



THE BEAT ABOVE THE BRIDGE

*Andrew Flitcroft fishes at magnificent
Dunkeld House on the River Tay*

PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL BOYD

Andrew covers the top
pot on Cathedral pool
above Dunkeld Bridge.





LEFT
The view downstream from the hut: Lady pool (with boats), Cutty Stone, Grey Stone, Green Point, Mouse Trap and Giraln in the distance.



LEFT
Head Gillie Gordon Pollock shares his wisdom with novice Kip McFarlane.



Andrew into a springer on Cathedral, while Gordon gets ready with the net.

last year after raising money to restore the building through crowdfunding. We nearly emptied it, but be warned, by the time it opens at 9am, gillie Gordon Pollock will be twiddling his fingers. You'll be lucky if there's anything left by lunchtime.

With delicious cake and black-pudding sausage rolls on board, we drove through the estate arch on to the long, landscaped driveway to the fishing hut, which is situated in front of and just upstream of the hotel. A 70-yard walk door-to-door. The hotel gardens are thick with record-breaking firs, sequoia and larch as well as hotel residents taking pictures in the magnificent setting. The gaff is stunning and on a grand scale. The fishing hut's not bad, either.

Gordon was waiting. Previously at Newtyle and Dalmarnock, it is his fifth season on this beat. Putting up rods and choosing flies were interrupted by coffee, cake and Kip's never-ending thirst for knowledge. The view downstream is impressive, the dark tree-lined water broken only by boils as it's kicked from one side to the other by unseen outcrops. It is the depth of these pools, mostly spun and harled from a boat, along with the Braan spawning tributary lower down, that attract and hold fish from the first to the last day of the season.

Lady pool, below the hut, is home to two stunning new wooden boats but can be fished from its gravel banks at most heights. A fish showed at the gauge by the neck, but on a good year I was told you can sit on the hut's verandah and see fish showing as far as the eye can see. Following two good spring seasons on the Tay, it was down to the law of sod that we'd timed our visit during a poor spring run and unseasonably hot and bright conditions more typical of Dubai than Dunkeld. News that only 70-odd fish had been

recorded on the Pitlochry ladder counter, compared to a figure of around 1,400 by the same time the previous year concentrated the mind to the task in hand. Given the conditions and with few fish about we would put all our effort into the best-known lies.

We headed downstream to fish the beat's bottom and most famous pool. Cathedral is immediately above Dunkeld Bridge - it's the one I have stared at on numerous occasions. We set off, Gordon giving commentary as we passed the haunts of past monsters, knowingly trailing a spinner behind the boat as we weaved our way downstream through Grey Stone, Green Point, Mouse Trap and Giraln.

Kip was to warm up his casting arm at Gauge pool, where a short stretch of rocky bank marks a nearside gully and fish often rest. I'd fish Cathedral pool from the anchored boat, a few hundred yards downstream. We'd hear Kip's call when he was into a fish.

Cathedral is the most prolific of 16 Dunkeld House pools. It takes its name from the 13th-century former cathedral on the north bank, the lawned grounds of which adjoin the river. It's a public setting with tourists sightseeing and taking pictures as you cast towards them, but the river is wide and their voices are not heard. There are two target lies on the north bank. Top Pot and Bottom Pot. You fish Top first, casting to a wall bordering the Cathedral grounds. Less than 2ft of water on the gauge is best for the fly here. We fished it at around 8in, with the actual depth varying across its width from 3ft to 6ft. I could see the bottom and all the scrapes, deeper pots, gullies and flat spots in which salmon might stop. We kept our distance from the hotspot, a gully of slightly deeper water 20 yards or so long, from the start of a ridge in the wall to where the tail lifts. I couldn't see into the

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YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S like when you're driving and one of the kids give you a last-minute warning they're going to be sick and the resulting whiplash and the fallout from the rear-passenger shelf? My wife says it's much the same

when I drive over a river. If I can clearly see the river through my window, it's not so bad, but some you can't - and she must brace herself for an emergency stop.

"What happened?" the little one will say from the back seat, having been rudely awoken. With a world-weary glance at the ceiling, my wife will say, "Don't worry, darling. It's just another one of your dad's rivers."

Peering over bridges is a ritual on most journeys and an essential prelude to a fishing trip. For me, they fall into three camps: those with known lies, offering a damned good chance of seeing a fish; those simply used for determining a river's condition; and those best placed to break up a journey. The best fall into all three camps.

For me, the bridge over the Tay at Dunkeld falls into the latter two, though I'm certain those more familiar with its vast span may know its fish-holding secrets. Handbrake turns are not needed. It's a more relaxed diversion and has often proved a welcome arm-rest on trips north and when delivering my catch to the town's smokehouse many moons ago. This magnificent structure, designed by Thomas Telford and witness to many opening-day celebrations, must

surely be the most iconic in salmon-fishing circles.

This season, I was resting my chin on it with Kip. Remember, my neighbour, who has yet to catch a salmon? Well, he still hasn't. It was late May - prime time on the middle Tay - and Kip's initiation was almost certain. I peered upstream across the massive river as I normally do and this time I was destined to wet a line.

The famous Dunkeld House beat is under new ownership. In 2017 the four-star Dunkeld House Hotel - former Edwardian residence of the Dukes of Atholl - sold the fishing rights, but work closely with the new owners (Dunkeld House Fishings) to host rods. You don't have to stay at the hotel to fish the beat, although it is convenient and undeniably tempting.

Access is through the town, but we needed breakfast first. We'd spotted a new, posh-looking artisan baker. We couldn't resist the smell and waited for it to open. It turns out Aran Bakery was created by a food writer, the youngest-ever semi-finalist of the Great British Bake Off (2015). Flora Shedden opened it



A welcome sight after a day on the river. The Glorious Dunkeld House Hotel.

gully, but I could tell it apart from the rest of the pool by its oilier boils and flatter surface.

Standing in the stern, I could cover it better with a 14ft 9wt, floating shooting-head and 10ft brown tip than with my shorter, lighter outfit - the Tay is deceptively wide. As Gordon roped us down it was like fishing in an aquarium. Every rock and divot was visible. I saw a springer swim underneath the boat as if we weren't there - reassuring proof that there was at least a slim chance. "If there's one there, he'll have the fly," said Gordon, who let a yard of rope out every five minutes or so, all the way down to and including Bottom Pot.

This hotspot is another channel (around 7ft deep) running from the end of the cathedral wall to the first bush on the downstream bank. We touched nothing in both. When you're fishing for running fish, which we were, it's just pot luck. You're looking for one to stop briefly where and when your fly is in the right spot. It's a waiting game. You're waiting for a flurry of fish, or just one or two to show. Just something to heighten your senses and sharpen your casting. Apart from that one fish seen under the boat, we saw few others until after lunch on Rock pool.

Rock, another great fly pool, is upstream of the hut and is fished from the bank. You've probably guessed it has a rock? A big one on the far bank, below which



LEFT TO RIGHT
The successful fly, Ross Macdonald's long-winged black & Yellow tied on a brass body (from T&S July 2018).

An Osprey - a regular sight at Dunkeld House.

One of two new and beautiful beat boats.

the fast and powerful "V" tail takes a right turn into Ferry pool. It is fished from a steep gravel bank, the sort that moves beneath your feet, but the depth is safe in low water. It gets flatter as you approach the tail and "V", where we immediately spotted fish. Again, the width is deceptive. To cover the rock, where fish are often taken, it was a very long cast, which only Gordon was able to reach. He's a damned good caster. Kip and I concentrated on the nearside "V", spurred on by the fish seen just above and on its far crease. Were these the same running fish we'd seen earlier on Cathedral? We will never know. There weren't interested. Or were they?

Gordon tied on a huge Sunray, whacked it across the "V", stripped it back and the same fish came to it in three consecutive casts. Exciting, but still fishless.

Conditions on Tuesday were identical. With morning sun behind the fish (not in their faces) it was the best time to fish Cathedral again. The routine would be the same, starting on Top Pot. This time I knew the deal, and this time things were a little different. The water hadn't changed, but there was a thin veil of cloud and we spotted one or two fish way

down at the bridge. The same fish would show again, a little upstream. It wasn't consistent, but over the course of the morning we saw a couple of pods, enough to lift the hairs on the back of my neck.

The line tightened on the dangle. I waited and lifted into what I thought was a trout. It felt weightless. The weightlessness was in fact a salmon that had taken my fly and kept running upstream to the boat. It wasn't until I caught up with it that I felt its weight. It was too late. There was probably nothing I could have done about it, but that didn't dilute my language, which I'm certain shocked the Cathedral tourists. It went quiet in the boat for a while, until yet more fish were seen at the bridge.

This time the fish took solidly on the swing. "That's more like it," I said under my breath as Gordon pounced into action. This time it was on, good and proper, swimming back and forth, downstream and back. It was a good fish, over 10lb and bright silver. It showed, jumped even, and set off on more strong runs before I drew it to the boat again. The tourists were filming, and so was Gordon. The video, four minutes long suddenly stops and the crowd melts away... You'll see it on Gordon's Facebook page.

The fish were still at Rock pool that afternoon and one or two runners had been caught on the beats upstream, but as the light started to fall and our hopes faded, the warmly illuminated Dunkeld House Hotel wrapped itself around us. A day of near misses was added to many others I've experienced of late, but it was nothing that a beer, a dram and a good night's sleep couldn't fix. We had one more morning to redeem ourselves.

I'm often accused of only publishing articles of successful trips. Well, to my critics I must apologise again, despite losing two fish. The following morning another fish showed at the Top Pot on Cathedral pool. I'd fished the fly through when it jumped opposite the boat. By the time it landed, Gordon had cast a spinner, which it took instantly. It was my turn with the net and soon a little sea-licer lay on the unhooking mat.

When I next lean over Dunkeld Bridge, I will, like those whose footsteps I've followed, see the magnificent scene before me in a different light. But that view alone doesn't sum up the many hidden Dunkeld House necks, runs and pools farther upstream, or the wonderful grounds of the hotel. Magnificent as it is, it's what you can't see from the bridge that impresses most. Of course, next time I look over its parapet I will almost certainly be boring those leaning next to me with tales of lost fish. You have been warned. 🐟



Gordon steps up at the last minute and saves the trip.

"I saw a springer swim underneath the boat as if we weren't there"

BELOW
Rock pool: a mighty cast to reach the rock, but the "V" tail peppered with fish and easily covered. "Don't let the fish run downstream!" warned Gordon.



Rods, rooms and a ribeye steak

To book and for more information on the Dunkeld House fishing, visit the beat's booking platform at www.salmon-fish-scotland.com/Dunkeld-House-salmon-fishing

Gordon Pollock also has his own Dunkeld House Facebook page where you catch up on daily news: www.facebook.com/Dunkeldsalmonbeat/

Newcomers to salmon fishing in need of a guide, tactical tuition, equipment (waders and waterproofs) and a fishing permit should visit Jock Montieth's (fishery manager) website: www.salmon-fish-scotland.com/River-Tay-Guided-Salmon-Fishing

Dunkeld Spey Casters' Club
The beat runs a Dunkeld Spey Casters' Club on the first Sunday of every month between 12pm and 3pm. It started on July 1, providing a free introduction to spey-casting, rivercraft and hooking techniques. It's open to existing and novice salmon anglers, and also extends an open invitation to other gillies willing to assist with tuition, who can promote their own beats.

To stay at the wonderful Dunkeld House Hotel, visit www.dunkeldhousehotel.co.uk If you do, make sure you try the rib-eye steak. It is undoubtedly the best I've eaten.

