

KING OF CLUBS

Mike Handyside reveals a former tiny fishing society's winning hand

PHOTOGRAPHY:
MIKE HANDYSIDE



Where it all began:
The Prince Albert
pub in Macclesfield.



In the late 1970s, this attractive Dovey pool under the 17th Century Pont Minlyn packhorse bridge was available to Prince Albert Angling Society members on a shoestring.

LAST ORDERS RANG OUT AT the bar. A group of working class men had more to celebrate this night than just replenished glasses. It was “time, gentlemen” to form what would become the largest fishing club in the UK, probably the best run in Europe today.

Along these lines we can envisage the birth of the Prince Albert Angling Society in 1954, taking its name from a backstreet pub in Macclesfield.

The founders’ absolute passion for all things piscatorial was waxing, along with post-war tackle developments, at a time of increasing opportunities for game fishing. They would have no idea of what was to be, though; a total membership today of more than 9,600, comprising equal proportions of game and coarse enthusiasts, along with non-fishers and 800 juniors.

I asked the secretary, Andrew Strickland, how the club has become so successful.

“The answer is diversity in many forms,” he said. “The variety of 250-plus waters [47 owned], both geographically and type. We have large and small pools and reservoirs, rivers and lakes from the Scottish border to South Wales. The society has members from Kent to Aberdeenshire and Lincolnshire to Northern Ireland.”

But it started from humble beginnings. The men fished day-ticket waters and matches; they didn’t own or rent a single venue at the outset.

Founder members then clubbed together, and the first water was rented: the Brickpond. Other pools followed.

A homemade quill float would dip to the attention of an investigating crucian carp; the angler’s



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goldfish, resplendent in colour, like the hues of the hayfield and scattered bales, as the summer sun sank on countryside in a golden era. A scene today replaced by over-fertilized green, green grass and unsightly polythene-covered silage.

Two stretches of the Dane were leased, too, where chub and dace dominated the middle river. No doubt some stalwarts flicked heavily hackled flies with cane under shading alders in the hope of attracting the excited rise of a brown trout, rather than the slow engulfing take of the chub. Game-fishing had begun.

Salmon runs in Cheshire in those days had been put paid by locks, weirs and the pollution of the industrial revolution. But wild brown trout still graced the numerous lowland brooks, spawning on sand-and-gravel substrate, but threatened by an insidious creep of silage production and its highly polluting liquor. And soon some “scruffy” trout waters came on stream for early members; stretches of the Peover Eye and Poynton Brook were rented.

Fishing on the Allgreave Stream (Clough Brook) established the club in the preserved territory of the upper Dane, running off the Pennines to the east, with little sand input and pristine spawning gravels. A 1966 Stockport Advertiser Angler’s Handbook tells of previous exclusivity:

“In its upper reaches [the Dane] is strictly preserved for trout fishing, the rights being held by clubs like Macclesfield Fly Fishers Club and by private syndicates.”

PRINCE ALBERT ANGLING SOCIETY

Breaking the boundaries of exclusivity and offering game fishing on a shoestring was partly key to the club's early good fortune, and this is reflected today.

"The secret of success is the quality and mixture of fishing at an affordable price," said Andrew Strickland.

The springs of four rivers split on Axe Edge Moor: Dane, Dove and Goyt cascade and tumble over its gritstone, while the Wye's pristine waters succumb to limestone's influence, both geographically and chemically. The preserved, hallowed waters of the Derbyshire Wye, with its wild rainbows, would be a step too far, in all but the dreams of the working-class founders, but the Dove would not. And so the society ventured into the stomping ground of Izaak Walton, acquiring not only stretches of the revered river, but also tributaries such as Bradbourne and Marston Brooks.

A tiny pool at Whirley provided the first trout stillwater, before, some years later Lamaload and Bottoms Reservoirs were rented, the latter previously restricted by the water board to residents of Macclesfield borough and surrounding area.

In 1972 a young boy cast a Corixa and, almost simultaneously, the fly-line drew tight to the most beautiful rainbow trout. I will never forget the brilliant iridescent purple and silver, as the trout broke the dull, calm surface, reflecting leaden skies over Lamaload. Nor will I forget my father giving me state-of-the-art reservoir lures shortly afterwards, whenever he bought the latest creations, no doubt launched with help from T&S articles. A tandem Black-and-Silver Lure mesmerised trout in a choppy ripple, while the Muddler Minnow, from across The Pond, like the rainbows originally, was revolutionary and is my first-choice sea-trout fly today. Names such as Bob Church and John Goddard drifted into conversation along busy banks, where anglers stood in ranks on Saturday and Sunday mornings. A sight and sound sadly long gone on many reservoirs.

Today, Prince Albert rents or has access to 13 stillwaters, including syndicate tickets on Ladybower, Blithfield and Clywedog reservoirs.

During the 1960s and 1970s many salmon and sea-trout waters were acquired for club members. Pictured is the River Dysynni.



"Names such as Bob Church and John Goddard drifted into conversation along busy banks"

ABOVE
In the 1970s, a young Mike Handyside walked across Godor Bridge. Today, no-one appears to take responsibility for river blockages.

BELOW
A 1972 membership card and the 1966 Stockport Advertiser Angler's Handbook, showing an already extensive list of waters in the early years.

Six salmon waters were acquired on the magnificent Severn, along with four on the Ribble at Ribchester, by 1966. Two 20lb salmon might be seen lying in February snow, tempted by a wooden Devon Minnow fluttering enticingly, inches above gravels, and drawn by a Wye lead bouncing the riverbed. By 1972 the Welsh Dee again offered spring salmon fishing, anglers generally not bothering with the few later summer and autumn fish. Beats on the Severn's main Vyrnwy tributary expanded the club's stronghold into the Welsh Borders.

In the early 1970s a boy's journey continued and I recall with great fondness walking across Godor footbridge on the Vyrnwy, a stop-off point on family holidays to the Welsh coast. My mother would walk the dog and father would fish for 25 minutes or so, while I gazed down at this fascinating and, what seemed, large river (I had not seen the mighty Severn yet). Here the Vyrnwy cuts a rejuvenating course in glacial deposits; something a junior would soon learn of in geography lessons. But the main destination was a land of sewin, the Dovey and Dysynni, stacked with silver by the end of July. ➤



Prince Albert Angling Society game-fishing waters

SYNDICATE WATERS

- 1 Blithfield Reservoir
- 2 Jay Farm Fishery
- 3 Llyn Transfynydd
- 4 Ladybower Reservoir
- 5 Howden Reservoir
- 6 Derwent Reservoir
- 7 Llyn Clywedog Reservoir
- 8 Llyn Bugeilyn
- 9 Gwernan Lake

TROUT STILLWATERS

- 10 Lamaload Reservoir
- 11 Ty-Mawr Reservoir
- 12 The Moat
- 13 Fields Farm Pool
- 14 Motorway Lake
- 15 Henbury Lake
- 16 Grizedale Lea Reservoir

RIVERS

- 17 Border Esk
- 18 Eden
- 19 Liddel
- 20 South Tyne
- 21 Lune
- 22 Ribble
- 23 Banwy & Twrch
- 24 Calder
- 25 Clun
- 26 Conwy
- 27 Cothi
- 28 Dane
- 29 Dee
- 30 Dove & Henmore
- 31 Dovey
- 32 Dulus South
- 33 Dulus North
- 34 Dysinni
- 35 Eamont
- 36 Cumbrian Esk
- 37 Hodder
- 38 Hyndburn
- 39 Irt
- 40 Lledr
- 41 Mawddach
- 42 Mint
- 43 Peover Eye
- 44 Seiont
- 45 Severn
- 46 Tame
- 47 Teifi
- 48 Teme
- 49 Tern
- 51 Twymyn
- 52 Vyrnwy
- 53 Wenning
- 54 Wharfe
- 55 Wnion
- 56 Wye (Herefordshire)
- 57 Derwent (Derbyshire)

For more information on PAAS waters, visit paas.co.uk



“The huge grey ghosts of deep tidal pools were lost to one drink too many...”

It is said that on Sundays pioneering committee members would take a trip into the heart of Wales, knocking on farmers’ doors in the hope of, and sometimes, securing leases on these fine rivers.

Today, a different route is taken. Andrew Strickland explained, “I think our late chairman Dennis Meredith would have agreed that diversity is evident across the management committee, which comprises different age groups running companies of their own, from builders, engineers, general managers, teachers and instructors to chartered accountants.

“Everyone has a specific role from conservation officer to general secretary.”

Back in the early 1980s purchase of the Hengwrt estate fishing on the Mawddach and Wnion captured the mood and excitement of sea-trout fishing of the period, arguably then the best game fishing in the card.

Campervans would arrive from all points of the compass on a Friday night, sometimes a short July night, and the huge grey ghosts of deep tidal pools were lost to one drink too many, a hangover haunting the angler the following day, too, as he glimpsed salmon lying up.

In 1996 a quirky situation befell the society in the form of well-forged membership cards being sold in Manchester pubs. A clever plan, concocted by committee, saw every club bailiff (today totalling around 250 volunteers) carrying letters to be given to fraudsters advising them their card was being taken, as part of an audit. The letter entitled them to fish on for a short period, until the card was returned. Of course, there would be no return. Sheer brilliance.

The police were interested in the ruse, although any subsequent prosecutions were difficult to prove. Suspected offenders could claim it wasn’t theft of fishing rights, or fraud, if they “genuinely” believed they had bought the permit in good faith.

Today, there are some misconceptions about the club and Macclesfield. The largest part of the membership is no longer from the Cheshire mill town, with some even living abroad.

“We have a growing group of grayling anglers in Holland, and members in Germany, France, Canada, Australia, Asia and the Americas,” said Andrew.

What about the river that runs through Macclesfield? The post-industrial Bollin was not worth renting in the 1960s, but it now supports huge numbers of wild trout, and some salmon in its lower reaches. Yet it still does not appear in club waters.

The words “We will not take waters off other clubs” appear in the membership card. Conversely, in the past, the society had problems of others seeking to do this. In the first newsletter (December 1985), the late John Turner, then chairman, wrote: “If they persist in pulling the tiger’s tail, we will turn and bite!”

Some felt these to be strong words. But I think



A River Vyrnwy grayling comes to the net for a Prince Albert member.



JOHN EARDLEY

LEFT
PAAS member John Eardley with a 10lb salmon taken on a shrimp from Llanelltyd Bridge pool on the Mawddach in 1985.



JOHN EARDLEY

BELOW
Tom Eardley, John’s father, worm fishing on the Twymyn (Dovey tributary) in August 1988.

John would have approved of them being said of the Welsh byelaw debacle, in which NRW have relentlessly forced unenforceable impositions through, despite a public inquiry at huge cost, fraying relations with stakeholders to tatters.

John Eardley, a member for nearly 40 years and strategy officer for the Campaign for the Protection of Welsh Fisheries, has voluntarily caught broodstock and stocked young fish in the Mawddach for the regulator, prior to hatchery closure. In addition, he has relentlessly helped control invasive species, such as Japanese knotweed.

“The wounds are so deep,” said John. “Many in Prince Albert say it is near impossible to see any meaningful working relationship unless there is a change of policy.

“Prince Albert has reacted to the whole sorry saga, giving up some Welsh waters and looking towards middle and northern England in recent years for acquisitions, such as on the salmon-stocked Tyne. A serious message to NRW, and more importantly Welsh government, who pull the puppet’s strings.”

I asked Andrew Strickland how the club decides on new acquisitions.

“These days access and parking are probably most important,” he said, “and a water has to be near our strongholds of membership or existing clusters of waters. Thereafter it’s down to the fishing, water quality, work required and improvements that can be made and any restrictions in place. Finally, we will try and pay a fair market price but no more.”

Would I recommend the Prince Albert Angling Society, which I first joined in 1972?

With a waiting list of only around two years and waters that produced a 30lb-plus salmon last September, on a shoestring, what other club would I recommend?

If the society’s founders were sat over a game of cards, many of today’s members would queue at the Prince Albert bar to buy those gentleman a round. However, sadly, the last bell has already sounded for them. **T&S**