

## Meet Your Boat Maker

## Boats designed to tame the Tay



Pictured at the Meikleour fishing beat where the new fishing season was opened with a blessing of a new boat are (l-r) Bryan McIntosh, Ian Duncan, Calum McRoberts, Tom Brown, Claire Mercer Nairne, John Ferguson (boat builder), Eddie McGhee and Daniel Wright. Picture: Kim Cessford. Top right: a Tay salmon. Above: Lady Violet Elliot.

**Helen Brown** finds out about the fishy side of the River Tay's long history — and the very special craft that make fishing on the great river possible . . .

**S**ALMON FISHING on the Tay is one of the most famous and popular outdoor pastimes in Scotland and enthusiasts come from all over the world to fish. Claire Mercer Nairne and her family run Meikleour Fishings in Perthshire, welcoming guests from as far afield as China.

French-born Claire is passionate about the sport. "Salmon fishing is a healthy activity that is affordable (from £30 a day). It has a traditional, old-fashioned image but younger people — and more women — are taking it up.

"Fishing is for all and we get all people of all ages here. In fact, this year's Meikleour and Upper Islamouth Ladies' charity day in June, for both beginners and experienced female anglers, will be in aid of Angling for Youth Development, a Scottish-based charity with the purpose of offering people of all backgrounds and abilities the opportunity to participate.

"In the spring, it's not so much about quantity as quality of fish and there are a lot of locals involved. In autumn, there is

a bigger run of fish and we have people coming from England, China, Belgium, Scandinavia or Germany. The Tay is a huge draw.

"You can practise salmon fishing from the age of 10 to 90 and very importantly, it supports a lot of businesses and the economy in rural areas."

Claire is also not the first lady at Meikleour to take an interest in the fishing tradition. In 1909, Lady Violet Elliot, youngest daughter of the then Governor General of Canada and later, 17th Viceroy of India, Gilbert Elliot, married soldier Charles Mercer Nairne, the Laird of Meikleour. She may have inherited a love of the outdoors from her father, who promoted the creation of national parks so that, when her husband was killed in France in 1914, she took on the running of the Perthshire estate herself, as well as bringing up two children. She became an active member of the Tay Salmon Fishery Board and battled for salmon conservation. She was regarded as pragmatic and forward-thinking. Meikleour was the

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first beat on the Tay to use a boat with an outboard motor in 1950. Despite initial resistance, it wasn't long until all beats on the river adopted power. Claire adds: "Clearing out the workshop recently we came across a Seagull outboard, in its original crate, so we reckon we have the first engine used for fishing the Tay."

Today, boatbuilder John Ferguson is the man who creates the craft. He served his time in Perth's Lower Harbour in the late 1950s then moved into joinery for a number of years before, he says: "going back to my own trade, which I love, in 1979. I rented a workshop in Stanley, bought some second-hand machinery and I've been building boats ever since.

"The biggest part is cobbles for salmon fishing, with the odd loch boat. Back then, the Taymouth Estate asked for a cobble and were happy with what I produced which led to another three. For the first three years I did that part-time but now I've been building boats full-time for 32 years.

"I also do all the repairs on the boats when they come off the river for the close

season from October 15 to January 15. It's not unusual for a boat to last 25 years if it's maintained and re-painted regularly."

These hand-made craft are all made of wood to a traditional design. The Tay, as the river with the biggest volume of water, has 16-foot boats, with the Spey's version coming in at around 14.

There are currently between 40 and 50 wooden boats on the river and the vital thing is for them to be solid and safe to stand up to the notorious Scottish weather.

John adds: "I do about five a year and it takes five to six weeks. I cut my own timber — I buy the tree in the round to get the natural shape and sweep.

"I use two timbers — larch for the planking and oak for the ribs, bow, knees, etc. There are copper fastenings throughout because it doesn't rust and is relatively easy to take out without destroying the surrounding wood."

Claire adds: "John does all the boats on the river. Boatbuilders in wood are few and far between now and I don't know what we'll do when he retires!"