

RTC BICENTENARY CELEBRATION

ADH SPEECH

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you here today to celebrate a momentous event, the establishing of the River Tweed Commissioners 200 years ago in 1807. The RTC, as I shall now call them, have been responsible for some or all of the fish in Tweed ever since.

I can report that the current RTC committee met on the precise anniversary date on 1st August 2007, in Cornhill-on-Tweed, as did the first meeting of the Commissioners exactly 200 years ago in the Collingwood Arms, although as the Collingwood Arms is under serious reconstruction, we were admirably accommodated by Mrs Micky Leschallas directly opposite the Collingwood Arms, as close as we could possibly get to the inaugural meeting place.

Why Abbotsford? The answer is because its creator, Sir Walter Scott, was a member of the original committee which recommended setting up the RTC, and as a result of which we are all here today.

In my semi retired state I spend half my life on RTC business and the other half in the service of Abbotsford and the extraordinary Sir Walter Scott. He is not the main event today, but let me tell you that in my view he is the greatest of all Scots and I hope in 4 years time we shall have a bicentenary celebration here to mark his 1811 acquisition of the Abbotsford site. I look forward to one of my fellow trustees trying then to do justice to the achievements of a deeply patriotic and honourable man, the world's first great worldwide novelist and responsible single-handedly for how much of the world still views Scotland and its romantic nature today, 200 years later. Indeed, you may have seen in yesterday's Sunday Times that Robert Crawford, professor of modern Scottish literature at St Andrews University, described Sir Walter Scott as "the single most influential writer in the worldwide history of the novel".

His part in the setting up of the RTC hardly ranks in his long list of achievements, but in a small way it is yet another example of how we are still affected today, without knowing it, by what he did.

So what was Tweed like 200 years ago? If the stories of behaviour (or should I say misbehaviour) are anything to go by, it would be unrecognisable to those who know and love it now.

Netting practices below Kelso were designed to maximise catch and allow as little escapement as possible. Fishing as a sport was secondary to the business of catching fish for food and for export to London. There were netting stations all the way up to Kelso, and caulds were used to block fish by unscrupulous proprietors in the name of profit.

“Burning the water”, effectively spearing fish from above at night by the light of flaming torches, was rife and much enjoyed as a sport by Scott and his friends. Poaching in the upper reaches for the few fish that escaped the nets and the spear was out of control, if not on the industrial scale of the 1960s to 1980s of recent memory, nevertheless it is difficult to see how any bailiff force with the difficulty of transport and communications could effectively combat massive small scale poaching by the local community in search of a square meal. Pollution from the growing population and from the industrialisation process of the early and mid 1800s meant that the waters of Tweed and its tributaries were far from clean.

Into this maelstrom of ills rode Lord Somerville, ably assisted by Scott and others, and through his determination to put matters right was born the RTC to control poaching (bailiffs in those days were fully armed), to regulate netting, to impose a weekly close time and to deal with those who would block caulds for profit.

You will all receive a copy of Carrie Balfour’s “hot off the presses” book “The early days of the RTC” which I recommend as a thoroughly good read, so I will not go any further now into the precise details of how the RTC came to be established, because of its cross territory status , 200 years ago.

We have a lot to thank geography for because were it not for Tweed being part Scottish and part English, and therefore with its unique legislation, we would either be a solely salmon Scottish river board (as are all other salmon rivers in Scotland) with a narrow representation base and with no responsibility for other fish, or we would be governed by the English EA. It is a unique system which has served us well. It may be a coincidence that we are considered to be more successful than any other UK river, but I strongly suspect that there are lessons to be learnt in both England and Scotland, especially in the matter of local responsibility and governance. For it is the people (not just the proprietors) who live with and around these great rivers who love them best; it is therefore they who should look after them and the fish that live in them.

So where is Tweed 200 years on?

Misbehaviour of various sorts continues but is now rare and not the rule. I would quite like to have seen “burning of the waters” in action but it died out many many years ago; river netting between Coldstream and Kelso ceased at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries and over the last 20 years further reductions have taken place so that we now have 3 in river and 2 coastal nets as compared to the 30 plus we had pre 1987. High seas drift netting has come and will hopefully soon go if we can remove the last 16 or so NEDNF licencees, surely an anomaly now that the Irish drift nets have ceased. Poaching keeps going but our bailiff force, well armed with jeeps, night sights, radios, mobile phones and very fast boats, no longer need to be armed with guns to be highly effective. Modern day poaching has nothing to do with having a square meal but is more likely to be large scale and often linked to making money to buy drugs. Our caulds, having increased in number for power and milling purposes during the 19th century, and only within the last few years have they finally been dealt with effectively so that for the first time for centuries all parts

of the Tweed system are now accessible to spawning fish. Caulds continue, however, to cause intense emotions and although it has been the RTC's job to deal with them over the years in various ways to allow the free passage of fish, I have to admit that the methods used have often lacked subtlety and tact, as the people of Selkirk never stop reminding me!

And finally in today's Tweed, unthought of in 1807 and indeed not set up until 1983, we have the Tweed Foundation, the first bespoke Scottish river trust now joined by many others across Scotland, to give the essential scientific base to everything we do. We know more now of our river and the fish that live in it than we have ever done before, but the more you know, the more you realise you do not know. The initial triumph of the Foundation was the habitat work which took place over a period of 10 to 15 years and made huge strides to correcting the river margin damage caused by intensive agriculture, grazing and afforestation. Genetics, stock identification, trout and grayling initiatives, consistent annual juvenile sampling in all tributaries, crayfish and other invasive control and eradication amongst many other things, the TF biologists go about their work enthusiastically and diligently and will never be short of vital work to do. Crucially we are beginning to identify weak stock components (we all know about the reduced spring run but there may be others) and with that knowledge can protect those weaker parts by stopping netting at those times of year and by rod catch and release. Almost unknown 20 years ago, by catch and release we regularly return over 50% of the total Tweed rod catch thereby allowing to spawn over 7,000 salmon which would have otherwise adorn freezers all around the country.

And so we come back to the RTC. When we talk to other river boards they are astonished that the Commission is comprised of 81 Commissioners, 38 proprietors and 43 local council appointees. We meet in full session 4 times a year and it is a curious balance of power (following, I believe, the recommendations of the Hunter Report of the 1960s) between the majority council appointees (who do not pay anything towards the RTC budget) and the minority proprietors (who are elected from the approximately 150 proprietors who between them do pay the RTC budget of £600k pa, almost twice as much as any other Scottish river especially if you add on the proprietors' voluntary annual contributions to the Tweed Foundation). Other river boards think we are mad to be so widely represented, but it works, it is inclusive, it mixes community with ownership and I believe it is a model from which other rivers can learn when considering river management for the future.

The dangers are different to 200 years ago, but it is still man that presents the biggest threat. Our behaviour on the river may be vastly improved but in 1807 it was impossible for Gs to get here from some foreign land in the hold of a 737 or a 747, or in an overnight ferry from Norway. Disease and parasites are a far bigger threat than anything we have known before; past ills could damage and deplete; today's communications advances bring rapid wipe-out as a real possibility. Easy to forget in this summer of rain, but there must also be concerns that the joint effects of global warming and water abstraction in the summer months will get close to depriving our fish of the one thing they cannot do without, water of survivable quantity, temperature and chemical quality.

But we are well on Tweed, we have a river that provides a minimum every year of 500 jobs and £18 million, and catches by rod and line a staggering average of over 14,000 salmon annually, and it is good to see so many here today who have had such a big part to play in what I hope will become seen soon as the revival of salmon rivers such as this throughout Scotland and the UK from the dog days of the 1970s to 1990s. I know mentioning individuals is invidious but I see Lords Nickson and Sanderson amongst us, both in their different ways so influential in the Scottish fisheries world. Also my predecessors as RTC Chairmen, Bill Thomson, still a young man although Chairman in the 1980s, who set up the Tweed Foundation with Billy Straker-Smith, and whose guidance saw the reduction in river netting through in 1987; Ian Gregg, who to my mind has had more influence on UK salmon fishery management over the last 20 years both here initially and now in England and specifically on the Eden, and in reducing the NEDNF, than any other person. He should be recognised as much if not more than Orri Vigfusson, but lacks Orri's PR machine and willingness to knock on Prime Ministerial and Presidential doors. Lastly, John Lovett who was so influential in getting together Tweed's contribution to the NEDNF buyout, without which it might not have happened. They were ably assisted by Nick Yonge's predecessors as chief executive, James Leeming who brought Tweed out of the quill into the computer age in one fell swoop, and Judith Nicol, a truly able and formidable chief executive for many years and under whose guidance both the RTC and the Tweed Foundation achieved the pre-eminence that they still enjoy today.

Now.....and if I have got my timing right, I have been speaking for just over 10 minutes, long enough, you will say, but, by way of rebuke, only 3 seconds for each of the past 200 years!

And so it is time to bring my welcome to you all to end, but before doing so, and at the risk of dipping my toes very lightly into murky political waters (a dangerous ploy with so many of our always supportive past and present MPs and MSPs here today!), I wonder if there is not something symbolic in Tweed's set up, a cross territory Borders river where English and Scots work together harmoniously in a common cause as they have done now for 200 years?

I believe it is therefore entirely appropriate for me to finish with the words of the architect of the RTC, an Englishman, Lord Somerville writing to his friend Sir Walter Scott, a Scot if ever there was one, in a letter of November 1805, after the victory at Trafalgar.

SOMERVILLE'S LETTER

Let me repeat that last sentence " Long live the pure and cheering health of our Tweed"
Thank you for coming to our little celebration and now.....

It is my pleasure to hand over to Richard Wakeford who is Director General Environment and a member of the Scottish Executive's Strategic Board, and who is kindly going to say a few words on behalf of the Minister for Rural Affairs and Environment, Richard Lochhead, who sadly cannot be with us.