

AN INTERLUDE ON SOME HAMPSHIRE CHALK STREAMS

PART II

THE BOURNE AT HURSTBOURNE PRIORS AND THE WALLOP

By T. J. SUTCLIFFE

“AS I drove from Netheravon on that late summer morning, I looked forward to my day on the Bourne with the keenest possible anticipatory pleasure. I took the Whitchurch road from Andover with a feeling close, I fancy, to that experienced by the Pilgrims in the Middle Ages as they approached the shrines of Saints.” So wrote Major Oliver Kite in his classic *NYMPH FISHING IN PRACTICE*. We also drove over in the keenest anticipation but from Stockbridge and through Longparish village, where we stopped for a brief moment to toss some pebbles on a large fish holding a position close against a bridge over the Test. And he amused us this trout, because he would scoot around and hunt-up every pebble we tossed; if the temptation to poach ever lay heavy on my shoulders it was that morning, because the fish was an easy 4 pounder and damn keen to take!

Longparish was sunny on this day and the flowers were all brilliant in the 10 o'clock sun. Major Hey, the bailiff for the Bourne, turned up midway through our second cup of tea and shared a pipe with us whilst he told us of the Bourne. I suppose when the chalk streams come in for accolades the Test must grab most of them. But as far as we were concerned the Bourne was the ultimate river, the highlight of our whole trip. How so, you may easily ask, when it is just a small tributary of the Test and only 3 miles long from the beginning to end at that? The answer isn't difficult to find once you've seen the water. It is undoubtedly the clearest little river I have ever set eyes on. It seemed as if the trout you saw in it were suspended in mid-air, like marionettes on invisible strings. It carries, proportionate to its size, the largest trout we saw in England, seeming to teem with 2 to 3 pound fish. But, above all, it was the most exacting, unforgiving and impossibly difficult river to fish, especially in the low-water conditions of late summer. And so we loved it and immediately understood how Harry Plunkett-Greene could write an entire book on it and how this book could become an angling classic.

From Longparish we travelled West to Hurstbourne Priors along a narrow lane, crossed the river below the cricket ground, passed the famous Beehive (an ancient customs building which is now a well-known angling landmark), and then across meadows to where we joined the river keeper, Harry, a charming old man who had spent most of his life in the care of this stream. Together we walked from the tiny fishing cottage to the lower boundary of the water, the famous point where the bright waters, the Bourne and the Test, meet. From here we strolled upstream for about 400 yards whilst Harry pointed out at least 20 takeable trout and gave polite instructions on how best to take them and, equally important, how not to! I realised then that we were really up against it. Here was a man happy to show you which fish were “on” and to point out to you those which probably were not, who would then no doubt stand back and watch your attempts with an eye that surely could not be more practised. I think then I was worried more about Harry than the trout.

We tackled up and made sure that we were fishing “exceedingly fine” as Charles Cotton would have it. I used a 12 foot cast and had a 3 foot tippet of 1½ pounds, to which I attached a size 16 Sawyer Pheasant Tail nymph, of which Harry approved. Tony did much the same but struck a moderate discord when he tied on a somewhat

over-used R.A.B. nymph. With this fly he evoked not only the trout's interest but Harry's as well. And Harry, the keeper of the finest in chalk stream water, was visibly impressed with Mr. Biggs' box of flies. "Most sensible flies, Sir, if I might make a comment—but mind you present them properly, Sir, because that's what it's all about."



A good fish lying in the crystal-clear Bourne.

(All photos: per Tom Sutcliffe)

The next few moments are very clear in my mind. Tony, who had been standing fairly close to the edge of the river whilst preparing to do battle, had obviously been keeping an eye on the water, because he excused himself from our company, walked three paces upstream and put 20 yards of line onto the glassy surface of the Bourne, whereupon a 2 pound fish took the R.A.B. and was smartly dispatched. Harry was visibly impressed. "Damn it, Sir," he said, "that was magnificent work. Might I suggest that you proceed upstream on your own and I will accompany the doctor." And that's how, for that day at any rate, I inherited Harry—and his Labrador dog.

We walked down to the junction chatting all the way, whilst I felt somewhat like the squire of the village in the company of the first footman. At this point Harry looked at 2 or 3 fish, which I thought deserved a crack but which Harry did not, until finally he found a fish holding station tight against the roots of an old elm tree. "That fish has been there the past six weeks, Sir, and he's really on at present. Have a go at him but don't put the line anywhere near him. Just the last 2 foot of leader and about 12 inches to his left, Sir, so that the leader is in the shadow." I looked at a fish of perhaps 2 pounds, fins moving gently in the current, his body swaying rhythmically from side to side as he kept his position. I looked, too, at the distance. Fifteen yards with a wind over my right shoulder and snag at 60° behind me. Better make it a high cast. I peeled off the line from the reel and threw the back cast. As soon as I felt the line straighten

behind me, I punched the rod towards my quarry. The line flew out smoothly and the leader straightened, rolling the fly gently into the water about 2 foot above the fish and well across him. I looked hard but could no longer see the fish. He'd gone as if he were the star turn in a vanishing act. I was conscious of Harry behind me mumbling something about being too long on the leader and having to give them the last 12 inches of tippet only. I wondered if Tony, too, was finding the going a bit tough.

I missed 3 more fish in a row, 2 of which I put down as I lifted my rod to cast! Here I'd been fishing for 20 odd years and I felt helpless, unable to catch trout that I could see clearly. But then my fortunes changed and I took a beautiful fish from a hard lie and I felt overjoyed and elated and convinced myself that it was all actually easy and that I'd just had a run of hard luck, until I missed the next 7 fish in a row and was ready to give the whole business up as a bad job. I think meeting Tony on the banks higher up at that moment saved me from total dismay. He, too, had been through the baptism of fire but had acquitted himself very much better with 2 keepers and 2 hooked and lost, but he also showed signs of the strain and concentration of the day.

On the way home, after promising Harry we would be back, we stopped in at a pub and each had a double whisky and soda instead of the usual pint of mild, and talked of nothing other than how easy it was to put down the fish of the Bourne, and how keen we both were for a re-match on this stream.

On an idle day when things looked good and no beat on the Test was available, George Marsh offered us a day on the tiny Wallop Brook. This stream flows into the Test below Houghton and we fished the beat upstream for a mile above the road bridge. This was an interesting outing for many reasons; the main one being George Marsh's words as he bade Tony and me farewell. "If you lads can take trout in this stream, then you can take them anywhere. It's really tough." Well, it was tough. It called for concentration and it demanded a strict no-mistake technique. But we did well, each taking around 12 fish in the 1½ pound class, the best going to Tony—a shade over 3 pounds. This last fish was a story in itself. I was downstream of him when I heard language that would have shocked a gathering of road gangers. I couldn't see Tony but I could hear him and, by the sound of the curses, I gathered he'd landed in a great deal of trouble. He had. By the time I joined him he was tying on his 4th or 5th fly after leaving the rest hanging in the branches of a dead birch tree right behind him. Upstream was a 3 pound trout actively swinging right and left as it took in nymphs, occasionally taking fly off the top. I knew there was only one way to help my distraught friend catch his trout because I know the way of Biggs in flyfishing as well as any man, and better than most. "Tony," I said, "if you can't get that fish just step aside because I'll take him with one cast," a feat I knew to be improbable if not impossible. It worked the trick because Tony's next cast missed the tree and took the fish, which sped upstream and gave a marvellously spirited fight before coming into the bank. It was a beautiful specimen, a wild brown with bright colouring, and Tony gently lifted his fly from its jaw and shooed it off upstream, much the wiser, I expect, for its experience.

I've never known a man so inclined to release a trophy trout as Tony. Frequently he will take a specimen that most men would love to hang on the wall or be photographed alongside. But 9 times out of 10 Tony marvels at the beauty of the creature and then releases it. I've tried this myself often enough but mostly it doesn't work for me. I just don't seem to be able to let go of the really good trout I take.