

A C Harrison – CPS members recall

What is most telling in recording AC's gentle, empathetic, helpful and generous nature is the way he calmed the nervousness of teenagers who approached him in the hope of becoming a CPS member, a process they initially found intimidating.

John Taunton-Clark, now living in New Zealand, was signed up by his late father when he was nine and later served on the CPS committee with A C Harrison. His father must have been one of the first members to join A C's nascent organisation in the late 1940's:

John Taunton-Clark

As a youngster, one of the great pleasures of visiting the clubrooms was putting our catch returns up on the boards and, even better, talking to ACH about our efforts and catches. He always seemed genuinely interested in what we had been doing and was unfailingly kind and encouraging to a 10-year-old who was fascinated by fish and fishing. He was always happy to share his considerable knowledge and, no matter how many questions I had, he took the time to answer them.

One particular incident has always stayed with me because it summed up the sort of man ACH was.

I had caught an unusual fish at Wemmershoek Dam and, being something of a fish nerd even at that age, immediately identified it as a tiger trout. During the usual gathering of the "gents" for sundowners after the gates had closed, however, the general consensus was that I was wrong. They were adamant that my fish was simply a brown trout. On the Monday, I took the fish to ACH.

He examined it and confirmed that I had indeed caught a tiger trout. He told us that only 50 tiger trout had been stocked some years previously and that mine was only the second one known to have been caught.

What has remained with me all these years is not simply that I had correctly identified the fish. It was that ACH never dismissed the opinion of a 10-year-old simply because he was a child. He listened, took me seriously, examined the evidence and confirmed what I had thought from the beginning. For a youngster passionate about fish, that meant a great deal.

ACH was also closely associated with the club journal, *Piscator*, which he edited for many years from 1947 to 1980, the year of his death.

He made a point of including catch reports that were particularly unusual or substantial. On one occasion I caught several witvis on fly in the canal at Voëlvlei. ACH duly recorded the event in *Piscator*, describing it rather wonderfully as a "witvis party".

I knew ACH for many years, and as I grew from that fish-obsessed youngster into adulthood, his friendly and generous manner never changed. A chat with ACH was always one of the highlights of a visit to the clubrooms. His passing left a substantial void.

His contribution, of course, went far beyond encouraging youngsters such as myself. ACH was involved in freshwater biology and conservation in the Cape, providing advice to Cape Nature Conservation and the Jonkershoek hatchery during the early years. In 1960, he was awarded an honorary MSc by the University of Cape Town in recognition of his lifelong contribution to freshwater biology and conservation. South Africa's prolific mayfly species *Baetis harrisoni* was named in his honour.

He was also involved in the introduction of bass and bluegill into South African waters during the 1920s and 1930s. With today's

understanding of introduced species, some may understandably view those actions differently.

Nevertheless, they were undertaken in a very different era, by people who saw enormous potential in developing recreational fishing in South Africa. The bass fishing that resulted in parts of the country is now regarded as world class.

Those of us who have enjoyed trout and bass fishing in the Cape therefore owe a considerable debt of gratitude to ACH and to the other early pioneers who recognised that potential and devoted so much of their lives to developing it.

But when I think of ACH, it is not really the honours, scientific contributions or achievements that first come to mind.

I remember the man who would listen seriously to a 10-year-old talking excitedly about a strange fish he had caught. I remember someone who was generous with his knowledge, encouraging of a youngster's enthusiasm and always interested in what we had discovered on the water.

Some people make a lasting impression on one's life.

ACH was certainly one of those people.

Mike Somerville – New Zealand resident

When I was 12 years old, I used to travel by train to Sandvlei to catch harders (*Chelon richardsonii*) on bread. One day, my dad picked me up from the station with a trailer in tow. He had just bought a sailing dinghy from Graeme Greathead, who happened to be a keen trout fisherman.

I was fascinated. Until then, trout fishing was something I had only read about, and I bombarded Graeme with hundreds of questions. With great patience, he gave me the name and address of the CPS,

along with an Abu Solar spinner. I still have that spinner today, some 50 years later.

As soon as my school schedule allowed, I set off for the CPS address with great excitement. I remember being somewhat taken aback by the old lift and, with a little trepidation, eventually making my way to the clubroom. I opened the door and was met by an old gentleman staring at me over the top of his glasses.

To a nervous 12-year-old, he was an imposing figure. I somewhat hesitantly explained who I was and why I had come.

That gentleman was AC Harrison.

Any nervousness quickly disappeared. AC was warm, patient and welcoming. He spoke to me about the club, helped me through the process of joining, and then took the time to guide me through the library, helping me find what he considered the best basic book for a beginner fly fisherman.

It may have seemed like a small act of kindness to him at the time, but for me it was the beginning of something that would shape much of my life.

Fly-fishing became a lifelong passion. It was instrumental in my eventual move to New Zealand and has taken me to beautiful, and sometimes exotic, places around the world. It has consumed considerably more time and money than I would probably care to admit, but it has also brought me enormous pleasure and, perhaps most importantly, introduced me to wonderful people who have become close and lifelong friends.

Looking back after all these years, I often think about that first visit to the CPS clubroom and the kindness AC showed a nervous young boy who had arrived knowing little more than that he desperately wanted to learn about trout fishing.

I firmly believe that had ACH not treated me with such patience, warmth and encouragement that day, that nervous 12-year-old might simply have scurried home and never discovered the lifelong pleasure of fly fishing.

And perhaps, 50 years later, I would still be down at Sandvlei, chasing harders (mullet) with a piece of bread.

For something that has given me so much throughout my life, I owe its beginning, in no small part, to AC Harrison. I remember him with great fondness and enduring gratitude.

Malcolm Johnson – CPS member

Malcolm joined the CPS aged 20 after completing his military service 60 years ago. He still recalls the gentle kindness of A C Harrison, the revered, pipe-smoking founder of the Society, who was awarded an honorary Master of Science (MSc) degree (honoris causa) by the University of Cape Town in June 1960.

I remember visiting the small office which smelt like pipe tobacco. I sat at a table with Mr Harrison and he told me the long history of the CPS and how they were encouraging young members. He gave me a small book '*Fresh Water Fishing in the Cape*' which I still have. He was very kind and explained the system of telling somebody when you went fishing on your own. He gave me some catch return cards, which the CPS asked you to complete on the day's fishing, the venue, the size of fish and I think length. I joined the Society as a junior member and paid something like R10.00. I did not visit the club room often but, on later visits, he gave me a book '*Introducing Fly Fishing in the South Africa*' by John Beams.

Campbell Lyons – CPS member

Although I never met A C Harrison, my dear friend, the late Tony Biggs, inventor of the RAB, knew AC well and spent a lot of time with him during many visits to the Cape Piscatorial Society office.

Tony told me how he first joined the CPS and met AC.

He said AC was very accommodating and friendly during his first visit and suggested that he fish the Holsloot in the spring as it was more stable than the other streams after winter.

Tony drew a blank on the Holsloot on his first outing, but later on his second attempt on the Berg River at Franschhoek, he caught his first trout on a wet fly, drifted downstream and swung under a bridge.

Tony never referred to AC Harrison by his full name, just AC.

He told me that AC, when he wasn't fixing broken typewriters or dealing with CPS matters, used to go to the Stuttafords store for lunch because he enjoyed the tinkling of the piano during his midday meal.

Tony was very fond of AC