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Bannockburn Characters

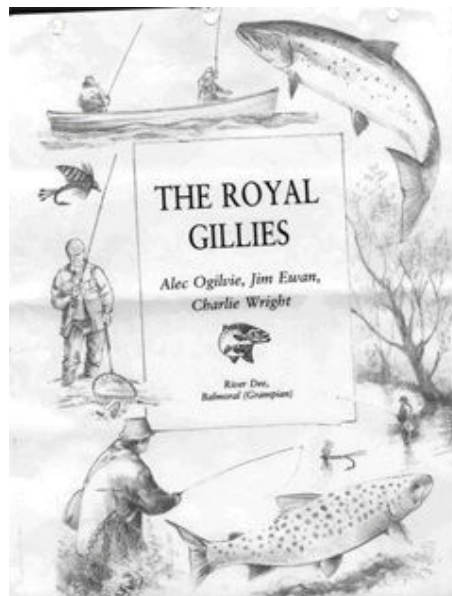
A series of characters around and about Bannockburn, Whins of Milton and Hillpark



Alex Ogilvie

Alex Ogilvie Bannockburns Royal ghillie, his story

Alex with dogs Tess and Robbie at Balmoral Estate 1985



ALEC OGLVIE

After twenty-two years in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Alec Ogilvie heard rumours that the regiment was to be disbanded. As luck would have it, just when his future looked most uncertain (the regiment was actually served in the end) he was offered what many fishermen would consider the top job in the gamefishing world: head-gillie to the Royal Family at Balmoral.

Quite spoken and respected, Alec, now fifty-seven, has been at Balmoral for over twenty years, but the regimental connection put him in the right place at the right time.

When the Royal Family arrive at Balmoral, certain regiments always come up to guard them. The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders was always one of those regiments. While the soldiers are here they also act as beater, postmen and gillies. In fact, I started as a postman and gillie, having already been on duty here with the regiment.

Depending on the season, gillies at Balmoral help with all the sport: they accompany guests to the hill and to the river. It was just about six years ago that I came off the hill and took over as head fishing-gillie.

Alec's father was a keeper in Kilsyth, but what tipped the balance in Alec's favour when the gillie's job first came up was probably the fact that he is also a piper. And these days playing the pipes is still very much a part of his duties.

I play up at the house at the gillie's' hall. Two of these are held. The first when the Queen and the rest of the Royal Family come up in September and the second at the end of October.

On many estates this tradition is the same and they will arrange a dance and a dinner for everyone who has helped with or been involved in the grouse shooting, salmon fishing or whatever. The Queen always attends the gillie's' hall here at Balmoral.

The sovereign's own piper is always at the hall, but I also play - we just wander round the tables as the guests eat and drink and then play for them when they dance. It's mostly Scottish dancing and the occasional quick-step. The Queen usually joins in!

But fishing lies at the heart of Alec's work, particularly when the Queen Mother arrives with her party of guests in May.

I gillie for her guests, but the Queen Mother is an expert and very experienced fishwoman who knows the river very well under most conditions, so she doesn't often need much help. Her guests tend to be friends and ex-employees.

Alec Ogilvie

28

THE ROYAL GILLIES

'She will stay for perhaps two or three weeks in May because that really is the best time of the year when most of the fish are caught. Like his grandfather, Prince Charles is also an expert, but then he's been coming here since he was a boy and he knows the river so well. I just help the guests while he tends to go off on his own. And he's caught some very good fish in his time.'

Traditionally the gillie has a very special place on any estate. Even where royalty is concerned the gillie is expected to tell the fisherman - or woman - where to fish and what fly to use. If they make a mistake he must put them right. 'A typical day for me starts at about nine o'clock when I meet the guests. I take them down and show them the water. I'll show them where, depending on the conditions, the fish will be lying. I'll tie on their flies and, if necessary, show them how to fish a pool down. Most importantly, of course, I help when it comes to playing a fish and netting it.'



There are three fishings at Balmoral: Abergeldy, Balmoral itself and Birkhall, where the Queen Mother fishes. The total length of river is about 10 miles and, as this is the Dee, fishing starts on 1 February and continues until the end of September. Spinning is allowed at any height of water until 1 May, but after that date it's fly only unless the river rises to what Alec calls the '2ft mark', literally a white mark on a stone by the river.

Alec also believes that the most successful fly on the river Dee is the Munro Killer, and he has himself taken a thirty-pounder on a Devon minnow. 'Working as a gillie doesn't reduce the fun of fishing for me and whenever I go down to the river I take a rod. When I caught my thirty-pounder I was using just 15lb line and I had to beach it alone - mind you even with that line I gave it some stick.'



Many people believe that the fishing at Balmoral is kept exclusively for the Royal Family. In fact much of it is let to people from all over the world. It is expensive – something that Alec didn't want to discuss – and if you want to fish in May you normally have to wait until someone dies. When that happens and a vacancy arises the fishing tends to go to those who have already been taking fishing earlier or later in the year. And there are the enormous attractions of Balmoral itself: houses on the estate are made available, for example, to some of those who come to fish. There are roughly ten pools on each beat, but some of these will be unfishable at different heights of water.

Things have changed greatly over the years and Alec has watched and helped as anglers moved from the heavy greenheart and cane rods of his early years to the ultra-light carbon and boson rods in use today. But does everyone opt for space-age materials?

'Not at all. The Queen Mother still uses a cane rod and Prince Charles uses cane and greenheart, which has a lovely soft action, although it's very heavy. In the old days everyone used 16 or 18ft greenheart rods in spite of the weight. And they did very well with them. In the thirties a forty-two-pounder was caught in Newton Pool on the Birkhall beat and many other thirty-pounders were caught then. When the Queen Mother started fishing, rod

THE ROYAL GILLIES

sections were still spliced – literally lashed together with strips of leather.'

And there have been other changes over the years. As tackle has become lighter and stronger, the numbers of fish in the river have decreased significantly.

'When I first came here the pools always seemed to be full of fish. Now deep-sea netting is not just taking hundreds of fish as we used to – it's taking hundreds of tons of fish. We bought the netting rights at the mouth of the Dee a few years ago, but of course that doesn't stop the deep-sea netting. The fish run the gamut from the Faroes to the river and then almost everywhere on the river itself.

'We occasionally get poachers here too. I once spotted a blue van driving quickly away from the river and when I got down I noticed that the water in one pool was an odd, cloudy colour. Within minutes twenty-five salmon rose dead to the surface. We had the water tested and it had been poisoned with cyanide. Most of the poaching is much less serious, however.

'I once approached a laddie who had a great big bag of trout at his feet. He was upstream fishing with a worm. I asked him if he had a permit and he said no, but he knew the keeper well. I rather liked that answer because I'd never seen him before and I was the keeper he was referring to.'

When the fishing ends in September Alec doesn't simply hang up his rods and wait for the next season. He helps feed the deer out on the hill and tends the banks of the river until the first fishermen arrive the following spring. The 1989 season was a pretty good one for Alec, with over 150 salmon landed by the middle of the year. He is now settled, he believes, for life. 'I don't think I would ever do anything else. I'm near my family and although I'm always busy on the river the job has great attractions of peace and quiet. You see an enormous amount of wildlife – I've seen everything from osiers and peregrine falcons to golden eagles – and I get the chance to live in this beautiful place just two minutes' walk from the river.'



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