

Simon Cooper

FLY FISHING AGENT, CHALKSTREAM CONSERVATIONIST AND AUTHOR

To meet with Simon Cooper, fly fishing agent, chalkstream conservationist and author, is to be in the company of a man who seems totally immersed in his element. That is the Wallop Brook which flows, literally, down the millrace and into the wheel house to the side of his home – the beautiful Nether Wallop Mill.

“I spent part of my childhood messing about on a stretch of the River Meon which I basically had to myself, it was heaven. Then time passed – school, university – and I was living in London. I fished at the weekends and realised there was a business potential and started Fishing Breaks in 1990. My parents were rather surprised at my new career choice, swapping a suit for waders. But it was tough at the outset. I was struggling to run the business and take the bookings, having discussed my idea at length with my friend, another Simon, he insisted I get a website and that changed everything for me and by 1996 the business had taken off.”

Simon owns and manages Fishing Breaks for fly fishing enthusiasts acting as a letting agent for landowners building trusted relationships with them and helping to support the preservation of the South’s most beautiful beats (angler speak for a section of river) with over 120 miles of river in seven counties. In addition to that Fishing Breaks run courses for novices within the grounds of Nether Wallop Mill.

As we wander around the teaching lake the trout, brown, rainbow and blue, are easily seen swimming in the crystal clear water.

“We hold one-to-one fly fishing experiences here, children’s holiday courses which have proved immensely popular, as well fathers and sons fishing days – or mothers and daughters of course!”

In the mizzle of that day we were fortunate to see the mayfly that have their season for a few weeks in late May and early June.

“Mayflies are a trout’s favourite delicacy. As the fly flutters above the water you will see the trout jumping for them.”

It maybe a rather tough life for the mayfly but they have unknowingly created the art of fly fishing, and it’s only fitting that Simon should find himself both living, running a business and writing from Nether Wallop Mill.

“We completely renovated The Mill. When we bought it in 1999 it was in a rather sorry state with the enormous iron mill wheel, which was manufactured in Andover, detached from its spindle. The Mill has a famous fishing heritage as Dermot Wilson, author and accomplished fly fisher, once owned it. He created a business in 1968 whereby people could order hand-tied flies and tackle that would arrive the very next day.

His business was extremely successful until ill health required him to sell to the American company Orvis who sell flies and fishing tackle to this day. The home of dry fly fishing is Hampshire but specifically Mottisfont Abbey. To begin with, the fly simply sank when cast until the ‘inventor’ of modern day fly fishing, Frederick Halford, made

flies from feathers which when cast floated on the surface of the water, teasing the trout to believe they were the real mayfly or similar insects. Hence fly fishing spread from southern England to become a worldwide sport, as popular today as it ever was.”

In 2016 Fishing Breaks was awarded Best Travel Provider and Best Fishery River by Fish and Fly Magazine.

When Simon is not overseeing Fishing Breaks he finds time to write. His first book *Life of a Chalkstream* immerses the reader into the sight, sounds and natural history of a Hampshire river through its journey of survival.

His second book *The Otters’ Tale* takes you on a privileged peek into the life of Kuschta the otter and her cubs. As with his first book, Simon is a master of weaving his considerable knowledge of natural history with a wonderful and thought-provoking narrative which will have you wanting to live by a river yourself. The otter in Simon’s book, (which is shortlisted for the Wainwright Award), is real and their initial meetings are beautifully described in his book.

“My office has a glass wall through which I can see and hear the mill wheel and the river flowing through. But when the wheel was still I would often think I heard a splash or caught a glimpse of something when I walked into the office. This often happened but as time passed the otter – as it turned out to be – became more confident so that now she will often appear and sit on the oak beams of the wheel house and check out what I’m up to before disappearing into the river once more.”

When does Simon find time to write?

“I’m quite an organised person as I write a bi-weekly blog for the Fishing Breaks site. I like to write roughly 500 words a day or 2500 a week when writing a book.”

Simon is currently working on his third book

Does he have concerns regarding the future of the delicate eco-system of chalk streams and rivers?

“The insidious pesticides that took otters to the brink of extinction are thankfully a thing of the past. In the past two decades, post water privatization, things are improving and fish stocks continue rise but pollutants in rivers are still a concern as is the rising population, urbanisation and the demand for water”

Has Simon Cooper found his perfect way of life at Nether Wallop Mill?

He laughs, “Yes I think I have”.

So despite his stunning surroundings what three things could he not live without?

“Rivers definitely, the ability to go fishing when I want to and rain!”

Simon Cooper’s books are published by William Collins.

www.fishingbreaks.co.uk

