



Dr. Tom Sutcliffe with a brace of 3 lb. brown trout from the Test.

(Photos: per T. Sutcliffe)

AN INTERLUDE ON SOME HAMPSHIRE CHALK STREAMS

By T. SUTCLIFFE

PART I: THE TEST

THIS year, late August blessed England with some fair weather, and brought respite from the soaking rains of July, making the angler's task a little easier and a lot more comfortable. We, that is, my wife Kathy and I, were lucky to find ourselves driving east from Bath, in Somerset, headed for Hampshire and a spot of chalk stream fly-fishing.

I'd never given chalk streams a try till this trip, as much as I've always wanted to. I suppose, though, in keeping with most of my fishing colleagues, I've done more reading on these sort of waters than on any others. To me they are the ultimate in fly-fishing waters, embodying in perfect harmony the major criteria for good trout water;

clarity, movement, fertility, stability and yes, even a little mystery, which is important, because if a river yields its trout too easily it will soon fail to hold your interest. I suppose if you're a cricketer you dream of one day playing at Lords, or at Cardiff Arms if you're a Welsh rugger fanatic. If you're a fly-man you dream of the Test, or if you don't, you should. Traditionally this is *the* chalk stream, perhaps even the most aristocratic trout river in the world, which is a reputation it has earned, I suppose, by supplying the goods down the years to countless fishermen, some famous, most not so. It is said of the Test that more great fishermen have fished it than any other river in the world. Who knows. What I do know is that it is very deserving of its reputation today, in spite of a fall off in the quality of the fishing over the past few years.

But what is a chalk stream and what makes it so different from the rivers we fish here in South Africa? Chalk streams are so named because they flow over a terrain consisting of calcium carbonate, or chalk. This lends great alkalinity to the water, making it a fertile bed for various sorts of weeds which harbour abundant food for the fish. It is also extremely porous ground, meaning that the earth is able to soak up the rain into a vast subterranean "sponge", releasing the water back to the stream slowly, in a pure, filtered form. This gives the river stability in storms and keeps it crystal clear. Some of the minor chalk streams nearly dried up in England's most recent drought, but the subterranean water supply kept the major water courses going. Fish do well in the alkaline water and show a much greater growth rate than those found in the freestone rivers. Trout of between 5 and 6 lb. are not uncommon in the Test, and the most recent best was over 8 lb.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the chalk streams is the reluctance that the trout may show in accepting a fly. This derives from a number of chalk stream characteristics, the most important being the great abundance of aquatic food which allows the fish to be selective, and the clarity of the water which keeps him forever on his guard.

But there are drawbacks to chalk streams as well. As I see it, the greatest problem is availability of water, because, in real terms, there are few chalk streams and many anglers. This puts a great strain on the water, and in most cases, as with the Test, the river must be stocked and fish replaced on a "put-and-take" basis. Few of the wild browns are caught today, which is a great pity because they are far superior to the hatchery-bred fish. Interestingly, rainbows won't breed in these rivers, so that any of this species caught on a chalk stream is definitely a hatchery fish.

As an off-shoot of these problems we naturally come to the one subject that doesn't mix too well with fly-fishing, and that is money. Today chalk stream angling, depending of course on which river you fish, varies from expensive to outrageously expensive. But by the same token, somebody has to keep the river in good order and this, plus the cost of the fishing rights initially, makes for expensive transactions. Today any saleable section of the Test could be auctioned at Sotheby's or Christie's of London. The new owner might then divide his piece of river into beats, each perhaps half-a-mile long, each requiring its own river keeper, and the lot requiring a head-keeper or bailiff. These people are responsible for cutting weed, which is usually done on a Monday and Tuesday, when fishing becomes impossible, repairing fences, keeping the banks tidy and easy for fishermen, taking out the coarse fish such as grayling, and, of course, stocking. So to get back some capital the owner then leases out rods, or half-rods, which might entitle the purchaser, at great cost each year, to one or maybe two days' fishing each week, when he at least knows he will be the only rod on that section of water and he can enjoy himself. So, you may ask, how's the average South African ever going to



Fishing the Bossington section of the Test at a point where the river is much wider than usual.

get a look at the Test? You can manage this in one of three different ways. Firstly, you may know the owner of a beat who might give you a day's fishing. Or you may approach a commercial organisation that owns a section of water, such as the Red Box in Winchester, or the Nether Wallop Mill group near Stockbridge, who will rent you a day's angling, from about £50 to £100 per day. Or, if you're very lucky, you meet a water bailiff or river keeper who, in exchange for a modest amount, will give you a day on a beat if he's sure the rightful owner is not going to want to use the river himself. This the keeper is perfectly entitled to do and it is regarded as a legitimate perk in what is otherwise a poorly paid profession. So, all in all, chalk stream fishing has become a somewhat exclusive pastime, but in my opinion a pastime well worth the trouble.

Going east from Bath we passed through Nether Avon, where the late Oliver Kite is buried near the banks of the river he knew so well and wrote of so brilliantly, and an hour or so later we drove into Stockbridge, a small village in the Test River valley. In fact, the river flows right through the town, and here I got my first long look at the piece of water I'd heard so much about. In my mind's eye I had pictured the Test as a wide, slow-flowing river, surrounded by huge trees. What I looked at from that road bridge was a golden-coloured river, no more than 20 or 30 metres wide, fast flowing, and laced with brilliant green weed. And as I looked closer I saw, to my utter amazement I will admit, first one, then two, then three large trout finning away in clear pockets of water, completely undisturbed by my presence not more than a few metres away. It was at that moment that I decided, come what may, this river *I must* fish.

Even my wife, who normally stands unmoved and impassive on matters piscatorial, was caught up in the majesty of this sight, and from then on she became as engrossed in the world of chalk streams as I did.

In Stockbridge, parked outside the Vine, which is a local pub, I found Tony Biggs waiting for us. He'd motored down from London, via the most direct route I'm sure, to join us on the Test. Our meeting on this "holy ground", as Tony calls it, was memorable, and we spent the next hour, predictably, entertaining ourselves on the bridge much to the amusement of the locals. I wondered then how we were going to shape against these trout. Tony, I will admit, was far more confident than I was.

Not far from Stockbridge are the Wallops, three small villages through which flows the tiny Wallop chalk stream. Here Dermot Wilson runs his rather unique tackle shop called The Mill, and we invaded the privacy of these good people that same afternoon to stock up on some pieces of tackle. They have a piece of the Test, but just couldn't fit us in. Nor, they felt, were other prospects all that bright, but they were civil and very helpful, and we left in good spirits. But by the following day our spirits were low, and by 5.30 that afternoon, with still no fishing to hand, we were all decidedly miserable. Tony then remembered that the owner of the Vine, with whom he'd shared a pint of mild the previous day, had mentioned the name of a keeper on the Test, George Marsh. I phoned him but was told he was out. At this point Tony excused himself, saying he was going to take to his bed. He looked terrible. Thirty minutes later I phoned again, and was not only speaking to George March, but hearing him say, "Come down now, for the evening rise, lads". Just like that! This must rate as one of the most exciting moments in my fishing career.

We met George at 6.30 at beat 4 of the Bossington section of the Test. He showed us our water, wished us luck, promised a beat for the morrow, and then disappeared. We were alone, with rods, on the Test. I walked to the water and watched it. The light was poor and fish were not easy to see, even with polaroids. I had an R.A.B. on, which Tony had given me, and he was using the same, I think. Within a minute a good fish showed in mid-stream and I put a fly forward of him and waited with baited breath. He took it first go and came in at 1½ lb., a grayling. As I released him, Tony cast across the river to a little dimple on the far bank. No hesitation. He took, and this time it was a brown trout of over 1 lb. There's nothing like success to breed confidence. We carried on from strength to strength, eventually each hooking and releasing six fish within the hour-and-a-half of available light. That night we really celebrated.

They cut us down to size the next day, though. I battled all day for two and Tony had three, all around the 2 lb. mark. Each fish had first to be found, identified as a feeding fish, then fished for. This day they seemed unhappy with the R.A.B. and we got them on Lunns Particular size 16. You are so dependent in the Test on a good hatch. If there is no hatch, you struggle, and you can't go to nymph on the Bossington section because it's dry fly only. The Test was revealing some of its mystery.

I was keen to fish the middle Test, and the Red Box in Winchester got us onto the famous Longparish beat. Here we were met by the keeper, Alfie, who kept us amused as we tackled up in a tiny Elizabethan fishing lodge on the banks of the river. This was one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen, the river flowing golden through acres of beautifully laid out gardens. Tackled up, Alfie led us down the road, through the village, stopping to chat here and there as people went about their daily chores. We turned down a lane, crossed a small churchyard, and arrived on the river. The stream here was shallow, perhaps a foot or two deep in most places, and very clear. Normally the Test is fished from the banks, but here we were told to wade and



Tony playing a good Test trout.

to keep a sharp eye out for trout in the pockets. Nymphing was allowed and, said Alfie with confidence, "They'll take anything you chuck at 'em". So being it, we proceeded.

My first fish I found tailing in some bright green weed, directly in mid-stream. The island of light green starwort was about the size of a small table, and all I could see was a large brown tail flapping here and there on the top as the fish worried the weed-bed for nymphs. On the bank a lady and her husband were having tea in the sun, watching me with keen interest. But how to get the fish? A nymph was ignored each time it passed down the side of the weed-bed, and I couldn't chance putting it slap in the middle. I tried a dry fly, a Lunns Particular, but it didn't impress the fish any. Throwing caution to the north and tradition to the south, I put on a big bi-visible R.A.B. and cast it right onto the weed-bed. He didn't hesitate, and I had him out just on 2 lb. I gave it to the lady and the gent for tea, because they clapped as I caught it, and, as far as I'm aware, that's never happened to me yet!

We didn't see much more in the shallow stretch up to the fishing lodge, although we covered some very likely-looking water. The fish in the Test were off, and when they go off you can swear the river is barren. The local pub made up for it by providing a really good lunch, after which we retired in a contemplative mood to the fishing lodge, where Tony fell sound asleep while I kept a sleepy eye on the river. An hour, or maybe two, later, I saw a rise up the long canal-like section that runs for 200 yards upstream of the lodge to the top of the beat. Then I saw another and another, and, failing to interest Mr. Biggs in these facts, I proceeded to do battle myself, armed with a small Lunns Particular. The first fish was bold and I took him with little problem.

This did awaken Tony, who by now had come down and was reclining under a tree. The second fish surprised me. I'd seen little more than a rise and part of his tail before I cast the Lunns to him. He had it first go and elaped out of the water like a marlin, easily 3 lb., then sped off upstream like a startled hare, where he eventually came off in some starwort weed. This electrified Tony, and he started in with determination.

I took a second brown of a pound under the near bank and let him go, I'm sure much the wiser for his experience. Tony was silent now. Concentration was etched into every line of his face. He was down on his knees, waving to me to keep low and come upstream to where he was, on a marvellous piece of water. I belly-crawled to him. He poked a finger at the water and I found myself looking at a beautiful brown trout, I thought about 4 lb., every dark and blood-red spot clear on the golden brown fish. Tony's fly drifted a foot or so past him. He was interested, you could see that by the sudden increase in the fin rate, but he didn't let go at the fly. Try again. Refusal. Cast higher up and more to his left. Perfect. Refusal again. "Try a nymph, Tony," I whispered, but Biggs was already ahead of me. The slightly weighted R.A.B. nymph plopped into the water one metre ahead of the fish. He came straight up, looked at it, and then sank back. Biggs was pale. "Cast higher up and let it drift down to his level," I suggested. First cast poor, but he's not been put down. Damn it, he's looking a bit anxious. Second cast perfect. I could see the little black speck that was the nymph tumbling downstream to the fish. This time, no hesitation. The white mouth opened and Tony let him turn down and then struck. That fish came in at 3 lb. 10 oz., and was one of the most beautiful and aggressive trouts I've seen. He fought like a devil as, incidentally, do most of the Test brown trout. From that point on up to the boundary we each took another three trout, one of them a rainbow, all between 2 lb. and 3½ lb. Alfie was overjoyed and allowed us to pour him a good tot of whisky, which he enjoyed while he recounted his experiences as a keeper over the previous 30 years. That night we slept very well.

We did return to the Longparish section for a second try at these magnificent fish, but this time we struggled. I suppose things were not quite right and, certainly, we didn't get much of a hatch. But we enjoyed ourselves as always, and Kathy, I think, had truck with the best fish which she induced to take on a handline, from a footbridge. May she be forgiven for this minor indiscretion. She never got this fish but he kept her amused for a good two hours while the men were out getting equally little response from the trout.

Our last day on the Test was back at Bossington with George Nash. We started in at about 10 on a clear sunny day, with a light breeze blowing, and in high spirits. The grayling were a nuisance on this day particularly, and I was glad when Kathy pointed out a lone, feeding brown, lying in a narrow road between the weed-beds, some 10 metres away. I put a small Kites Imperial right on his nose, and he came up, looked at the fly and started drifting back towards me. He continued this slow motion inspection right up to our feet, when he decided to take. But I could only prick him because all the slack I had around me slowed the strike, and after a minute or two he came off and disappeared in a flash. Kathy was enchanted by the whole episode, and this stimulated her to find me another fish, which she did in no time. She's got eyes like a hawk this girl, and I pleased her by taking this fish on an R.A.B., a rainbow of 3 lb. Tony joined us now and Kathy found him a fish in the same pool, which he took while I was still playing the rainbow! This was a brook trout of 3 lb. 4 oz., beautifully marked, and a spectacular fighter. My third fish was a 2½ lb. brown, and at this juncture we laid our catch on the grass and gazed at as spectacular a bag of fish as any angler has seen.



Tony Biggs and the Test keeper George Marsh share a good story.

This was a marvellous day, because we ended up with six fish each, and that in spite of the fact that they became very difficult in the afternoon. Suddenly we could only take them on a Lunns Particular; suddenly they were put down by anything less than a perfectly presented cast and this, we both agreed, was how we really liked it.

That night we celebrated with George and his wife Margaret in the local pub in Houghton called The Boot. We had steak rolls and chips, litres of mild and bitter, and I filled in the football pools for the first time in my life while Tony held the entire pub's attention with stories of Egyptian cobras, leopards and such-like things which bother the fly-fisherman in Africa. It was a charming evening made the more so because of the magnificent day's fly-fishing behind us.

The River Test is a dichotomy. Sometimes it appears extremely easy, almost too easy, to take its trout. Then perhaps, even when you least expect it, it turns the tables on you and becomes an extremely exacting piece of water to fish. But always it is a pleasure to be there; walking up the magnificently kept banks, searching for the moving fish, pitting your skill against the many obstacles that lie between you and your trout. The contrast between this and any African river is obviously great. Somehow this river seems to have been created for fly-fishing, its other functions seem almost superfluous. Someone, I think Oliver Kite, said that if you asked any fly-fisherman to design the perfect trout river, he would come up with a chalk stream. And, if he had more than average imagination, he would produce the Test. Fair words those. I think I would agree.