

Friends of Loch Tummel Sailing Club Newsletter

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An interview with Allan and Cathy Thomson....



Cathy Allan

Allan's first experience of getting into a dinghy was when he ditched a single engine aircraft into Scapa Flow in an 80 Knot gale, having hit, and cut a barrage balloon cable with the propeller. Although all the balloons were supposed to be down the RAF omitted to say that there were still four up tied to buoys. (Editor's note – the aircraft was trying to land on a carrier at the time – what else! Cathy and Allen were also to meet at Scapa.)

His only knowledge of sailing was from helping adults race models in the local pond. In 1946 he was given the use of a cousin's canoe at Balmaha. It had a drop keel but the mast and sail were missing and had to be replaced with improvised mast and flour bag sails. It was ok off wind but needed paddle power to tack.

Towards the end of the Club's first season Allan and Cathy visited Tummel and joined in the following Spring. There were very few boats in the club then. George Sangster said to Allan that he could borrow a boat if Allan could helm it. They then bought an Enterprise and sailed together until George moved away from Pitlochry. There were no wetsuits in the early days and on a capsize the crews tended to go ashore. Allan had a knitted woollen bonnet and on one capsize took the boat ashore, used the hat to bail out the boat and then went back out sailing again putting the hat back on full of water!



The original club house was an old school building from Killin. Matt Young, who was a builder, erected it. The original starter's box was an ex Runway control caravan with an opening lid. The races were often started by the ladies who also made the teas. Matt was a founding member of the club with the Liddell's and several others. There was a lot of local support and the aim of the club was to give local people an opportunity to enjoy the sport.

Shortly after joining Allan was made Vice Commodore and then Commodore. The original committee meetings were held in the Fishers hotel and then occasionally as members popped in and out of Allan's watchmaking shop in Aberfeldy.

The ground required a lot of work and there was nothing like the work parties for getting people together. The club was a very friendly organisation and everyone knew all of the other members. Several loans were given to raise capital even from people who had no intention of sailing and some were never reclaimed. (editor's note – these were still sitting in the accounts until recently!)



A warm welcome was extended to all newcomers. Mike Barron and Hugh McIntyre were early members. Basil and Jean Rodger arrived after Jean picked a boat out of a catalogue by sticking a pin in it. The result of this was a Shark catamaran which had a handicap of 65 at a time when a National 12 was 100. They were heading for the Loch when the boat's builder, Reg White, whizzed past them with a strange contraption behind – the cat folded up on the trailer.

Basil sailed the cat from Oban to Tobermory for their summer holidays, on one occasion getting caught in a rising storm and unable to manoeuvre due to shipping in the Minch it was thought to have covered over 20 nautical miles in just under 50 minutes. Incidentally, Basil had actually lost a leg from standing on a landmine in Burma but this was no deterrent to him in any of the club activities he undertook whether pushing broken down cars or undertaking

building works. The Shark was eventually sold to Allan and then to Hugh McIntyre and is now in an historic cat's museum in Devon.

The ground was originally very rough and there were a lot of tree stumps on the shore, some were just below the level of the grass and would catch out the unwary car driver. Most of them dated from 1937 when the dam was flooded and were as hard as iron. They were destroyed by splitting the crowns with an axe and after several efforts the roots could then be dug out. There was one tree stump in a difficult position to the West of the jetty under the water. Many boats were hitting the stumps and the Glasgow University OTC were invited to the club to try blowing them up with explosives. Their efforts were in vain having no effect on the stumps. There was another stump which was near the east fence and Mike tried to pull it out with his LandRover, again without success. They were eventually destroyed by a bulldozer.



The original jetty was not particularly long and was made, from among other materials an old deep sink. This can still be seen marking the original end point and showing how short the jetty was at the time.

The Loch was drained at one point to its pre flood level to allow some work to be undertaken on the dam (now done by divers). Apart from the river on the north shore which was too deep to cross it was almost possible to walk right across the Loch from the club and there were lots of visitors to see the remains of the drowned house. The original river still affects the Loch when the Tummel Bridge or Cluny Hydro stations are working. The effect can be seen by the eastern tilt on the west mark and the current can drag and influence a boat as far down the Loch as the end of the wood across from the clubhouse.

The opportunity was taken to build a long wooden section to the end of the jetty, organised by David Nothcott. Thanks to Beeching there were plenty of railway sleepers and telegraph poles available. Round A frames were sunk into the mud and connected and topped by railway sleepers. Two surveyors ensured that it was all flat and level. However, unfortunately that winter was very severe and the Loch was covered with ice which lifted the jetty and left it twisted and uneven. This jetty has been recently replaced by the present floating jetty. Jim Hartshorne made alterations to the floating jetty by making a metal H section to stabilise the floating T part. Jim and Alistair Rae was also responsible for the construction of the Fifteen jetty and the winch.



Photo courtesy of Grant and Pat Cochrane – the Pier sometime in the early seventies

The Port an Eilean Trophy (Island Race) was given to the club by the owner of Port an Eilean House on the basis that the race was to be held around the 12th August in order that their shooting guests could then watch the race! Dr Fairbairn asked local artist Daniel Cavin (he of the mural at the Friends party) to make the pursuit race trophy from a stone selected from the river Tummel. Dan made a cardboard stage for it along with a story of a God chasing a goddess. The first winner of the trophy was Donald Liddell and it is apparently still possible to just make out his initials IDML carved on the stone. Matt Young had his workers make the stainless steel keel boat trophy. Basil Rodger donated the barometer Island pursuit trophy in order that one member who could only sail on Saturdays had the opportunity to race.



Allan first won the Island race when Ian Sands, who's father ran the boating station in Loch Fascally, missed his toe straps and fell overboard and by the time he had climbed back into the Enterprise Allan had passed him. A second entry in the cat had Allan finishing without another boat in sight but the wind filled in and the Cat lost out. The following year, sailing the Cat with Basil they

crossed the line again just as the wind was dying and went on to win the event for the second time.



During Allan's time as Commodore Thursday night sailing was organised to which local youngsters were invited. One evening there were 40 people out on the Loch and George Douglas had six young ladies out in a borrowed 15. This became the basis for a cartoon on the wall at a barn dance in Dave and Karen Kerr's barn. It was entitled 'George and his harem' and was painted by Dan. The Barn dance was to raise funds and, being a newly completed building, was actually inspected by a local official on the day of the dance!

Basil was once sitting at the A mark watching the other boats sail round the mark when a sudden gust hit the Shark and unfortunately, as a result, two holes were pronged into Dave Kerr's 15. A fortnight later when Basil was coming into his buoy a sudden gust accelerated the cat again putting two fresh holes into Dave's 15!



Early events in the club included a mid-summer midnight sail and the club once took 3 - 4 dinghies to Loch Fascailly to publicise the club. The midnight sail was not a particular success as there was not a breath of wind at midnight. Other publicity included running a slide show in Aberfeldy at the Town Hall with a fully rigged Scorpion dinghy at the door and taken through the town on a trailer with its sails up!

Alex Finlayson and Allan decided to try single handed A class catamarans obtaining the required ply and assembling the boats in Alex's garage. The joint between the hulls was so flexible that the windward hull never lifted out of the water. Alex named his 'Ginger Tom' and Allan's called his 'Feather' hoping that Ginger would always do the chasing. The Unicorn class went on to prove a better boat.



When Basil stopped sailing Allan bought Basil's Shark and Jim Hartshorne had a Marauder. Shortage of crew was resolved when they took it in turn to sail in each other's boats on a week about basis. On one Island race the bungs were forgotten but the cat was moving so fast on a northerly reach that the bung holes were acting as self bailers. After a couple of seasons they decided to buy a '15' with Jim arranging the towing and maintenance and this sailing partnership ran for 25 years! Allan does not want to disagree with Jim but he is sure that he was standing on the top of a sunken gate when he jumped overboard thinking they had gone aground. The net effect was the same – a soaking up to the neck!

Many thanks to Allan and Cathy for sharing these stories.

With Special thanks also to Dr Alan Foster– Honorary Secretary for his support to the ‘Friends of Loch Tummel’.



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