

LOOKING

1904-2003

Back

as Blagdon celebrates 100 years



In the first of a series of articles to be issued in our 2003 editions of the Buzzer we take a look back at Blagdon's fascinating early years.

Hailed as the birthplace of reservoir trout fishing we start by looking at how it all began...

Originally known as the Yeo Reservoir, Blagdon opened its 440 acres to fishermen on the 21st May 1904 and its fame quickly spread throughout the fly fishing world.

Permission to fish Blagdon had to be obtained from the Bristol Waterworks Company Secretary, Bill Alexander. The cost was 10 shillings a day to fish from the bank with a maximum of 8 fishermen. If a boat was required (there was only 1 available in the 1904 season) plus the services of a keeper, the cost rose to £1, a considerable sum of money at the turn of the century.

Bristol Water archives reveal that the potential of Blagdon as a trout fishery was only realised when in 1902, whilst the Reservoir was filling, Bill Alexander invited a friend to fish for what he believed to be coarse fish in the Lake just below the by-wash on Butcombe Shore. Having had his line broken several times during the day using a roach pole and with nothing to show for it, he asked a Caretaker of the Lake to lay a "Spiller" with about 60 hooks attached to it thinking that large eels were the likely culprits. Three days later the Caretaker arrived in a state of great excitement carrying a parcel containing a beautifully marked 5lb brown trout.

Later that week they returned with Flies and Artificial Minnows and caught between them 14 brown trout weighing up to 4lbs. According to this typed manuscript, which was

actually dictated in 1947 by the other angler, H. Merrett-Stock, this is how the trout of Blagdon Lake were discovered.



Top picture: Blagdon ghillie Jimmy Murdoch with client, circa 1935.

Keepers of Blagdon whose careers spanned 60 years pictured with entertainer Will Fyffe.

Left to right, Donald Carr, head keeper, Jimmy Murdoch, ghillie, Will Fyffe, Sam Carr, Angus McLaughlin and Lawrie Williamson

In December 1904 Donald Carr was appointed Head Keeper and was to nurture and develop the fishery to make it famous throughout England and indeed the World for the size and quality of the trout it produced. Donald was the first in a long line of Scottish keepers and Ghillies to arrive at Blagdon and had previously worked on the River Tay and in Co. Donegal.

Whilst only 102 brown trout were caught in that first year the average

weight was an incredible 4lbs 13ozs with the heaviest weighing 9lbs 2ozs! Rainbow trout were not initially stocked in Blagdon although 500 fingerlings were introduced in 1904. These fish were supplied by a Mr. Neville Grenville of Butleigh Court near Street in Somerset. In 1905 just 3 of these Rainbows were caught, the largest weighed 2lbs 14ozs compared to 668 brown trout for the same period. As the years progressed the number of rainbows stocked in Blagdon were gradually increased but as recently as the mid 1960's stocking levels of browns were always higher than rainbows.

Blagdon was not an easy place to reach in the early days and one method was to travel via the Great Western Railway who opened a branch line from Yatton to Blagdon on 4th December 1901. The line was primarily built for the transportation of coal to fuel the beam engines at Blagdon Pumping Station but anglers also arrived by train.

Much was written in the famous fishing journals of the time about Blagdon and its wonderful fishing and huge trout.

In the winter of 1910 articles appeared carrying the story of a colossal brown trout, which ran, up the stream to Ubley Hatchery. The fish was a perfectly conditioned hen and was weighed by Donald Carr. Its weight was an incredible 16lbs 4ozs. Safely returned after spawning, the fish was never caught and must have fuelled the imagination of future anglers of what might be lurking in Blagdon's magical waters.

Most fishermen will be acquainted with the Lodge at Blagdon but not many will realise that this is not the original building. The first hut was constructed of wood and had a thatched roof, which later became tiled. No records exist showing when the old hut was demolished and the existing hut built but the cars in the attached photo give us some idea of the period which we believe to be circa 1925.

Whilst the timber hut is long gone fishermen from that era made reference to the outline drawings on the internal walls of the hut showing the size and shape of fish captured in those early days. Many anglers remarked that some of these sketches appeared to show the fish as having unusual proportions some even

describing them as being deformed. However a later study in the 1950's by Cecil Myers, a Scientist researching the growth of Blagdon fish, came to the conclusion that they were of a strain that took on this shape because the Lake provided such a rich larder and they had a tremendous growth rate.



Such was the fame of Blagdon trout that ova were exported all over the World.

Prior to 1910 shipments of eggs went to New Zealand and around 1913 ova from these fish were brought back to Blagdon. As an experiment they were reared and stocked in the Lake. Could the Blagdon and British record rainbow weighing 8lbs 8ozs caught in 1924 by Col. Scott have been one of those descendants? This is indeed possible but we shall never

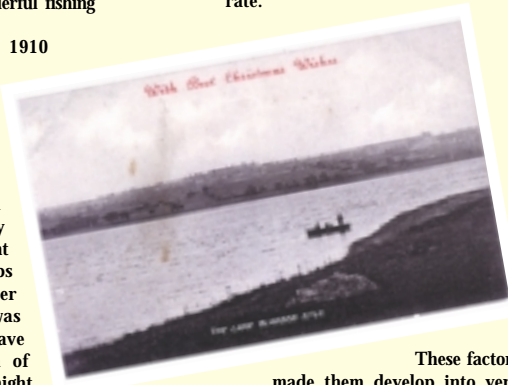
be certain which just adds to the fascination of Blagdon's rich past and the quality of its fish. Those that can remember this record rainbow which hung on the walls of Blagdon Hut for so many years will recall its beautiful proportions and colouring. Sadly, the fish set up by Cooper's, the leading taxidermist of the day was stolen in 1996 and has never been recovered.

In our research on Blagdon's past we also found out that part of the timber from the original hut was used to erect a summer house for Mrs Bell's use whilst her husband the famous Dr. Bell was fishing. The location of the summer house was Orchard Bay and some of our anglers may recall a hut on this site behind Orchard Bay Point.

In its long history Blagdon has had relatively few Fishery Manager's a policy that Bristol Water are proud to acknowledge. The skills learnt over the years have been handed down from generation to generation and the Scottish

connection existed right up until Lawrie Williamson's son, Ian retired in 1996.

Not many individual photos exist of Fishery Keepers and managers from the past but



These factors made them develop into very deep and short fish in comparison to their weight.

we have been fortunate in obtaining a collection and in Blagdon's Centenary year thought they would be of great interest. The photo on page 12 shows four of Blagdon's earliest Head Keepers whose combined careers spanned almost 60 years.

We have unearthed many more interesting facts about Blagdon's past and will be publishing further articles in forthcoming issues of The Buzzer.

This page, clockwise from top; Blagdon Pumping Station under construction in 1898. Blagdon Hut, circa 1925. Boat with ghillie drifting close to the shore at Cheddar Water. Blagdon ghillies - front row Lawrie Williamson, Sam Carr, back row Jimmy Murdoch and Angus McLaughlin.

Steve Pope