

Tales from the Riverbank

Or “The heron, the wren and the seal!”

BY IAN MCLAREN

Robert Burns wrote a song about it, generations of Bridge of Allan residents have walked its banks, and nowadays its flooding patterns have become a source of concern to some of us. It is, of course, the Allan Water or River Allan - and for an informed opinion on how the river is doing, *The Times* turned to the voice of experience on the Allan, Mr John Kelly of Churchill Drive, who has been monitoring its state for the last 27 years.

John is one of two water bailiffs on the river for the Allan Water Angling Improvement Association, with a remit to check fishing permits and ensure that fishermen stay within the laws of the sport.

But in practice he is so much more than this. He speaks with great fondness for the river and its beauties, and with a passionate commitment to its preservation.

He spends most of his time there according to his charming wife, Jose, whom he met while serving with the army in Belgium. “He only comes home when he is hungry,” she says.

So he seemed the ideal man to ask about the present state of the river. The increasing amounts of rainfall, especially during last November’s floods, are having a major impact on its banks, said John.

Many of them have been undermined, and could prove dangerous - he feels the Centenary Walk by the Haws Park could probably only be preserved with the use of stone-filled Gabian baskets.

The floods have also left the river above the bridge flowing more deeply over flat sandstone, while depositing new build-ups of shingle and stone shelves lower down, with the new flows undermining many trees.

He is full of praise, however, for the Council Ranger Service in their work in preserving the banks and replacing bridges.

The recent drowning tragedy has obviously affected him deeply, but the beauties of the Darn Walk, as well as the pride in his work and sport shine through.

There have been many laughs over the years, especially from his sprightly 95 year-old fellow bailiff “Old Bert” from Braco. A car-load of old ladies once stopped to say, “We’re looking for Braco,” to which Bert



John Kelly, water bailiff and nature lover

quipped, “I thought you were looking for husbands”!

Then there was the occasion when John had been joined by a high-level team of fishery inspectors and riparian owners during the season when fishing with worms is illegal, when he spotted a close neighbour strolling cheerfully towards them bearing a collection of squirming worms!

There is less poaching nowadays - John recalls finding piles of torch batteries at Mill of Keir in the past, but the younger wardens from the Salmon Board now come armed with night-sight binoculars and mobile phones. He does point out that some of our most recent forestry workers from Eastern Europe do seem to have a different mindset and regard fish as being “there for the taking”.

What makes John’s job even more enjoyable is his love of Nature. Did you know there is a wren’s nest in the rubbish build-up at the gates beside the bridge? Have you spotted the herons and grey wagtails as you look south from the bridge?

Are you aware that there is a huge bull seal - “a massive beast” - which chases and eats the salmon right up to the stretch behind Cornton Cescent? But John, as ever, plays by

the rules. Apparently, you would need a special licence from the Secretary of State for Scotland to deal with it.

In this, as in many other issues to do with the river, it is clear that the Allan is in good hands when it is being looked after by people of the calibre of John Kelly.

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**CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS
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 6 Munro Road,
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