“Seventy per cent of club members are in favour of catch-and-release”

adjacent to the Lawson of Dyce bacon factory. Prior to its closure meat waste was discharged into the river. Trout in the vicinity were often in the 4 lb to 5 lb class, but they tasted of smoky bacon!

It is worth emphasising that ADAA (with Inverurie AC) played a pivotal role in the clean-up of the lower Don. Following a public meeting in the Aberdeen Music Hall in the late 1960s, it was abundantly clear that the North-East River Purification Board was not minded to tackle the problems. The clubs then persuaded the Secretary of State to grant a public enquiry into the pollution problems. ADAA hired a heavyweight legal team and the enquiry found in favour of the clubs. The Purification Board (its chairman resigned and the ADAA president was invited on to the Board!) was finally forced into action, the paper mills were no longer able to pollute with impunity and the rest, as they say, was history. It is perhaps fitting that, having instigated the process, ADAA was the main beneficiary of the clean-up as its lower Don beats became far more productive – not only in terms of salmon and trout catches but also sea-trout, which

previously had hardly occurred in the river; indeed, the club's catches of sea-trout in the Don now exceed its catches in the Ythan.

The club were also prime movers in what became the River Don Brown Trout Improvement Association. It was formed to counter the enormous damage done on a weekly basis in the 1970s and 1980s to trout stocks by busloads of “anglers” from the Central Belt, who fished without permit, killing everything in a frenzy of slaughter (using all methods bar dynamite) – usually for a pot of cash, which was awarded to the heaviest bag; the fish were often simply left to rot. The first application for a Protection Order was refused. A second application was prepared; Alastair Hume and the late David MacLean of Littlewood Estate led a delegation and presented it personally to the Scottish Office in Edinburgh. This was successful and the Protection Order came into force in 1990 – requiring all anglers to obtain permits. The following season there was an event which has become the stuff of legend. A whole busload of individuals, fishing without permits, were arrested in Upper

Donside and incarcerated in Inverurie police station. The bus was impounded and word got back to the bus owners that it was liable to confiscation; from then on bus companies in the Central Belt declined to take anglers to Donside – consequently the plundering of the river ceased.

ADAA have been trailblazers on the conservation front: banning the sale of rod-caught salmon from the 1960s (this only became law in Scotland in 2007), banning the use of shrimp from the 1970s, banning the gaff from the mid-1980s and the tailer in 2005. On the Don the club now recommends that each member retains no more than four salmon (all after June 1); this is tougher than the Don Code which recommends a maximum of six. A recent survey found that 70 per cent of members are in favour of catch-and-release; the return rate for finnock in recent years has been 95 per cent.

The club is a substantial and professional business – albeit without employees. All beat maintenance (over 30 miles of banks!) is contracted out. Member Stuart Fleming, who is the main contractor, did 1,900 hours in 2008; every piece of water has a detailed annual maintenance plan. ADAA spends £40,000 on maintenance and improvement works annually. Other costs include £12,000 on rentals of non-owned waters, £10,500 on purchasing fish and £64,500 on Fishery Board assessments.

ADAA is now a major player in Aberdeenshire fisheries, sitting on all three local salmon fishery boards as well as the Dee and Don trusts (the club was instrumental in setting up the latter). The influence it exerts is significant. It is also highly respected, not least because it is able to back up its position at the table with financial muscle. When, a few years ago, one of the local fishery boards found itself in a “financially challenging” situation, ADAA stepped in with a sizeable contribution!

AVERAGE CATCHES (2004-2008)

	DEE	DON	YTHAN*	TOTAL
Salmon/grilse	270	1,086	136	1,492
Sea-trout	104	314	114	532
Finnock	355	260	248	863
Brown trout		4,120**		4,120
Rainbow trout				1,953

*Includes last three years at Ardllethen
**Figures for 2003-2006 (figures for 2007/8 are unreliable)



John Fyfe returns an April springer of about 15 lb to Cockers pool at Parkhill.

Factfile

The club's website at www.adaa.org.uk (which receives 20,000 page hits per month) contains a veritable wealth of information. It also details visitor permits, including roving tickets for the Don and the Ythan.

Note: The Machar pool on the Ythan is not available to visitors (as the wading can be treacherous), nor is the Garthdee beat.