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SEASON'S END

Simon Cooper digests a difficult year
and looks forward to a bright future



I T IS THAT MOMENT IN THE YEAR. THE time to stop. Look back. And ask: what the hell just happened?

I suppose my first reaction is relief. I had forgotten those dark days of April until I started typing this column. Searching every nook and cranny of the internet. Reading the runes of every trifling government announcement. Looking for that chink of light in the lockdown darkness that presaged the announcement that we could fish the chalkstreams. April was definitely my low point.

March might have been, but Johnson's portentous announcement of the lockdown on March 23 created so much activity at Fishing Breaks that we hardly had time to think. Unravelling thousands of fishing days. Answering questions we had barely considered a few days earlier. From every direction plans had to be unmade then remade. I have to say to all of you out there – thank you. You were kind. Helpful. And considerate of the bind we all found ourselves in.

Inevitably, the solutions were not always perfect. Finding that balance to suit the often-conflicting needs of clients, river owners and ourselves was not easy. But we got there in the end. However, when I totted up the figures for March, traditionally our biggest sales month, turnover was negative. Now that was a sobering moment; not something I've ever had in 30-plus years. April was only to be better in that it was a big zero.

However, as it turns out, all was not lost, as I can only assume there was someone, somewhere in government who loves fly-fishing, for our release from lockdown could not have been better timed – May 11 is the eve of the official start of Mayfly. And goodness how you feasted like trout during a *Danica* hatch. Essentially, we did three months' business in three weeks. The phone rang off the hook. We triaged bookings. I recall days on end when no sooner had one of the three of us replied to

one email then our inbox had filled with ten new ones.

Eventually, thank goodness, the rush abated – I do not think our nerves could have taken it for much longer. But it did not abate that much. We have had an *über* busy summer. As I chat with other guides and owners, the tale is similar: a surge post-lockdown with a noticeable return of clients who had not been seen for years, followed by an influx of newbies, families especially. How wonderful and heartening is that?

The truth is that, despite Covid, I feel confident for the future. We've weathered a crisis many times worse for the rural economy than Foot and Mouth, the only comparable shutdown I can recall in my lifetime. There are still many battles to fight as our chalkstreams are assailed from all sides by the pressures of flowing among a tiny, densely populated nation, but we have survived.

Perhaps it seems indecent to talk of a Covid dividend, but if goodness is to come out of this awfulness then maybe the rediscovery of the great outdoors will be that reward. I, for one, am excited for our sport in 2021.

In last month's Chalk Talk I wrote that in 2015 the Salmon & Trout Association (now Salmon & Trout Conservation) undertook legal action over coastal netting of salmon with the help of Sea Shepherd and the Hunt Saboteurs. This is untrue. S&TA, acting alone, lodged a formal legal complaint with the European Commission about the Scottish Government's failure to protect salmon from rivers designated as SACs under the Habitats Directive. I apologise for my error. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.