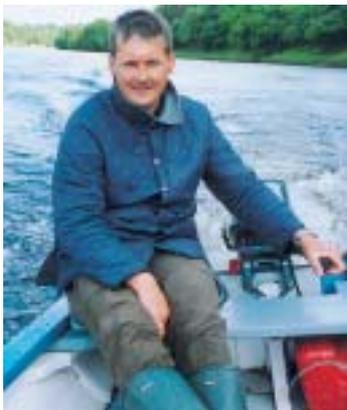


# Taking the helm

DEBORAH KILPATRICK MEETS JOHN MONTEITH, A GILLIE ON THE RIVER TAY WHO HOOKED UP WITH A LEGEND TO LEARN THE TRICKS OF HIS TRADE. NOW HE FEELS TRADITIONAL METHODS COULD HELP TO HALT THE RECENT DECLINE IN FISH STOCKS.



Scotland is blessed not only with spectacularly beautiful rivers, but also with one of the longest salmon-fishing seasons in the world, lasting from as long as January to October on rivers like the Tay. With the potential to attract many thousands of visitors a year – tourists as well as angling enthusiasts – our rivers are one of the Scottish economy's most important assets.

But the last century has seen a huge decline in fish stocks (between 1830–1846 70,000 salmon were netted each year above



Dunkeld Bridge, while today the annual catch in the Tay is about 10,000) and a consequent decrease in visitors. This has begun to impact on local economies, with many hotels, built when the rivers were full of fish, struggling.

Scottish gillies are now coming together to remedy the situation. Spearheading this work on the River Tay is John Monteith, gillie of the Newtyle Beat.

John greets me clad in the traditional uniform of tweed suit and green wellies. Inside his hut, the walls are covered with photos of Willie Laird (aka Willie the Gillie), the



Laurie Campbell

Newtyle gillie from 1930 to the mid-1980s and John's mentor.

Willie was a local legend – his picture hangs alongside images of Macbeth and Robert the Bruce in the Tap Bar in Birnam. He was born on 16th March 1912, growing up with seven siblings in an Atholl Estates cottage, where his family lived for over 100 years. Willie was 18 when he took over at Newtyle, and as a third-generation gillie who knew 'every rock on the beat', he was well respected.

'Over the years literally thousands of people fished with Willie Laird, including the

Duke of Westminster,' John tells me.

He was a remarkable character who influenced John deeply, from their first meeting in 1970 when John was five.

'I was already into fishing by then and caught my first pike at the age of three. Meeting Willie the Gillie was like meeting God. He completely exploded my imagination in the pursuit of catching Atlantic salmon in the Tay. He realised as soon as he met me that I had a terminal illness – the fishing bug! Later Willie gave me one of his old brass reels, made by Mallocks of Perth. It's an heirloom.

'He was a wee man, but he was hard as nails – sinewy, with huge hands. He liked a dram and would sometimes sleep in this hut. It was not unusual for me to arrive in the morning to find him lying on the floor with a 24-pound salmon next to him – he'd be cuddling it like a teddy bear!

'Wee things happen around here that don't add up. Willie loved *Annie's Song* by James Galway. A few times I've been out in the boat and started whistling it, when within seconds the line has tightened and I've hooked a salmon.'

Willie passed on his knowledge of the river

to John. He also influenced his complete change of lifestyle; as recently as 1997 Monteith was a successful city businessman, but he gave it up to live out his dream of following in Willie's footsteps.

'I was up here one night and there was a full moon across the river, casting a beam like torchlight onto the hut,' John explains. 'As I stood looking at it I suddenly thought, 'You're going to be the gillie here.'

'At that time I had no such plan, but a year later I left the rat race to come here. It was commercial suicide, but I just couldn't get it out of my head. It was a shock coming down to a humble gillie's wage but I've changed my life for the better.'

John is now focusing on habitat improvement on the Tay. To raise funding for this much-needed work, he has set up a salmon fly-casting school which will start in March 2005, to be held above Dunkeld Bridge. John has named the school (and his corporate

since the 1950s, when the River Tummel was dammed.

John explains: 'Salmon would have needed to be bigger in the past to navigate the higher water pressure the extra foot would have created. Survival at sea is nowhere near what it used to be because of commercial netting, therefore the salmon tend not to survive long enough at their feeding grounds to grow big any more.'

Many factors including mismanagement, changing farming methods and the decline of old techniques of habitat improvement have had a huge impact on our rivers. Even seemingly unrelated events such as the landslides that devastated two Scottish hills last summer can have a devastating effect.

'No one has pinpointed the cause of the landslides above Dunkeld yet, but I blame forestry drainage,' John says. 'The conifers that are planted can't survive in peat bog soil, but when you drain a hill, you get rid of its

**'MY OLD MAN ONCE SAID TO ME, 'THERE ARE TWO CLANS IN SCOTLAND, THE MCGEES AND THE MCTAKS, AND IT'S BETTER TO BE A MCGEE.' THAT IS SO TRUE, AND IT'S SO RELEVANT TO THIS ISSUE — YOU HAVE TO GIVE TO THE RIVER AND THE COUNTRYSIDE, NOT JUST TAKE FROM IT.'**

hospitality venture, organising five-star salmon fishing days) after Willie the Gillie. He is currently working with the Tay Gillies' Association and the head biologist for the Tay Salmon Fisheries Board, Dr David Summers, on habitat improvements on three main spawning burns on the lower and middle Tay before this year's spawning season begins.

'Salmon creates jobs,' John explains. 'If the Tay was full of fish like it used to be in the 60s, this beat would employ four gillies. If that were mirrored throughout the River Tay, 200 extra jobs would be created with an added positive knock on effect to the entire Scottish economy.'

'This river is one of Scotland's biggest assets. In 1908 Tay Salmon Fisheries recorded 40 fish a day over 40 pounds; these were caught in the nets at Perth and sent via train to London to supply top hotels. You don't see big fish like that any more.'

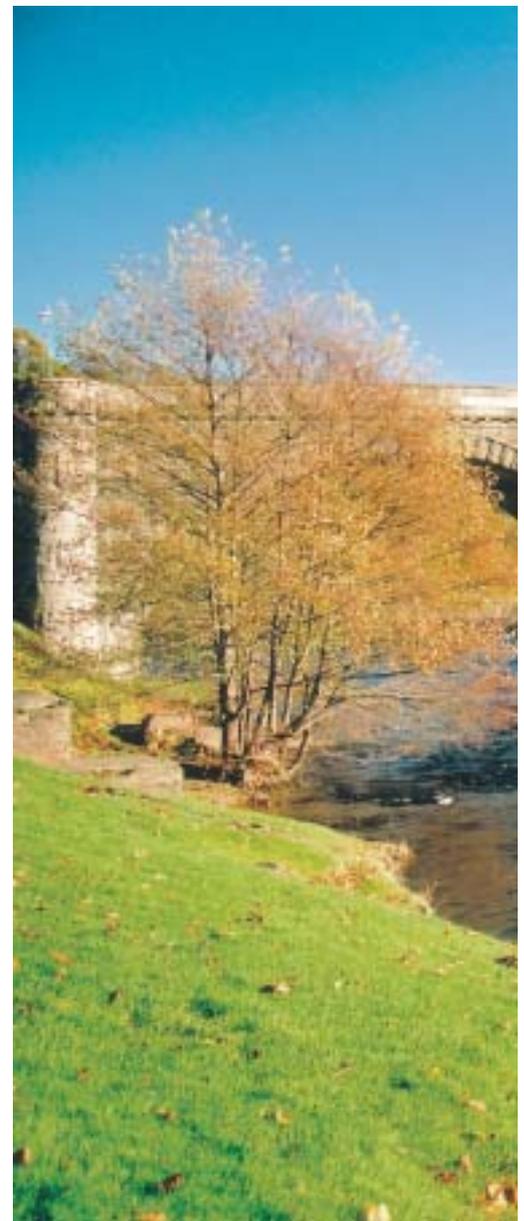
The river has lowered by a foot during spates

natural ability to absorb and release water slowly – that's why the hills are collapsing.'

The sediment that comes off the hills compacts soft gravel in the rivers, needed by fish to lay their eggs in safety. During summer's low water John is thigh-deep in the river raking silt off, to leave the gravel soft enough for successful spawning later in the year. All the old gillies would have done the same.

It is clear that a deeper approach to countryside management is needed if fish stocks are to be maintained and improved, including cooperation between many different bodies including the Forestry Commission, farmers, the Government and fishery boards. We can learn from the old gillies such as Willie Laird; John's use of his tried and tested methods such as gravel-raking and predation control has already begun to pay off.

'I was lucky to be taken under his wing at such an early age, when I was easily influ-



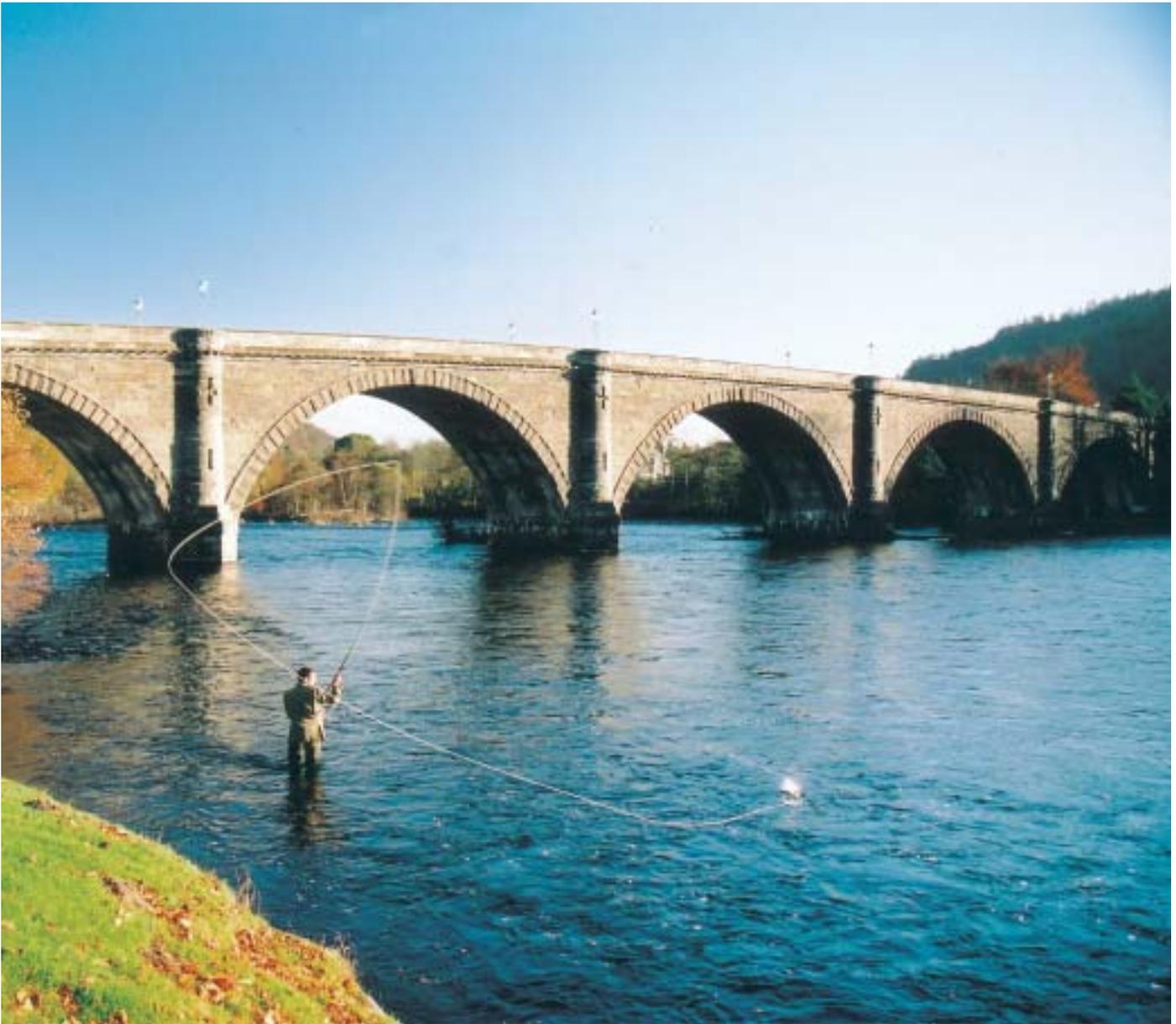
enced,' John adds. 'He used to say – and this was in the 70s: 'These are the old methods, no one does this any more.'

'I've been out there a lot loosening off the gravel on the Newtyle Beat. Now the river is full of young salmon. On the last day of January I was up a tree looking down at the water, I could see 35 salmon spawning, even in the low winter sun.'

In 2003 there were no salmon spawning in the area. Despite their effectiveness such techniques are not used much today, highlighting the difference between the old and new gillies.

The Tweed Foundation, a charitable trust set up to promote the development of fish stocks in the River Tweed, is a notable exception. They have achieved outstanding results and it is this level of improvement that John envisages for the Tay.

'We could work on it one burn at a time,' he suggests. 'Two million eggs and fry (the



*Main picture:* At the Willie the Gillie School of Casting site above Dunkeld Bridge. The Casting School is strictly for raising funding for much needed habitat improvements on the Tay system.  
*Above:* Willie Laird on the Tay. *Previous page main picture:* Leaping salmon. *Top left:* Willie Laird.  
*Below left:* John Monteith.

amount hatched annually by the Tay Salmon District Fishery's Board, as, some believe, an insurance policy against salmon extinction in the Tay) in the whole of a river system is not a lot. This beat alone would have that if the habitat were in its optimum natural state.

'There are two and a half thousand square miles of burn and river that have not been touched for over 50 years, in the Tay system alone. We need teams of people to study, evaluate and clear it. That's what is done in farming with crop rotation and there's no reason it can't be done in fishing. The Tweed Foundation has already done it and is reaping the benefits, but it's nothing more than the old gillies used to do every day.

'My old man once said to me, 'There are two clans in Scotland, the McGees and the McTaks, and it's better to be a McGee.' That is so true, and it's so relevant to this issue – you have to give to the river and the countryside, not just take from it.' □