

History of Bon-Accord Club

In 1865 a number of young men, residing in the Hardgate, met at the riverside beside the Old Bridge of Dee and discussed the idea of forming a swimming club, the membership to be confined to young men in the district.

The idea was carried out and amongst the first members to enrol were the brothers Peter, Allan and John Burleigh, brothers Frank and George 'Doie' Davidson, William Cooper, William Walker (well known consulting engineer), Willie "Moosie" Sutherland, J. Watson (tailor, Bridge of Dee), Archie Macdonald, William Milne (who was the Club's first secretary), John Thomson (last survivor of the founders, d. 1930) and a few others. It was agreed to call it the *Dee Swimming Club* due to the fact that all their practise and racing would be done in the River Dee, there being no swimming baths at the time.

Two of those first members, Willie Walker and Willie 'Moosie' Sutherland were members of the Bon-Accord Club which had been started in the town some three years previous, and they joined the new organisation to assist and encourage the venture. They, however, had to sever their membership because the Bon-Accord framed a rule to the effect that no one could be a member of more than one club in the same district. Nevertheless they took a very keen interest in the Dee Swimming Club and had the satisfaction of seeing its members winning the foremost places in all the national championships.

In the first week of October 1875, Willie Sutherland took part in the back swimming and distance diving championships of Scotland, which were held under the auspices of the Paisley Club in the Storie Street Baths, Paisley. So great was the interest in this meeting that the place was packed almost to suffocation long before the advertised time for commencing proceedings in the water. The competitors appeared and received a great ovation, but when they took to the water a startling incident occurred, as one by one the swimmers ('Moosie' included) had to leave the water, being nearly choked through chloride of lime having got into the water. The fumes rose among the spectators, several of whom were nearly suffocated. The gala had to be postponed for two weeks. The second time everything went off all right. Sutherland was accompanied by his bosom friend, Willie Walker, who had entered for the plunging competition. 'Moosie' annexed first prize in the distance diving, traversing 205 feet in one dive, and thus became Scottish champion in distance diving. Willie Walker had hard lines, as he was defeated only by inches for first place.

The late 'Moosie' Sutherland was undoubtedly the 'prince of swimmers' in Aberdeen, his noble work in saving life being unequalled by anyone at the present day. During his relatively short lifetime, he died aged 42 years on 20th September 1886, he had saved well over 100 lives from drowning. His last important race was the first ever Dee to Don swim in August 1886 in which members of both the Bon-Accord and Dee Clubs took part. 'Moosie' finished first.

Willie Sutherland was a very popular character and he received an award from Lord Provost Leslie in December 1871 as a result of his heroic rescues at the sea beach. The presentation took place in the Court House in Hay's Athenæum, which was being used at that time by the council whilst the Municipal Buildings were under construction.

The following persons were saved by Willie Sutherland in his first year of his appointment as Rescue in 1871: -

On May 23, a young gentleman; July 8, two boys; July 15, a gentleman; July 31, two young gentlemen; August 3, two young ladies, August 9, a young man; August 16, a young man; August 22, a boy; and September 1, two gentlemen.

In the course of his speech the Lord Provost went on to say: -

"I may also mention that Mr Sutherland has been the means of rescuing persons from drowning before these already mentioned. He saved two young men from being drowned in Walker's Dam, Rubislaw, in the year 1867, and three lads in the River Dee in the years 1861 and 1863. The Bon-Accord Swimming Club of this city at the time recorded their in their minutes expressions of praise to Mr Sutherland, and further desired to mark his services in some tangible manner, but were unable to do so from the want of funds. Mr Sutherland has ever given valuable assistance in teaching the youths of our city the self-preserving art of swimming. He has laboured carefully and diligently along with his brother swimmers in promoting its interests to the utmost of his power.

As a swimmer and diver Mr Sutherland has few rivals. The champion swimmer of Scotland (Mr Reid of Glasgow) last year came to this city to try the skill and abilities he was possessed of. Mr Sutherland unhesitatingly, and in his usual unostentatious manner, gave the champion an opportunity of testing his swimming powers – and the result was that Mr Reid was fairly and honestly defeated in a swimming race with our hero. Mr Sutherland was then hailed as champion of Scotland. Since that time Mr Sutherland has seldom engaged in competitions, as his position as Rescue at the Sea Beach required his more immediate attention. His past services there have called forth warm feeling and of admiration and appreciation from all classes of the inhabitants of Aberdeen and those strangers who attended our excellent Bathing Station during the past summer. It is with great pride that the bathers of Aberdeen can look to so clean a sheet of casualties as this year presents. They are thankful for God's gracious dealings in sparing them the heart-rending scenes of drowning and of protecting him who we honour tonight for his praiseworthy conduct. In the discharge of his duties Mr Sutherland has truly done his duty honestly and bravely, and we now present to him a token of our love."

The presentation consisted of a lifebuoy medal with inscription and purse with 25 sovereigns, which was subscribed by all the classes of the community. The medal was of considerable size. It was in the form of a 'lifebuoy' with lifeboat above, with a gold centrepiece, which bore the inscription: -

'Presented to William Sutherland, along with a purse of 25 sovereigns, by Lord Provost Leslie on behalf of bathers and friends in appreciation of his valuable services in saving the lives of 13 persons while Rescue. December, 1871.'

On the obverse side was a representation of the Beach in time of storm, and the words, 'Rescue, Aberdeen'.

It is worthy of note that the Bon-Accord Swimming Club and Humane Society (known as the Bons) was the first properly constituted (26th April 1862) swimming club in Britain and was formed by a number of young men residing in the Holburn and Chapel Street districts. Archie McFarlane (d. 1906 aged 80), Rescue at Aberdeen Sea Beach 1846 - 1870, was giving a few young lads swimming lessons and he suggested that they form a swimming club in Aberdeen. They held their first meeting in the school at Little Belmont Street. Amongst those present were Archie McFarlane, Daniel Jack, 'Moosie' Sutherland, John Baillie, William Walker, Alexander Spark, Archie McDonald and Tom Douglas. For a number of years they practised and held their competitions at a part of the river called the Pottie-o-Dee. The Pottie was a fine natural open pond with splendid banks from which the swimmers practised diving. There was a small island in the centre of the Pottie, upon which the Bon-Accord erected their first clubhouse for stripping accommodation. This pavilion, however, could only be used when the tide was down a few feet, as at high water the place was always flooded.

Archie McFarlane had been awarded a lifebuoy medal, like the one 'Moosie' Sutherland received, in the middle of the 1860's. A large party of Aberdeen University students were bathing in the sea when there was a nasty cross-sea running. All went smoothly for a time until the cry went up that seven of the bathers were in difficulties, and were being rapidly carried out to sea. In an instant McFarlane had stripped, and was swimming fast to the rescue. He soon got alongside the bathers, and he rescued one after the other until he had brought out five of them. So overcome was he with exhaustion in bringing the five youths safely to land that he collapsed at the water's edge in going out for the other two, who by this time had drowned. He received great praise from the citizens of Aberdeen for his brave deed, and at a public meeting Mr John Farley MP made the presentation to Archie for his heroic rescue.

In August 1873 the Bon-Accord Club instituted the quarter-mile championship of Scotland, which was swum in the Dee and won by Willie Ross, Captain of the Bon-Accord, in the inaugural year. It must be said that there were over six 'quarter-mile championships of Scotland' being raced, the rest being based in Glasgow and some of them were handicap races. This race eventually became the North of Scotland championship.

The Bon-Accord Swimming Club celebrated their 120th Anniversary at the Crescent Hotel on 24th April 1982. In the 1990's they amalgamated with Thistle Ladies, and became the Bon-Accord Thistle ASC.

At the first meeting it was decided that the Dee Swimming Club's colours should be blue swimming pants with white facings, to be distinct from the Bons colours of red and white.

For a few years the Club practised and held their competitions at a part of the river above the Old Bridge called The Rush, and they always went in on the South side of the river near to where Victoria Bridge now stands. It was here that the name of Peter Burleigh began to reach the Bon-Accord members in the town, the Hardgate then being considered outside Aberdeen. The membership rapidly increased and it was found necessary to move to a more suitable part of the river, and for a number of years the competitions were swum off at what was known as Scrapahard, a fine stretch of water

beside where Duthie Park now stands. It was during this period that the Club really came to the front and forced the Bon-Accord Club members to look at their laurels as some of the Club's best swimmers challenged the supremacy of their rivals. Peter Burleigh was undoubtedly the Club's best champion, and he had many a tussle with the Bon-Accord cracks over all distances, and he was always in a front place at all open matches.

The old Crooked Lane Baths which stood at the corner with St. Andrew Street was the first baths to be opened in Aberdeen on 17th March 1851. It provided only hot baths at the outset, having space allotted for a swimming pool but not the funds to provide it. The pool, 46 feet x 26 feet, was eventually installed in 1869 following a face-lift and thus the Crooked Lane Pond became the first place where swimming could be practised during the winter.

Practise was transferred to new baths, that were built by the Aberdeen Swimming Bath Company, in Constitution Street, and opened in August 1887. These baths measured 75 feet x 30 feet, being 8 feet at the deep end tapering to 4 feet at the other, and held 72,050 gallons of water.

Practise followed to the Corporation Baths at the beach, which opened in 1898, and latterly at the Bon-Accord Baths, which opened 1940.

The Crooked Lane Baths was eventually closed down and the building used by Waverley Press.

The Constitution Street Baths was eventually closed down and the building turned into a tram depot.

The Beach Baths were closed in 1972 because the building was declared structurally unsafe, and subsequently demolished.

Saturday, 29th August 1874.

TODAY'S CHAMPION SWIMMING MATCH ON THE DEE

This interesting match, under the auspices of the Bon-Accord Swimming Club, which will come of this afternoon, promises to be a success. The following are the names of those who have entered the competition, with the colour of their caps: -

R. A. Robertson, West of Scotland Swimming Club, Glasgow.....	Green.
Peter McQueen, Glasgow.....	White with blue trimming.
James Cooper, Dundee.....	Blue with white check.
Richard McLaren, Dundee.....	White with blue edge.
J. Mowat, Capt. of Dee Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	Blue and white.
Wm. Burnett, Dee Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	White.
Wm. Sutherland, Bon-Accord Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	Black.
John Mitchell, Bon-Accord Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	Red, white and blue.
John Ross, Bon-Accord Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	Red and black.
James Hamilton, Bon-Accord Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	Red.
James Tait, Capt. of Bon-Accord Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	Black and yellow.
William Ross, Bon-Accord Swimming Club, Aberdeen.....	Red and white.

(present champion of Scotland)

A report on the race: -

CHAMPIONSHIP SWIMMING MATCH – The annual swimming match, under the auspices of the Bon-Accord Swimming Club, for the championship of Scotland, came off on the Dee on Saturday afternoon. Notwithstanding the wet nature of the afternoon there was an exceedingly large turn-out of spectators – probably from 4000 to 5000 – who were present and witnessed the match. Altogether eleven swimmers entered the water, three of whom were strangers – one from Glasgow and two from Dundee. The start was not the best. All having entered the water, Peter McQueen, Glasgow, who seemed to be a strong swimmer, quietly took the lead and

managed to keep it for a very considerable distance, swimming overhand. Before halfway, however, had been reached, a point where the match grew exciting, as most of the swimmers were close together, the white cap of William Burnett had smoothly passed, first the red white and blue cap of John Mitchell, then the red cap of James Hamilton, and was now coolly sliding before McQueen, who soon lost ground altogether. From about the point mentioned to the end of the stipulated 440 yards, the position of the swimmers was pretty much the same, as the result of the race shows. Burnett has a good first, being in advance of Hamilton two yards, or nearly so, whilst the distance between Hamilton and Mitchell was about one yard. William Ross, last years' champion, even taking into account his bad start (he being either second or third from the last party to spring) was not swimming at all satisfactorily. The respective positions of the prizemen were as follows: - first prize (a handsome silver cup and £4), Wm. Burnett, Dee Club; second prize (£2 2s), James Hamilton, Bon-Accord Club; third prize (£1 1s), John Mitchell, Bon-Accord Club; fourth prize (15s), Jas, Tait, Captain, Bon-Accord Club; fifth prize (10s), James Cooper, Dundee.

The course for the championship race was from the wooden bridge in line of Market Street, down stream to within a short distance of the ferryboat station.

When Captain Webb swam the English Channel on 24th August 1875, the Bon-Accord and Dee Swimming Clubs were the first to send congratulations to the hero.

On 5th April 1876, 32 lives were lost in the Torry ferry-boat disaster. It was a public holiday and hundreds of people from Aberdeen took advantage of the good weather by going to a funfair in Torry. At the end of the day, everyone clamoured to get on board the ferry over the River Dee to go home. In a boat designed to carry 40, at least 77 people managed to clamber on board. But while crossing the water, the ferryboat tipped over and all the passengers fell into the fast-running current. There are differing opinions as to why the accident happened. Some said when the boat hit the current it cantered and water came in, with the passengers running to the other side which made the rocking worse. Others said it was the slackening of a rope on the Torry side of the river that caused the boat to rock. The tragedy was watched by hundreds of people on both shores. One of the problems highlighted by the Government Board of Trade inquiry into the Dee disaster was that the boat, which had a wire line used to pull the vessel from shore to shore, was the wrong type for the area. The boat, a 25 foot-long substantially-built flat-bottomed vessel, was built by Aberdeen shipbuilders, Alexander Hall and Company, and had only been in service two months. Before the ferryboat was constructed, local fishermen had warned it was the wrong type of ferry for the area, because of the fast and strong currents. However, it was decided the ferryboat was the best – and cheaper – option compared to a bridge. The Government inquiry criticised the role of the police, and mentioned the over-laden boat, the spate of the river and the poorly spliced rope. The outcome of the inquiry prompted the construction of a stone and lime bridge – the Victoria Bridge, which still stands today.

A great swimming entertainment on behalf of the Torry Boat Disaster Fund was carried through that November in the old Crooked Lane Baths by members of the Bon-Accord and Dee Clubs. Two outstanding events were accomplished that evening; one of the earliest games ever of water polo, then known as aquatic football, was played, and 'Moosie' Sutherland stayed under water for 3min 45sec. The polo game aroused great excitement as the Bon-Accord had the strongest aquatic members at the time, and their supporters could not believe it possible for the Dee Swimming Club to beat them. The Dee team was faster on the ball and Willie Burnett scored the only goal of the match. The occasion swelled the fund by £4/13/1.

Saturday, 23rd September 1876: -

SWIMMING GALA IN ABERDEEN

A new variety of the aquatic entertainment, a "swimming gala," took place in the pond at the Crooked Lane Baths last night, under the auspices of the Bon-Accord Club. For the benefit of the uninitiated it may be explained that the difference between a swimming gala and an aquatic entertainment to the professional mind is that there is less variety of feats at the first than at the other, and last night this distinction was made painfully apparent to the onlookers by the somewhat dull uniformity and similarity of the display. The depression in this respect was not improved by the stifling atmosphere which prevailed in the building. The steam which rose

from the heated water in the pond, combined with the breaths of those present, tended to make the air at least somewhat uncomfortably "stuffy," while the accommodation for the onlookers round the edge of the water was limited to such an extent that it was almost impossible for one to move in any direction. The performance commenced with a competition amongst boys who had been trained by the members of the club during the past season. Seventeen youngsters entered, and three heats were swum. The distance was two lengths of the pond, or thirty yards, and the prizes consisted of handsome volumes. The prize winners were 1. Chas Geddes; 2 and 3 (ties) John Emslie and George Buchan; 4 James Buckner; 5 Wm. Milne; 6 George Stalker. The principal event of the evening was a handicap match for all comers, in which eighteen competitors contested. The distance was $13\frac{3}{4}$ lengths of the pond or 200 yards, and the swimmers were divided into four preliminary heats, which resulted as follows for the first pair in each contest: - 1st Heat - 1. George Robertson (3 lengths start); 2. William Durward (1 length). 2nd Heat - 1 Frank Davidson ($1\frac{3}{4}$ lengths); 2. John McKay ($\frac{3}{4}$ length). 3rd Heat - 1. James Robertson (1 length); 2 James Tait ($1\frac{1}{2}$ lengths). 4th Heat - 1. John Leys ($1\frac{1}{2}$ lengths); 2 Alexander Dawson ($2\frac{1}{2}$ lengths). These swimmers again took part in two intermediate heats, when the following were the positions of the competitors: - 1st Heat - 1. Frank Davidson; 2 Wm Durward; 3 G. Robertson. 2nd Heat - 1 Jas. Tait; 2 J. Robertson; 3 Alexander Dawson. In order to avoid two final heats the last man in each of the lists agreed to divide the fifth prize. The four remaining antagonists had a tough struggle for places, and they all came in remarkably close together at the finish. The order of the final was as follows: - 1 James Robertson (Dee Club); 2 Frank Davidson (Dee Club); 3 William Durward (Bon-Accord); 4 James Tait (Bon-Accord). George Robertson and Alexander Dawson, the pair who did not swim, both belong to the Bon-Accord Club. The starts in the second and final heats were the same as the competitors were allowed in the first. The first and second prizes were silver medals, the third and fourth prizes Maltese crosses, and the fifth a handsome volume. An amusing feature of the programme was a "tug-of-war" between four married and four single members of the Bon-Accord Club. The opposing teams got themselves "harnessed" to the two end of a rope in the water, and on the signal being given they began to swim and struggle in opposite directions. In the first tussle the "singles" succeeded in dragging their opponents to the end, but in the second trial the position was reversed very summarily, the "married warriors," by a desperate struggle, pulling the representatives of celibacy to the end without any difficulty. A clever trapeze performance by Robert Garrow and James Maitland, two members of the Bon-Accord Club, and a number of well-executed aquatic feats by Mr William Sutherland, the beach "Rescue," were very much appreciated. The arrangements were very satisfactorily carried out under the superintendence of Mr James Tait, the secretary of the Bon-Accord Club.

Towards the end of the 1870's and the beginning of the 1880's, both the Dee Swimming Club and the Bon-Accord Club had several remarkable distance swimmers in their ranks, and by way of keeping up the enthusiasm, several long distance races were instituted by the Bon-Accord Club, amongst the principal being a two-mile scratch race which was swum in the Dee. This race in 1878 created considerable excitement throughout the North, as fully 30,000 spectators watched the contest with keen interest. Jim Robertson won the race for the Dee Club.