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# DID YOU KNOW?

Simon Cooper invites you to cast for American trout on Dutch-made rivers



**A**S YOU SET OUT FOR YOUR FIRST foray of the season to the southern chalkstreams here are a few facts about these unique rivers that you might want to use to idle away the hours (but hopefully minutes) between, or waiting for, a fish to rise.

1. Our ancestors made them. If you were around 2,000 years ago your average chalkstream valley would have been a giant wetland, largely impenetrable to all but the native beavers and otters. However, the soil left behind from the Ice Age is highly fertile and early man soon twigged this, draining the marshes for crops, grazing and, eventually, homes. So, what we now regard as the rivers themselves came into being having been dug by the early settlers as drainage channels.

2. Small but powerful. There were thousands of mills powered by the chalkstreams. Flour mills. Feed mills. Fulling mills that washed sheep fleeces. Tanneries. Carpet factories. Bone-crushing mills. Latterly, even electricity-generating mills. Some were tiny, operating only a few hours a week for the benefit of small communities. Others, like Sadlers Mill on the River Test at Romsey, were major commercial operations.

3. More days in the year than chalkstreams. Numbering the chalkstreams is an inexact science but the count currently stands at 283, ranging from some under a mile long to the River Avon that straddles Hampshire and Wiltshire, which at 60 miles is the longest chalkstream in the world.

4. A merry band of two, or maybe three. Until recently it was thought only England and France had chalkstreams, the latter numbering just a dozen in the Normandy region. However, recently three have been "discovered" in Denmark, although these are yet to be officially recognised.

5. Not as old as we think. Like many pastimes we pursue today, fly-fishing on the chalkstreams has

its origins in the Victorian era, flourishing from the mid-to-late 1800s. It was not until that century that the chalkstreams began to be managed for sport on the grand country estates, with the first brown trout stocked as early as the 1830s and rainbow trout, imported from the USA, following in the 1860s.

6. Making hay. The southern chalkstream valleys of the 21st century are the product of the 17th century when Dutch water engineers were imported to re-engineer the landscape to allow controlled flooding of the valleys in the winter, spring and early summer. The existing "rivers" were split into two, three or more channels with connecting carriers, drains and tails, creating the familiar chalkstream landscape we fish today. However, this was not done in the name of fishing but rather intensive land management to maximise grazing for livestock and hay production.

7. The rain falls mainly on the downs. Except during times of exceptional rainfall, it is a good rule of thumb to assume that the water flowing in a chalkstream is, at any given moment, 90%-plus from springs with the remainder surface runoff. Similarly, the water emanating from the springs will have fallen as rain many months beforehand on nearby high downland, seeping through a thin layer of turf, before being absorbed into the tiny fissures of the chalk. Once in the chalk, the water takes on some of its alkali properties, while being purified and chilled as it seeps downwards through hundreds of feet of this soft, calciferous rock. At the valley base the water breaks out of the ground at a constant 10 deg C as billions of tiny springs that aggregate to form what we know as a chalkstream. ■

*Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at [fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)*