

ADVENT EP 7



THE GIES RIVER

Contents

- 1 • Aim of study
- 3 • Location of Gress river
- 3 • Description of Gress river
- 5 • Historical background
- 7 • Land Raiders
- 7 • Interview 1 (with Gress resident)
- 11 • Gress Angling Association
- 13 • Interview 2 (with GAA member)
- 19 • Interview 3 (with local fisherman)
- 23 • Conclusion
- 25 • Bibliography and websites

The Gress River - a study by Andrew MacDonald EP7

For my local project, I decided to look at the Gress River, to find out a bit about its history and discover its importance to people in the village, both past and present.

I went online to look at photos and to find out some facts before interviewing three people to get a good picture of the river – in particular, I wanted to find out about the Gress Angling Association and its re-establishment and to understand how the GAA are trying to restore the river to the way it was almost a century ago, when it was full of salmon and brown trout.

I knew that my uncle was involved in the GAA and that my father was into fishing on the river (I've been fishing there with him myself beside the Black Bridge) but I needed to find out just how much the river had been part of their lives and part of the family's history before I'd appeared....





Location of Gress River, Lewis

There is another Gress River- in Liberty County, part of the Everglades in Georgia, where they get twisters, hurricanes and floods. Their weather is probably warmer than ours- but at least we don't get as much wind as them- but only just! :o

Gress River, in Lewis, begins about 8 miles northwest from Stornoway. The source of the river is Loch Ghrias and its estuary (the mouth of the river or the widest bit) is at the beach when it joins the sea.

Description of River

The river flows through the centre of North Lewis to the east coast, cutting through rock and heather. It 'rises' in Loch Ghriais and comes down through a series of pools and natural dams – getting wider as it descends and getting deeper in its stiller areas, where you can sometimes find the biggest fish. Apart from the fish that are living in it, the river is home to many insects – which then attract birds from herons that stand in the pools and lochs to the oyster catchers with their orange legs and beaks which you see at the machair end of the river. The main river systems or series of rivers in Lewis are in the famous Grimersta estate, the creed at Stornoway, Blackwater, Laxay and Gress. People say that loch fishing is the main sport on this island, but more and more people are returning to river fishing, as it is more exciting.

**The river carves its way through tough
3,000million-year-old Lewisian Gneiss rock**



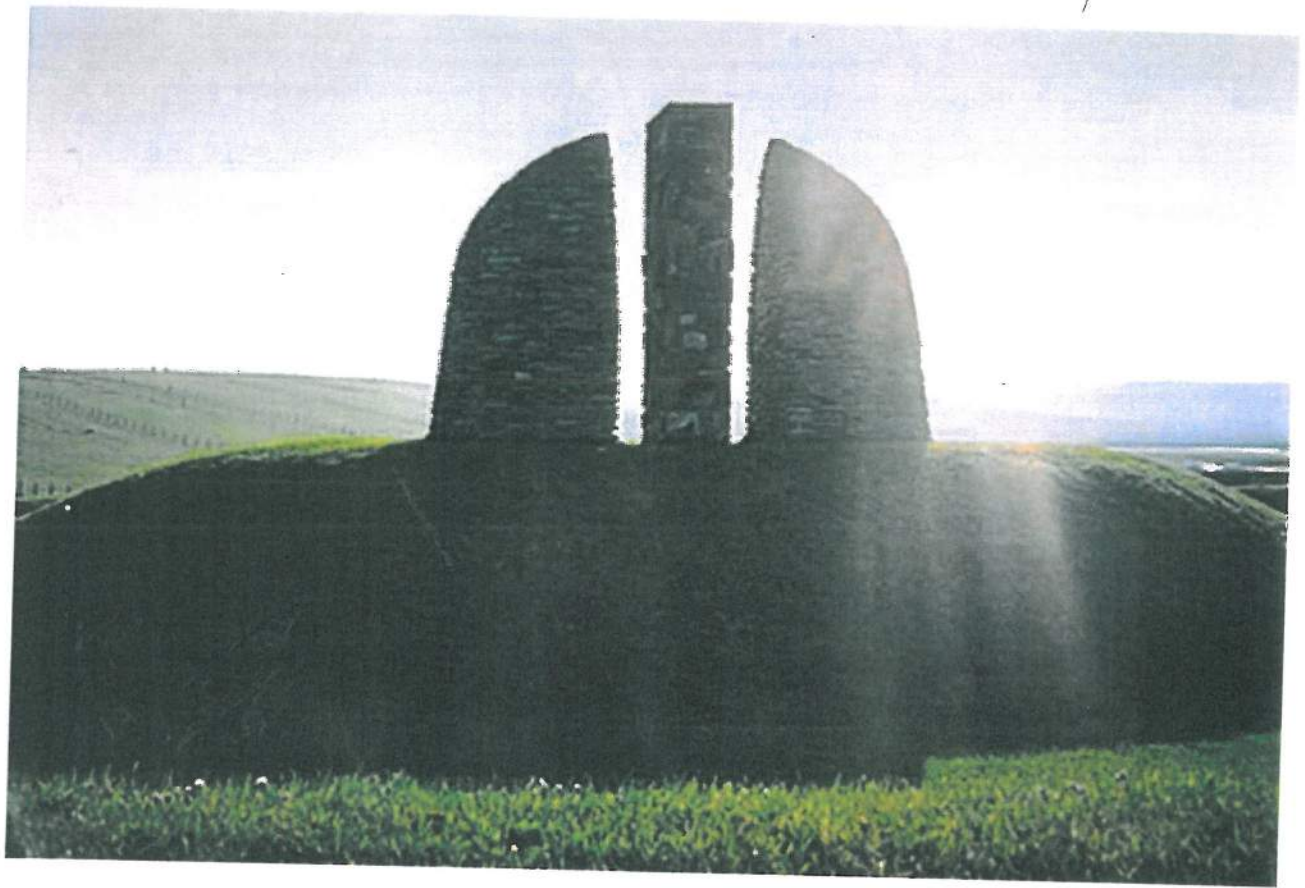
Historical Background

First mentioned in Martin Martin's 1703 'Description of the Scottish Islands, Gress River' was in Victorian times, part of the Gress Lodge Estate where rich Victorians used to come and stay, after all the hard travelling they did to get to Lewis so they could fish.

They would stay for quite a few months at the lodge, so they could get the perfect holiday and opportunity to fish and shoot seals, ducks and rabbits. They would have good guns, and strong rods, so they could catch a brown trout or salmon easily and the rod could also carry enough strength for a powerful current. In those days, as I read in The Wildfisher blog, our river was thought of as being nearly as good as the famous Grimersta – which is still really famous for salmon.

When these people stopped coming to the Lodge, numbers of ghillies went down too – so a lot more poaching happened and fish stocks went right down. Some of the poachers were sweeping the pools and lochs with gill nets which went away with everything, from the youngest fish to the oldest.

I wanted to find out how all this was turned around but first of all I decided to interview Mrs Janet MacDonald, one of the older residents in the village – and my granny! – and ask her about her memories of the river, and her thoughts about the memorial stones which stands at the river's mouth.



The Gress Land Raiders

As I said, there is a striking memorial sculpture by the artist Will MacLean commemorating the Gress Raiders, which stands at the mouth of the Gress river. They were local men who came back from WW1 and made a stand for the right to have crofts and crofting land allocated to them as had been promised, before they left the island to fight in the trenches. My great grandfather was one of them and so I spoke to his daughter (my granny) about her river memories.

Interview 1 –

When my granny and her four siblings were growing up, they weren't allowed to play beside the river. However, they did have to cross it twice a day, to and from school – and even on a Sunday, going to church. They had to stay on the bridge – but of course they would play around it whenever they could! In winter, they would sit on their school bags and slide down the banks in the snow and ice.

Summers were good then, according to my granny and before water was piped to the houses, women would make huge peat fires on the banks of the river and boil up big pans of water to wash their blankets and clothes – which would then be rinsed in the running river afterwards and stretched out on the heather to dry.

She had heard of the story that I'd read about, about the woman from Back who had drowned a long time ago trying



to cross over to Gress – and she confirmed that one of the pools near the top of the river was named Joanna's pool after her. In my granny's own memory time, in the 1950s, two little sisters drowned in the deepest part, at the rock formation known as the Chair. One of the girls fell in and the other went in after her to try to rescue her. Neither survived; their wee brother had been with them and he managed to get home on his own to let people know what had happened.

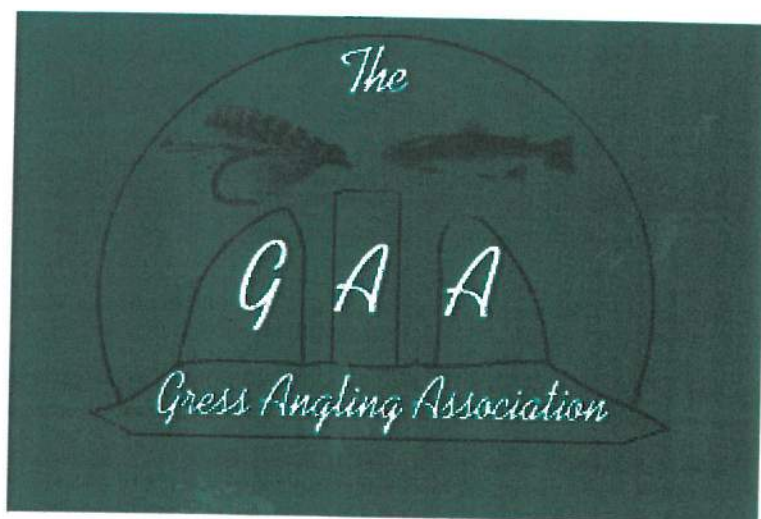
On a happier note, I asked my granny if she had eaten fish out of the river. She laughed and said, 'manys a beauty!'

I asked about the family's link with the river and she said that her four boys had learned to fish on it, as had her own two brothers. People even learned to swim in it; she went on to tell me how my uncle Alex John ('J') (more of him later!) was pulled out of the water by a Murdo Paisley as he was known – otherwise he would have drowned himself.

My granny talked more about the river when the estate was still running it and when the rich people were coming to visit at the lodge. A Mr Holmes owned the lodge then and she remembers one of the men in the village shouting after him, 'catch many geese today, Mr Holmes?'!!

The ghillies had a hut on the edge of the moor beside the river to watch for poachers; quite a few of the village men were involved in this sneaky fishing! Granny had a few more stories about that but I'd better not write them down!

When I asked her what she thought of the memorial to the riders she was actually lost for words for a moment. She



thinks it is a very good thing to commemorate these war heroes who came back and stood up to Lord Leverhume – an uncle of hers had argued for the men – and she thinks that the stone sculpture itself is a powerful reminder of those who fought for Gress ‘to the hilt’.

Where the monument stands is where the old road was and my granny remembers this area flooding quite often at high tide with people from Gress and Tolsta stranded, no buses able to get through to take them to town or to work.

I enjoyed hearing her stories about the past and began to think about how much the river must have come into her everyday life as she went over it every day on the old bridge where the Black Bridge now sits.

The Gress Angling Association

In 2003, the Gress Angling Association was restarted with the aim of restocking the waters, looking after the surrounding area and monitoring the fishing being done so that the river’s recovery could be charted. I wanted to understand why this had happened so I spoke to one of the members, Mr Alex John Macdonald – who is also my uncle J and he had some interesting stuff to tell me.



Fishing In The Hebrides

Salmon Fishing

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When To Fish
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Fishery Descriptions & Location Map

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Fishing Regulations

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Getting Here
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Gress

Location

8 miles north east of Stornoway

Summary

Five year average:- 20 salmon/grilse, 169 sea trout and 122 brown trout.

Visitor's day ticket: £10

Angling Restrictions Effective from September 1st:

NO bait fishing

ALL hen fish (both sea trout and salmon) to be released.

Spinning permitted ONLY downstream of wooden footbridge.

Description

The catchment drains an area of approximately 42 km² on the north-east coast of the Isle of Lewis.

The Gress River is seven miles from its source at Loch Ghrias to the estuary at Gress sands. A spate river with an illustrious past the Gress river fish numbers followed a slow decline over the years culminating in the collapse of fish numbers nationally in the mid seventies.

The river is now under the stewardship of The Gress Angling Association who are attempting to manage the river back toward it's known habitat sustainable stocking density. Some improvement can be seen in the fish numbers and size but this is seen as early days in terms of the river's hopeful recovery.

Season is June 1st - October 15th. Visitor's day tickets are £10.

Permits from Sportsworld, 1 - 3 Francis Street, Stornoway. Tel No: 01851 70 5464.



Catch Statistics

Salmon & Grilse

Year	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	Average	'15
June	0	0	0	0	0	0.0	0
July	2	1	0	2	0	1.0	-
August	2	8	8	18	4	8.0	-
September	11	12	5	11	0	7.8	-
October	1	6	1	7	2	3.4	-
Total	16	27	14	38	6	20.2	0

Sea Trout

Year	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	Average	'15
June	10	15	36	29	13	20.6	0
July	34	17	31	32	23	27.4	-
August	25	55	70	22	70	48.4	-
September	50	103	56	14	56	55.8	-
October	29	11	11	6	28	17.0	-
Total	148	201	204	103	190	169.2	0

Trout

Year	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	Average	'15
June	31	10	0	35	10	17.2	0
July	41	90	0	22	7	32.0	-
August	14	9	105	21	91	48.0	-
September	15	19	27	0	4	13.0	-
October	8	4	10	32	4	11.6	-
Total	109	132	142	110	116	121.8	0

How to Book

No days available online through us at this moment. There may be some later, at which point a booking link will appear here. To be automatically emailed when rods are added, please go to our [rod alert page](#)

Booking Conditions

More Pictures

Contact Details

Donnie MacIver
Tel: 01851 703434
Mobile: 07717344246 (9am to 5pm)

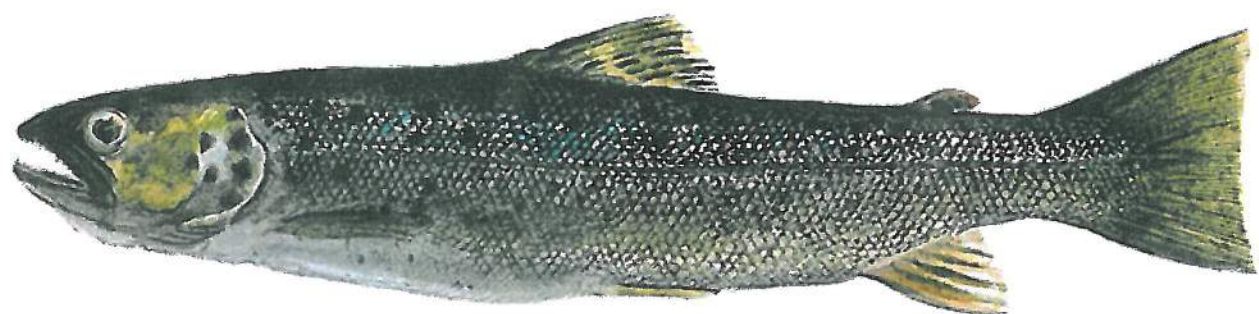


Interview 2 –

J started off our conversation by talking about the stages of the river, how it comes from a spring that formed Loch Griaies and then flows through rocky channels, very thin in places, down through five or six steps or natural dams before it widens out and starts to 'meander' across the machair area and then goes out to sea. (He also told me that if you go far enough out the peat road, you will eventually come to the old hydro dam which was built by the army – he remembers this happening when he was quite wee and he thought it was a war starting, with all these soldiers on the road!)

The GAA was first set up in the 1970s by some of the Gress men who put fish eggs into the river to try to bring back the fish that had been taken by all the uncontrolled poaching.

The river had been 'dormant', J said, overfished and not looked after. Sadly this was beginning to happen again until 2003 when the present association members became more organised. The river is not best known for salmon yet, although some have returned, but it is well known again for its sea trout. The present association want to do things right; they even have a biologist who comes to the river now to test the quality of fish. 'Electro' fishing it is called; he works for the Outer Hebrides Fisheries Trust organisation, which GAA is a supporter of, and they help angling groups to look after their rivers. This Electro fisherman looks like a fish Ghostbuster – he wears a big battery pack on his back and has two electrode probes which he puts into the water and sends out a shock which temporarily stuns the fish so that



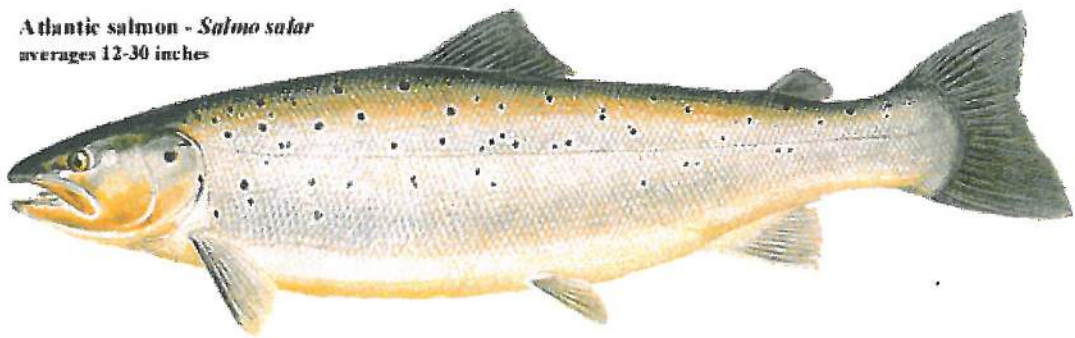
they float to the surface and he can do checks on numbers, age, male, female, healthy or not, at a few points along the length of the river. I'd like that job – zapping the fish!

When I asked J if he was pleased with the way things were going with the association, he said 'oh yes' and shook his head in disbelief. 'There's no need now to restock the river – it's restocking itself. Fish are thriving, coming back and laying eggs. We have a catch and return box in the graveyard carpark where we encourage people to tell us what they have caught and on what day. We also encourage the returning to, the water of young fish under a certain length. This is much easier to do with fly fishing. You see, if someone uses bait, the fish will swallow the bait and the hook and it is almost impossible to get the hook back out without damaging the insides of the fish, which would kill it. Fish of a good size, people can take away with them and eat but we would prefer if they fill in a permit record first so that way we can keep season records ourselves and see how things are going.'

He went on to tell me that at the moment they have 12 full members, with some children members also. A season's permit costs £20 and can be bought at Sportsworld. It used to be Gordon's shop but all the form-filling got too complicated. There are also two rowing boats that can be used up on one of the top lochs and the key to unlock them is also at Sportsworld which all involves 'a bit of trust between the association and the fishermen' as he put it.



Atlantic salmon - *Salmo salar*
averages 12-30 inches



Last season, 70 people paid to fish on the river. The family day, the catch and release day, is another good idea which is encouraging young people to keep up the sport of fishing. I went a couple of times with my father and everyone was strung out along the lower bits of the river. A big white tent was put up too – with biscuits and fruit shoots 😊 and a barbeque for anyone who caught a big enough fish!

My uncle J does think that the river now has a great future – he told me that he is seeing frogs and dragonflies along the banks as well as a good amount of fish in the water.

I think the fact that people like him are so interested and so enthusiastic about keeping the river alive and full of fish will mean that loads more people will get the chance to learn to fish and to have good catches in the Gress river.

The salmon and trout season is from June 1st to October 15th – so I spoke to another Gress fisherman (who recently came back from offshore and who is probably keen to get out with his rod) about his feelings for the river and his own experiences fishing on it – Mr Iain MacDonald aka Da!!



Interview 3 –

So my father said he has been fishing on the river ever since he was about ten, mainly catching brown trout. He said his best day's fishing there was once when he caught a 2lb sea trout with a fly he had tied himself. This fly tying interested me as I have seen his equipment for this; his magnifying glass and the special clamps along with the fine wires and the clumps of feathers. (He did some detailed drawings of the flies which are up on the wall in the porch.) He mainly uses 'wet' flies like the 'teal and black' or the 'Kate McLaren' – the flies have been given names – but Da sometimes uses unnamed versions of his own! He first tried fly-tying in 1991- he'd been offshore with a friend who had shown him the skills and the next time he was going through Inverness on the way home, he bought all the specialised equipment.

I also asked my father about the best part of the river to fish and he said, 'the Rock Pool; you have to be careful beside it. In fact, you have to be careful in all parts of the river especially when walking along the wet bank when the river is in spate and when there is rain gathering.'

I asked then his opinions of the GAA and what the organisation has done for the village. He replied, 'When people got together, headed by 'Swannie' (John MacDonald), the GAA gave a new lease of life to the river – their support has given fishing back to the young local people.' They also make sure that the river is well-maintained and this has regenerated the Gress river fish and all the other living creatures along the river's banks, on the moor or on the



machair. This was similar to what my uncle had felt too about the positive feelings about the river these days.

Then my father surprised me a bit with two more facts. 'In 2008,' he said, 'I was commissioned by John 'Swannie' Macdonald to produce a trophy which would be presented annually to the season's first salmon catch.' He showed me a photo of a dramatic design. 'The trophy has a resin cast of the raiders' memorial set on two marble blocks finished on an oak base.'

So not only was my father asked to make a trophy for the GAA, but he then used the amazing stone sculpture as his inspiration. No wonder my family likes this river, I was thinking, when he gave me his second fact. 'Incidentally, I assisted master stonemason Jim Crawford in the building of part of the stonework in the memorial.' !!!!! I knew my father had worked on the blackhouses over in Carloway, but I didn't know he'd helped with the Raiders' monument.

He must feel very proud of that. I know I do now.





In conclusion

Based on my reading and research and on my interviews, I feel I know the river a bit better and understand its place in the village a bit better too. I can see that the river is doing well – with fish being caught by Gress residents, GAA members, fishermen from all over the island and by visitors who buy permits and come to fish.

I've also learned that a clean river helps its surrounding ecosystem, allowing plants to grow (some rare ones, like the purple orchid) and helping insects and birds to find food and shelter. Another two more rare species that can be found in Gress are tiger moths (the big furry caterpillars) and the corncrake with its creaky call. The river helps water the moor and the machair and provides water for cattle and sheep on the common grazing. In the past, people got their water from the river and the river still helps the village by bringing visitors to the area – as well as giving us the odd tasty tea!

My own family, as you have read, have strong ties to the Gress river with my granny bringing up four boys to love fishing, which they have passed on to their children. Her own childhood was full of river memories and games, her relations fought for the right to build a crofthouse almost right beside it; one son is part of the GAA and helping to look after it while the other continues to fish on it, having helped create the memorial and making the smaller memorial of his own on the fishing trophy.

PS ...I hope to be a good fisherman one day like my father and uncle.

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