

Early days on the Cape streams

by Peter Arderne

My trout fishing started on the Liesbeek. Not that I caught my first trout there, but this was one of the two Peninsula streams where I spent many of my early days.

Soon after the end of the Second World War my father resigned from the army and returned to Cape Town to start a poultry farm. So the early fifties found the Arderne family on a small farm at the Tokai end of Constantia where Dad built his chicken houses amid the wind-swept vineyards. The Constantia of those days was a far cry from the opulent and leafy suburb of the nineties. The winds howled from both North and South and sand piled up against the doors of our new home.

Dad was also a rock fisherman of some repute having been brought up on the shores of False Bay. As a small boy I often accompanied him and my uncles on their trips to Rooi Els and Hermanus where I was usually placed on the safe reaches of some gully to try for hottentot and dassie while the adults braved the more exposed rocks for red steenbras, musselcracker and the very popular galjoen. Sadly rock fishing was already in a decline, particularly in the more popular spots. With farming and yachting taking up more of Dad's time I found myself at Kalk Bay harbour and the pier at Simons Town which were deemed safe for me, but this was hardly exciting.

Schooling meant a long trip to Rondebosch and we were fortunate to have a neighbour, a part-time farmer, who was also an accountant at the Schweppes factory at Newlands. He was kind enough to give several Constantia youngsters a lift to the factory from where we walked to Rondebosch station and up to school. The most interesting section of this hike was the first 150 metres where a path from the factory ran along the side of the Liesbeek River to the Rouwkoop Road bridge. The river here was more or less in its original state and a very attractive playground for small boys with about 20 minutes to spare, providing the remaining mile or so was run to beat the prep school bell. Much time was spent erecting diversions or pebble dams in the streambed with fairly regular confrontations with pupils from the neighbouring school who would mount surprise attacks on our work party, either wrecking our dams or hurling our shoes into the river.

It must have been about April of 1951. The river was running strongly after the first spate of autumn and we were hastily putting on our shoes for the final dash to school when I saw something move gently downstream towards where I was sitting. Although the City Council was trying its best to clean up the stream and control pollution this fish was obviously in distress. As it moved towards the bank below me I was able to observe at close quarters what I presumed to be a rainbow trout, all green and silver with a very pronounced lateral red band. As I bent down to try and grab it, it suddenly recovered enough to turn and dart across to a deep run under the roots of an oak and that was the last I saw of it. But the spell had been cast and I was now determined to try my hand at trout fishing as soon as I could get tackle and licence together.

Before I could proceed with this plan I was told that the season had ended and that I would have to wait for the magical September 1st when the new season opened. This was just as

well as most eleven-year-olds in those days hardly had the funds to acquire tackle at short notice. Fortunately for me, my maternal grandfather was an Irishman who had brought his boyhood tackle with him from County Cork and it now lay unused in the attic of the old house on Wynberg Hill. This I knew as the attic was frequently visited by the grandchildren, but none of us had had the courage to ask whether we could possibly acquire it as the old man was a formidable character and we were much in awe of him. After intercession by my mother, grandfather agreed that, providing I cleared the tennis court of acorns, I could take his tackle. My joy was somewhat shortlived when close inspection revealed that the greenheart was in a state of considerable decay and the old silk line was in a similar condition. There were some slightly moth-eaten flies, mainly March Brown, but these looked quite usable, although the catgut was definitely beyond redemption.

At least I had the whole winter to effect repairs, and with considerable binding, varnishing and a bit of shortening the rod looked almost passable. The silk line was definitely in a dubious state, but as I did not expect to catch anything over a pound it was pronounced satisfactory for the time being. Pocket money paid for some of the newfangled nylon, which had in any case replaced gut, plus a CPA licence for the 1951/2 season. As the winter drew to an end I had read everything about trout fishing I could get my hands on in the local library, which was not much as Capetonians were in the main unimpressed with the sport. It appeared to be something that the right sort of Englishmen did on chalkstreams, and for mere colonials the place to be was Natal where the Mooi River had a reputation of being nearly up to British standards. None of my classmates had ever tried trout fishing and when I ventured that the Liesbeek was to be my fishing venue this was met with everything from mirth to outright derision. On the other hand, my mother had read a report in the Cape Times that trout had been stocked in the river and had bred; and in fact quite a few had actually been caught with some rumours of really big fish in the lake down at Observatory.

The school rugby season only ended in mid-September. As I was not terribly good, being slight of build, I would have gladly missed the last games, but one had to be virtually paraplegic to be excused. So the first Saturday of September was spent being pounded by larger boys from Belville or Parow, but at least Sunday was clear and the early morning found me riding my bike in the direction of Newlands. The rod was strapped to the frame between my legs with the fishing bag and sandwiches safely on the rear carrier. At the Paradise Road bridge I turned up Riverside Road and halfway up pulled the bike under some bushes. The stream was flowing strongly with a noticeable peat stain typical of many Western Cape streams in high water. Having assembled my tackle, such as it was, I set forth with high anticipation of landing my first trout, which I had solemnly promised the family would be available for the evening meal.

Needless to say, by lunchtime I was beaten. I had lost most of my flies, some length of nylon and the old Greenheart was looking in need of urgent repair. To make matters worse it had started to rain so there was nothing for it but to pedal home again which was at least a 50-minute ride.

The next weekend found me back at the Liesbeek, and the next, and nary a take. In fact I had not even seen anything remotely resembling a trout. The family was amused but I was not, and to make matters worse the story of my tribulations had leaked out to my friends,



Peter Arderne with a rainbow trout caught in 1955 above Hout Bay.



and I became the butt of a great deal of mockery. To fail at sea fishing was one thing but to waste one's time on the lowly Liesbeek was considered to be decidedly daft.

Then our family dentist, who was also a family friend, heard of my hardship and offered to take me out to one of the real trout streams of the Boland. The next Sunday my cousin and I were packed into his large American car and we set off for Du Toit's Kloof. The Smalblaar looked huge compared with the Liesbeek, but Uncle Lynn had sighted another angler about a kilometre downstream and was most disconcerted about the idea of sharing the river with an unknown person. So with much muttering we were packed into the car again and were told that we would try the Holsloot as very few ventured up that precipitous road. I had never heard of the Holsloot and sure enough there was no sign of a vehicle having been up there for days. From what I can remember construction on the dam had not even commenced. We unpacked for the second time, about half way up the kloof, and Uncle Lynn led me to a long, inviting looking run. Here, he said I could not help but catch a trout and then watched as I let my Invicta downstream with the strong current. Sure enough, as I started to retrieve there was a solid tug. A somewhat unsatisfactory fight followed this, and it was not long before I had beached a very handsome one pounder.

"OK", said Uncle Lynn, "you see how it is done? Now you can get on with it without my help," and he disappeared into the undergrowth. The cousin had no experience outside rock and surf and I certainly was little better despite the fact that my duck had been broken. We battled on until late lunch with little to show but countless scratches and a significant reduction in our meagre stock of flies. In the meantime Uncle Lynn reappeared with four fine looking fish, and after lunch we headed for the lower river which was reserved for the Worcester Club where the cousin and I watched as Uncle Lynn gave a demonstration of dry fly presentation to the early evening rise.

At least I had now caught a trout and regained some dignity and a little respect from any friends who came to inspect the specimen as it lay in state in the fridge for a couple of days. This was until the maid pronounced that it would keep no longer and must be cooked.

The family was not surprised when I announced the following Sunday that I was off to the Liesbeek again. In fact I was full of confidence and certain that my luck had turned. This time I made my way up to the Kirstenbosch Road bridge where, on the lower side, the stream dropped over a concrete sill into a circular pool of reasonable size by Liesbeek standards. Sure enough as my fly was sucked under the fall there was a sharp tug and a bright silver fish cartwheeled across the pool and then rushed back to the sill before screaming off downstream. A few minutes later I had her beached and despatched. All of 12 inches and quite plump as many Liesbeek fish were. I now felt that the Holsloot trout did not actually count and at last I had achieved something on my own.

Until Christmas I continued to fish the Liesbeek with reasonable success. I caught several brace below the Vineyard hotel and, in the Sans Souci bridge pool, just before Christmas, I took a two-pounder. This was a magnificent looking trout, but completely inedible. In Spring, after high water most of the fish caught in the middle and lower reaches could be eaten, but by summer the oil from the Paradise Road garage downstream spoilt the flesh and this was very evident in low water conditions.

By late December most Western Cape streams are too low for good fishing and in any case immediately after Christmas my friends and I were packed off to the scout camp at Hermanus. This was an annual event dating back many years, and was not something one could afford to miss.

In the meantime I had received a Christmas and birthday present rolled into one. A split cane rod which was to last me at least 10 years and, as important, junior membership fees for the Cape Piscatorial Society. Much has been written about A C Harrison and the impact he had on fresh water fishing in the Cape. He was also an amateur entomologist of some note, and one of the few survivors of the terrible First World War battle of Delville Wood. As such he was treated with great respect by the small group of fly fishermen who frequented the Club rooms in Shortmarket St. He appeared to spend a great deal of his time on CPS matters even though his typewriter repair agency adjoined the Club rooms. I never heard of him fishing while I was in the Cape; possibly he was too involved in providing sport for others. Despite his stern demeanour he had endless patience with small boys, and spent a great deal of time giving me advice and telling me of the many streams he knew so well. He also lent me a complete set of back copies of *Piscator*, which had the effect of keeping me out of his office for a few weeks.

What were interesting were the stocking reports. Although the Steenbras reservoir received fairly large allocations of fingerlings on an annual basis, little stocking was necessary apart from smaller streams which had never been stocked before. One report that caught my eye was that in 1948, some four years back, 500 fingerlings had been placed in the headwaters of the Orange Kloof stream at the upper end of Hout Bay valley. This was relatively close to our home, and the idea of exploring new waters was an exciting prospect.

That autumn the first winter rains arrived early and at the first opportunity I was pedalling up Constantia Nek. I knew that most of the fingerlings had been placed in the upper stream on the Council property, which lay on the reverse slope of Table Mountain. The entrance in those days was just off Constantia Nek and was barred by a locked gate, and a notice by which the city engineer threatened all kinds of dire action against trespassers and other undesirables. Undeterred, I pulled the bike well into a thicket, scrambled over the gate and set off down the narrow track which ran between pines. Some way on I had to take evasive action when I sighted a guard with a knobkerrie, but otherwise there were no signs of other humans in the plantation, which gave way to indigenous forest as I moved into the mountain valley. Further on I could hear the stream rushing through the undergrowth and a left-hand fork took me down to a tea-coloured stream foaming over a small weir. Apart from the weir pool the fishing area was very restricted. Upstream the rivulet disappeared into thick bush and about 50 metres downstream a veritable jungle of palmiet blocked my passage. I did manage about half an hour of fishing with nothing in the weir, but where the stream started to tunnel into the palmiet I thought I saw a flash of silver behind the fly. By then it was getting dark with rain threatening, and I trekked back to the bike with the knowledge that at least the downhill ride to Constantia would be a quick one compared with the long uphill slog.

There was still a month of the season left which was plenty of time with the short Easter vacation to look forward to, and it was not long before the old Raleigh was being pedalled

up the Nek again. This time at the top I took the main road in the direction of Hout Bay. The first property was Orange Kloof, which had a Cape Dutch farm stall at the roadside. A request to fish was met with a very firm 'No', which in fact was one of the very few refusals I ever had as a schoolboy in the Cape. I interpreted this as possibly a good sign as surely it meant that there was indeed something to be caught. A kilometre or so downhill the next property was a flower farm and the request to fish was met with a perplexed, "Yes of course, but I doubt whether there is anything in the stream."

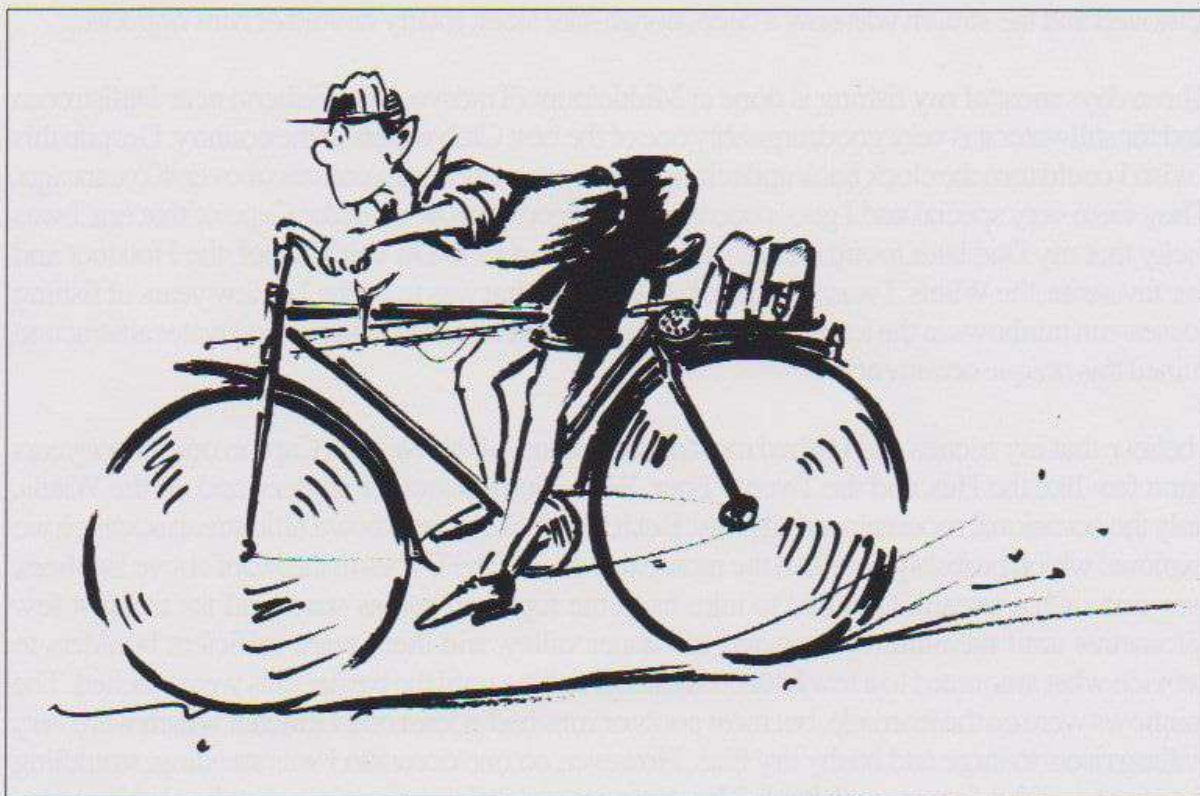
The Hout Bay river here was small, even smaller than the Liesbeek, and for the 500 metres that it ran through the property it was almost entirely flanked by thick palmiet or completely enclosed by low growing bush and trees. One had to find a point of entry and then wade and slide down the stream, which was, for the most part, on a firm peat bed. With palmiet, riverine bush and trees there was little chance of conventional casting, but anyone brought up on the Western Cape streams soon became adept at roll casting, a short range flick or simply feeding the line into the current with the hope that the fly could be retrieved when it inevitably became entangled in some underwater jungle.

Having wriggled into position at the head of a run I let the line out using option three, but here there were no snags and as the fly travelled back past the undercut of the peat there was a take and I soon had an 11 inch rainbow in the bag. I had several more takes as I progressed downstream and when I took my second 11 incher I felt that was enough for the afternoon. Back at the house the owner was delighted that I had caught something and was amazed that 'haarders' could have swum that far upstream from the sea.

During the next few years and right up to my matric year I had many hours of pleasant and rewarding fishing from that farm virtually down to the lagoon. During this time I was often joined by Walter, now a wine producer of considerable note. Also Ed who now is a computer fundi and who sometimes takes time off to join me up in Mpumalanga. All three of us were junior CPS members, and even though old AC Harrison suspected that we were fishing the Hout Bay river he never revealed our secret until we were old enough to get to the Boland waters. I think he realised that we were very restricted in our choice and any publicity about the Hout Bay would limit this even further.

It is interesting that trout thrived in Hout Bay's peat-stained waters which were as dark as any of those on the southern and eastern aspects of the Cape mountains, and therefore both acidic and short in nutrients. These have generally been proved unsuitable for trout, but I think the flower and vegetable farms along the river added to the fertility and the tributaries entering the river lower down were mainly 'white water' and helped to dilute the acidity. Most trout were between 10 and 12 inches, but I did capture a cock of two and a half pounds on one of my last visits, which was huge for this stream.

There is a sad sequel to my tale of the Hout Bay stream, which had provided me with so much pleasure. It must have been in 1962 when I returned after an absence of six years. I had recently come back from overseas and I borrowed the family bakkie and drove across to the property where I had had my first success. The owner did not recognise me but the response was the same, "Yes, sure, go ahead". But then he added, "Nobody fishes these days but some years back there were some kids who were quite successful." I walked down to the little bridge, but this time I did not bother to take the rod out of the case. The palmiet and trees, which bound the banks, had been



Drawings by Tom Sutcliffe.

removed and the stream was now a deep, donga-like sloop, totally devoid of runs or pools.

These days most of my fishing is done at Middelpunt (Transvaal Fly Fishers) near Dullstroom and for stillwater it is very good, arguably one of the best Club waters in the country. Despite this I wish I could turn the clock back and relive with my sons those adventures of over 40 years ago. They were very special and I guess one was privileged to grow up in the Cape of that era. I was lucky that my Dad later found enough time to transport us to Du Toit's Kloof, the Holsloot and our favourite, the Witels. I was also fortunate to have what was to be the last few years of fishing for sea-run rainbows in the lower Eerste before pollution from the wineries and water abstraction ruined this unique occurrence.

I believe that my friends and I fished most of the streams of the Western Cape in our school years bar a few like the Hex and the Twenty Four. We seldom saw other anglers, and on the Witels, only the occasional mountaineering party. But it was those lesser-known little streams, which we explored which probably provided the most excitement. The Dwars in the kloof above Banhoek was just such a stream. One had to hike from the top farm across state land for the first few kilometres until the little river entered the upper valley, and there were sufficient boulders to provide what amounted to a few hours reasonable fishing until the barrier falls were reached. The rainbows were on the lean side, but most pools or runs had at least one 12 incher which were very willing risers to large and bushy dry flies. However, on one occasion I was standing, straddling the stream, with a foot on each bank. The water was crystal clear, as clear as only a 'white water' stream can be in our Boland mountains, when a huge rainbow glided out from below one boulder and disappeared beneath another. How big was it? Maybe five, maybe six pounds and in magnificent condition. We certainly tried for it later on, but it was totally impervious to our offerings of dry fly, wet and nymph. We even dropped remnants of our lunch into the little pool but nothing stirred again.

When I spoke to ACH of the barrier falls he said it was just the place for an experimental stocking with the newly arrived brook trout. The arrangement was that at the start of the December holiday we were to meet the Jonkershoek truck on Austen's farm, which was the uppermost in the Banhoek valley. Walter and I had taken our bikes out to Stellenbosch by train where we spent the night with our friend Melvyn, and early the next morning we rode over Helshoogte in time to meet the truck. This arrived as arranged, but you can imagine our dismay when we found that the brookies had been loaded into three old fashioned milk churns which full must have weighed at least 50 or 60kg each. Mr Austen, the farm owner, was most sympathetic and detailed three of his strongest African labourers to assist us. Even so it was an incredibly arduous climb to above the barrier falls, and in later years when we assisted with the stocking of the Upper Elandspad, Kromme and a tributary of the lower Witte we were issued with sensible plastic bags at a fraction of the weight.

The brookies disappeared almost immediately, as they seem to have done in all the RSA streams where they have been stocked. In the early seventies I persuaded my brother-in-law, a non-angler, to accompany me to the upper Dwars for an afternoon's fishing. It was December but the flow was good after recent rain and looked perfect for dry fly. I approached the stream in great anticipation and fished it thoroughly, but saw nothing, almost as if it had been completely fished out which I suppose is quite possible as it is not a long stretch and downstream on the farmlands the population could easily be wiped out by the summer drought.

Likewise the brownies of the lower Witels seem to have met with the same fate. Happy Valley, above the second swim, was generally acknowledged as the best water, but the lower section right from the Mitchell's Pass junction was excellent in those early days. Even in the late sixties, when I had my last fishing with Mark MacKereth and had managed to prise him away from his beloved Smalblaar, I took him to the lower section knowing the master fisher would appreciate a really good dry fly stream. By that time Mark was getting on and I had not appreciated how tough the boulder hopping would be for him. Even so, he took several nice browns and was full of praise for the quality of fishing.

It is sad to record the decline of most of our Western Cape streams, but at least we now have a sensible state policy of eradicating alien vegetation which can only benefit our valuable fynbos and the water flow in our rivers. The CPS has also taken the enlightened step of declaring all the streams 'catch and release' so maybe after some years of abstinence it will be worthwhile packing my fly rods again when I make my annual trip to Cape Town.

