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KITE'S LEGACY

Simon Cooper remembers an inspiring angler and broadcaster



I'M ASHAMED TO ADMIT THIS, BUT IT TOOK a call from the editor to alert me to the fact that November marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of one of my childhood heroes — Oliver Kite.

Kite came into my life via television, his long running 1960s weekly series *Kite's Country* a window on to a natural world that I was, back then, just beginning to comprehend. He put the art of fly-fishing in the context of the countryside, beside all the creatures and people that inhabited the chalkstream valleys.

A few shows still exist today; you'll find them on YouTube and I've just watched the "Grayling festival with friends" episode as Kite accompanied by the Netheravon vicar, doctor and a friend head out for a day on the Avon close to the village. A bit of me wishes I hadn't seen it. I never noticed it before, but Kite is, as my grandmother would have said, very full of himself.

It is a tremendous period piece, rather Pathé News, narrated by Kite in his beguiling tones that reach back to his Welsh upbringing, received pronunciation and clipped Army economy of words. Frank Sawyer has a walk-on part at the start. The doctor arrives late having attended morning surgery. The vicar scurries off early to officiate at a wedding service. Over lunch, with great ceremony one of his guests presents him with a gift, a box of immaculate dry-flies brought from France. He returns the favour with a bare hook that, in his words, has "a bit of wire on it to make it sink" — the pattern he uses to clean up the grayling while others struggle with ones and twos. The inference is clear. I feel the ghost of grandmother giving me a knowing look.

But half a century is a long time ago; values and attitudes have changed. The Kite legacy is more than the artifice that television requires, so what is that legacy? I think we need to be clear that without Frank Sawyer there would have been no Oliver Kite. Kite, still in the Army, settled in the same village as Sawyer —

Netheravon — in 1958, soon becoming a friend and diligent pupil to the head riverkeeper on the extensive Army waters of the River Avon.

He was a quick learner. In 1963, Kite published *Nymph Fishing in Practice*. Sawyer is given due credit in the book, but you can argue that without Kite, and his subsequent TV career, the Netheravon method of nymph fishing would never have attained the status that we take for granted today, with prominent thoraxes tied into nymphs, the emphasis on sight fishing, and the "lift" to induce a take.

But Kite was far from being a tunnel-vision nymph man. His name lives on in the lexicon of dry-flies through the Kite's Imperial, a pattern that successfully imitates the large dark olive and iron blue. He also had a tying of the hawthorn that does not include the legs we typically see in modern patterns. For with Kite, dry-flies were less about the look than the movement. He believed in stiff hackles that would ride the fly high on the surface, on its tiptoes, allowing breeze and current to give it movement that trout would find irresistible.

It is a strange coincidence that Sawyer and Kite were to die in similar circumstances, albeit Kite, aged 48, predeceased his mentor by a dozen years. Kite had served in the Army for most of WWII, largely in the Far East, and was struck by lightning in Borneo in his twenties. This fatally weakened his heart and in June 1968, fishing the Test at Polhampton, a few hundred yards below its source at Ashe, he died of a heart attack.

In truth, Oliver Kite's chalkstream career was brief — a single decade spanning 1958-68. But the fact that we still talk of him today reflects well on the man and the impact he made. ■

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.