

CUMBRIA CANOESTS ROYAL DEE DESCENT – 17-20 OCTOBER 2022

POST TRIP REPORT

Introduction

1. The Royal Dee is a jewel of a river, rising in the Cairngorms and flowing past Balmoral to the sea at Aberdeen. The river's watershed routinely carries less volume than that of the Tay or the Spey and so in summer conditions is characterised by shallow shingle banks for much of its course. In spring or autumn, especially after rain, the river can provide a hugely pleasant 100 km trip with enough Grade 2-3 interest to make it sufficiently challenging for those wishing to progress from moderate water. The river is closely shadowed by the A93 and an assortment of B and C class roads for most of its paddleable length, making vehicle-based inspection of the key rapids achievable (though, with a well-marked OS map, recce'ing from bank or boat can be safely achieved without the need for a pre-recce by car).

Trip Overview

2. In this trip, a group of six paddlers (Mike Sunderland [Trip Leader], Mac Knowles [Deputy Leader], John McAllister, Tony Colla, Tom Bamber and Tony Crook) set out in five boats to journey self-contained from above Braemar to the tidal waters of Aberdeen. Four were in solo boats and with the Trip Leader and Deputy Leader paddling tandem. Our objective was an enjoyable and safe 4-day/3-night trip with wild camping over Sun 17-Wed 20 Oct 22.

Access Point	Daily Distances	
Victoria Bridge (access road to Mar Lodge) at Grid NO 102895, 4 km downstream of Linn of Dee.	Day	Distance
	Day 1	17 km
Egress Point	Day 2	26 km
Small children's play park (adjacent to Aberdeen University Boat House) at Grid NJ 944051	Day 3	33 km
	Day 4	30 km

Planning

3. **River Selection.** Building on the success of last year's Spey adventure – the 2020 'capping trip' in the Cumbria Canoeist open boat calendar – there was a feeling that the 2021 climax should raise the bar one notch and seek Grade 3 water. Consultation between the two trip leaders concluded with the selection of the Dee – challenging enough but not over facing. To best guarantee water levels, a late Oct trip window was selected, and the trip was advertised across the Cumbria Canoeist network 6-months out.

4. **Organisation.** Despite the early advertisement, response numbers were low but with some cajoling crept up to a total of 8 (which was the trip's maximum). However, a fortnight before launch, two of the agreed 8 paddlers dropped out, leaving a crew of 6 (which proved very wieldy on a river of this nature and so worked perfectly). With a week to go, the team was pulled together virtually by Zoom, which provided a good opportunity to sense the mood of individuals regarding the prospect of low water paddling (the conditions that were, at that point in time, being forecast). Alternative rivers were discussed, but the mood was very much to continue with Plan A (the Dee) while being prepared to switch rivers if this proved unworkable on the ground. The decision was also

made on this Zoom call to use a commercial shuttle firm to lift the team, boats and gear from Aberdeen to the Dee put-on, thus saving much faff and time at both ends of the trip.

5. Logistics

- a. **Car Parking.** Cars were parked at Tesco's Aberdeen South at a cost of £10 per vehicle for the week, with reservations made via YourParkingSpace.co.uk. This car park was a 10 min walk from the planned egress point from the river.
- b. **Shuttle.** Highland Yaks were booked to provide the shuttle lift from Aberdeen to the put-on at Victoria Bridge. The cost of the service was £300 all in.

Execution

6. River Journal

a. Day 1

(1) On the morning of Day 1, we came from various directions to meet at Tesco's Aberdeen South car park at 0830. Tesco's was where we planned to park for the week, and it was from here that we were transported to the head of the river by the commercial shuttle firm of Highland Yaks. The shuttle upriver gave us a chance to scout the water in general and included a brief stop at one of the smaller rapids that we would tackle on Day 2.

(2) We put on at Victoria Bridge at 12 noon. The rains of the previous 24 hrs had, fortunately, swelled the river from 'low' to 'medium' and we made reasonable progress downstream. The river builds slowly with some areas of shingle and small rapids as it moves down to Braemar.

(3) Shortly after Braemar we met a Deer Fence across the river (Grid NO 149925). There was no need to portage as there was a gap near the bank on RL and a gap in the centre; it was relatively easy to negotiate without too much limbo.

(4) The river continued in the same vein with shingle banks and small rapids down to the Invercauld Bridge, at which a series of ledges create a Grade 2 rapid for some 400m; this was the site of our first swims (with, among other things, several maps being fished out downstream). The 'early baths' encouraged us to start our search for a campsite (which we found some 6 km further downriver).

b. Day 2

(1) We passed Balmoral Castle and negotiated the small and simple rapid beneath the castle's access bridge (Grid NO 262949) before cruising uneventfully along the 12 km to Ballater, calling at the campsite upstream of the town's road bridge to take lunch. After Ballater the river quickens as it passes through the relative narrows of Cambus o' May, the end of which is marked by the Cambus o' May footbridge (Grid NO 420976). We camped for the night about 1 km after the bridge.

c. Day 3

(1) A succession of small rapids led us down to Dinnet Bridge (Grid NO 461983). Here was a more notable rapid, which we inspected, though it proved straight forward enough and was successfully navigated by all. Easy water then followed for the next 7 km down to Aboyne, where we took lunch at a wayside inn (ensuring that we gave a healthy tip in recompense for the melee of squelchy footprints that we left). After Aboyne, there was a further 12 km of relatively benign water but as with most of the river at this level, a paddler needs to pay constant attention to broaching hazards lurking just below the surface; these are frequent and easily can catch out the unwary and the complacent.

(2) The signal that things were going to step up again was the appearance of Pontarch Bridge (Grid NO 608973), with a Grade 2+ fall just above it. Another few km downstream and we moved into a succession of easy rapids dispersed along a 4 km stretch of pleasantly wooded valley scenery, though we knew to keep an eye open for the approach of Cairnton Rapid (Grid NO 659956), anticipating it to be the largest water that we had so far tackled. This rapid did not disappoint and was inspected from RR.

(3) 800 m after Cairnton, we closed with Invercannie Rapid (at Grid NO 665961, adjacent to the local sewage farm). This was the trickiest rapid on the river. Shorter than Cairnton rapid, Invercannie was more demanding technically as there was a double drop comprising several long wave trains and small stoppers emanating from the right bank. The rapid was inspected in detail from RL and was shot as 2-groups-of-3 to ensure that sufficient cover was available in case rescues were needed (and to ensure that the camera could be rolling at the crucial moment). The water was thunderous here, though its bark proved more ferocious than its bite.

(4) From Invercannie, the river continued along towards Banchory with some vengeance and, despite the guidebooks implying that this stretch is devoid of rapids, there seemed to be a small surprise at every turn. One of those surprises was a notable pour-over, which flipped our tandem boat and resulted in the bottled water purchased a few hours earlier in Aboyne becoming permanent tribute to the river gods. This second swim of the day put a halt to further progress, and we camped where we swam, a stone's throw from the welcoming lights of Banchory.

d. Day 4

(1) From Banchory the river levels out with some small rapids and shingle banks as it slowly broadens towards Aberdeen and the sea. This was about a 5-hour paddle for us, with a lot of flat water the nearer we got to Aberdeen. It was made more tiresome by a quite gruelling head wind in places. Deciding that discretion is the better part of valour, we made rafted pairs of the four solo boats, achieving greater speed for less effort, and putting us back on schedule for a mid-afternoon arrival at Aberdeen. Lucky the wind dropped as we approached Aberdeen and leaving the only one hazard for us to face in the

closing mile - sculling singles and coxed fours out for Wednesday afternoon training from the University Rowing Club.

(2) The Rowing Club (Grid NJ 944051) was our planned egress point but the plethora of rowing craft pulling in and launching made this an unsavoury prospect and we moved 50 m further downstream to the small playpark adjacent to the club and alighted there on the grass. Tesco's (where our cars were parked) was a short, 10 min, walk away.

7. Water Levels. The table below shows the water levels as recorded on the various gauges on the river during our trip.

	Gauge Readings (midday water levels in metres) ¹				
	Mar Lodge	Polhollick	Woodend	Park	Garthdee
Day 1	1.08	0.64	0.68	0.99	0.84
Day 2	0.86	0.65	0.85	1.23	1.12
Day 3	0.87	0.69	0.88	1.21	1.07
Day 4	0.89	0.73	0.89	1.18	0.99

8. Wild Camping

a. There were plenty of opportunities to camp on the riverbank. We camped at:

- (1) **Night 1.** Grid NO 230931, RR in wood.
- (2) **Night 2.** Grid NO 419977, RL on grass in front of fishing hut.
- (3) **Night 3.** Grid NO 692955, RL on astride the river path, adjacent to the golf course.

b. Important in any wild camping activity is to leave no trace of one's passing. This can be a challenge when using open fires for warmth (which can be an important safety tool, especially after a swim, rather than just something merely to add ambiance to a camp). Fires were set each night using some dry kindling carried in the boats as an initial primer and were thoroughly cleared when camp was struck.

Lessons Identified/Recommendations

9. Sustain. Here is what we thought went well and should be considered for re-use on future trips:

Ser	Subject	Lesson Identified – What Went Well	Recommendation
1	River Selection	River selection was perfectly pitched for the expected target audience	Carefully consider the groups likely skill base and select accordingly
2	Date Selection	The dates selected left us free from mosquitoes, which can be a significant blight on such trips in Scotland	Mid/late Oct is a good time for this river

¹ Data courtesy of RiverApp.

3	Group Size	Group size of 6 worked very well – very wieldy on the river, while allowing 2 independent groups of 3 to form if needed	8 is the max size of group for various reasons but 6 might be the sweet spot
4	Team Zoom @ D-7	Zoom meeting 1 week out was great for initial meet & greet, discussion of alt river options & to assess levels of enthusiasm	Do this again, esp if alternatives need to be considered
5	Parking via Apps	The use of YourParkingSpace.co.uk made things simple.	Use similar again to take guesswork out of parking
6	Commercial Shuttle	The use of a commercial shuttle saved multiple hours of additional faff on Day 1 and Day 4	Always consider this slick option if it is realistically available
7	Flexible Float Plan	Specifying the daily target in terms of time not distance meant that no one should have felt under pressure to 'sprint'	Use this to create a relaxed atmosphere – but also see Para 10 Ser 2
8	Making Camp	Being off the water 1.5 hrs before last light gave sufficient time to make camp in good order before dark	Use this yardstick again, esp important when daylight is limited
9	Open Fires	Carry dry wood in boats to start a fire; build wet wood 'cradle' and light fire on top to promote drying out of wet wood	Carry dry wood plus axe (to split wood for kindling) and consider a saw
10	Daily Re-Packing	After Day 1 everyone understood how long it took them to pack up/get afloat and adjusted their get-up-time accordingly	Ask someone for an alarm call if you are a 'sound sleeper'
11	Leave No Trace	Last thing before going afloat, the camp area was swept to ensure 'no trace'	Do this as individuals for own area then as a team across the whole site
12	River Knowledge	1:50K OS maps with guidebook information & satellite imagery pasted onto the map face proved very useful; the team had a set of 10 A4 map pages of this type covering the river's length	Annotated 50K's = 'best practice', esp if the river is not well known to team; ensure that annotations can be easily read while paddling and in low light
13	Making Headway	Swapping tandem boat crew and 'paired rafting' of the solo boats on Day 4 helped to ensure timely arrival in Aberdeen; this technique is esp useful in a headwind	Know how to use a swim line or painter with a quick release knot for rafting

10. **Change/Improve.** Here is what we thought could be tweaked to make future trips better:

Ser	Subject	Lesson Identified – Change/Improve	Recommendation
1	Shared Situational Awareness	Conduct a 'river briefing' (using the maps at Para 9 Ser 12) on Day 0 or earlier so that paddlers have time to absorb and consider the information	Do as Zoom at D-1 or as a F2F on evening of Day 0
2		Without a specified distance target for each day, slower paddlers felt a worry that they were not paddling fast enough and	Consider setting a rough-order distance target each day – also see Para 9 Ser 7

		thus were holding the group back from some (unspecified) goal	
3		Some paddlers felt they did not have enough understanding of the river (overall or on a day-to-day basis) for them to contribute to the plan (eg possibility of an 'evac point' from the flat water on Day 4).	Consider 'over-offering' info as it is often easier for a group to say no to info 'over-push' than it is to ask for more
4	Team B&B	There was a strong feeling that getting together on the evening of Day 0 would have been particularly positive, esp as an opportunity to achieve some of the above shared situational awareness goals	Strongly consider a B&B get-together on the evening before Day 1
5	Water-proofing Gear	Some paddlers found that they had wet gear after immersion (capsize or swamping) as they had not waterproofed sufficiently well	Work on the premise that you will swim and prepare, pack and secure gear accordingly Ditto swamping
6		Some map cases were not waterproof, resulting in their important contents becoming unusable	
7	Securing Gear	Several items were lost during capsize as a result of not being secured	
8	Tandem Paddling	'New pairs' should take time to shakeout before tacking moderate or above water	Allocate some time pre-trip for at least a flat-water shakeout
9		The boat used on the trip for tandem paddling was a 15-footer; when loaded this offered little freeboard and so swamped easily in larger water and was of reduced use in white water rescue situations	For two adult males out camping for a week on Grade 2/3 water it is likely to be a 17-footer that is needed
10	Swim Lines	There were a variety of practices evident when it came to rigging swim lines; 'best practice' is a line each end, sufficiently long to allow an incumbent swimmer to reach the shallows and anchor themselves before the line goes taught on their capsized/swapped boat	Swim line set-up should follow 'best practice' Send out info on swim lines early to allow purchase if required
11	Self-Rescue	Some swimmers were passive, waiting to be rescued and/or abandoning their capsized boat for others to chase; in moving water environments swimmers should (in the first instance) use their swim lines to self-rescue their capsized boat – this often saves time and effort all round	Prior to launch on Day 1, spend some time discussing white water rescue drills and ensuring that swim lines are set correctly and will pay out properly

Summary

11. The group was a motley bunch with differing experiences in canoe and kayak, however, it proved a perfect collection of paddlers for this small open boat trip through the beautiful Dee Valley on good moving water - 2/3 knots on the flat water and fun/friendly

rapids between. Everyone gelled; we drank too much, talked a lot, laughed a lot and burnt a lot of driftwood - a perfect combination for an open boat trip.