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DEERSHUCKER

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TROUT & SALMON

THE VOICE OF GAME-FISHING SINCE 1955

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 THE LATEST 10FT
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 IS A HATCH**

*How to predict when
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**TROUT AND
 HAMPERS**

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 Hampshire stillwater





Meeting the Meon

*Chris McCully casts classic
duns to foot-wide runs on a
lovely Hampshire chalkstream*

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD FAULKS



ABOVE Small, perfectly formed - and wild as the wind.

LEFT Chris eyes a promising run below the footbridge in the middle of the Exton beat.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO MY friend Steve Rhodes forwarded a pamphlet - *A Dales Fishing Story* - which told the story of the Appletreewick, Barden and Burnsall Angling Club between 1873 and 1973. The author of this splendid work, which mixed history with analysis and narrative, was John Baker. It was weeks later that I realised I'd once fished with Mr Baker. It was a Whitsun holiday in 1968 and I'd been invited to the Wharfe with Mr Baker and his grandson. One of the most significant dishes of trout I've ever seen was turned into my Mum's sink that evening - three trout, all around 8oz, which Mr Baker had caught on a Partridge and Orange in a stream below the Hebden footbridge. My reaction to those trout was profound. I admired their intricate loveliness, down to the beauty of each stipple, but even then I realised that there was a relationship between ➤



ABOVE Avoiding lurking greenery.

trout and their habitats. Rivers could only sustain so many fish of such an average size and in those days an average Wharfe trout would have been 8oz-12oz. Those of us who then fished the Dales rivers had what I think were reasonable expectations. A pounder was a good fish, a two-pounder the fish of a season. To catch a four-pounder would have been like lassooing a gorilla in a flower-bed.

Angling expectations have changed radically. In the same year as I was admiring Mr Baker's trout I also came across a black-and-white photo in *Trout and Salmon* of three Grafham fish (caught by Peter Thomas, if memory serves): two browns and a rainbow laid on a thwart. Those fish averaged 1½lb and were considered remarkable enough to feature in this magazine. How many regular Grafham anglers would today be satisfied over the course of their day to catch three (and only three) fish of that size?

"Expectations" came up again last week on the Itchen when Simon Cooper, who offers chalkstream tickets through his Fishing Breaks agency, mentioned that increasingly he heard anglers grumble about perfectly acceptable, even abundant catches of trout. "I ask people how they got on," said Simon. "They'll say, 'I only had eight' - and think they've had a poor day."

Twenty-four hours afterwards, Richard Faulks and I visited the Meon. "Expectations" were still on my mind. All I'd read about the Meon, especially its upper reaches, told me that here was a true chalkstream, the most easterly of all Hampshire's chalk rivers, whose upper reaches held nothing but wild trout. These fish rarely if ever reach the sizes of trout found in the

RIGHT It rarely pays to fish as if your hair's on fire.



CHRIS McCULLY

has written or edited more than 20 books, including *Nomads of the Tides*, a book about Irish sea-trout, published by Medlar Press.

Itchen (which lies 30 minutes' drive to the west): on the Meon, a pounder is a good fish, a trout of 1½lb a really good one and a two-pounder best left to Paul Procter. The record book at Exton Manor Farm told a similar story - of numbers of fish running between 4oz-10oz and occasional giants. Then again, the Meon at Exton is a small stream: were it not for the water clarity and the abundant crowfoot I could almost imagine I was fishing some of the Yorkshire becks of boyhood.

Wasn't it the case, I asked myself while I was tackling up, that I too had become guilty of unreasonable expectations? Did I not these days tend to fish too quickly and anxiously, charging up and down stream, or racing off to new drifts, in search of a fish that would grace a camera lens? Had I not lost, after all, that meticulousness any stream requires? When I was younger I'd spend an hour on part of a Yorkshire river pool - waiting, changing flies, watching, believing. I resolved to bring a similar attentiveness to the Meon valley.

Choice of rod and line is important on such

BELOW
A touch of grease on to the silk line. If double-tapered silk lines do start to sink, simply reverse them on the reel.





a stream. Certainly on the upper river you'll be casting from and into tight places - into channels in the weed, eases in current purling over pale gravel, into foot-wide runs under trees. I'd taken with me a cane six-footer, a British-made replica of a Lee Wulff Midge. Teamed with a silk fly-line this throws a tight loop and (therefore) offers control and accuracy. More importantly, line and fly land softly, particularly if a single fly is knotted on to the end of a steeply-tapered leader of no more than 7ft. A point of 3lb is about right if you want, as in May you will want, to offer olive-suggesting artificials (sizes 14-16) to Meon trout.

And so at last I waded gingerly into the Meon. Upstream lay a reach of around 600 yards of fishing. The river coursed almost soundlessly between and around beds of crowfoot which were not quite yet in full flower. There was wild mint, too, and ranunculus.

Nothing was rising. It was still early in the day. I imagined the fish would be tucked under the weed and would line up to feed in the gravel runs and channels if and when any olives hatched. (Richard and I also expected mayflies to appear at some point in the day but as it happened, we saw only a solitary may.) Nevertheless, some kind soul had noted in the record book that he'd had fish on "prospective dry-fly" - a good phrase - and I thought that it

might be possible to winkle out a fish or two before any hatch occurred.

The years when I tried, with unbecoming obsession, to replicate insects exactly are long gone. These days I use only a handful of largely impressionistic patterns when trout are feeding (or can be reasonably expected to feed) on olive duns. When darker-bodied duns are up then I use a loop-winged John Storey (16-18) or a Funneldun tied with olive silk and a slate-grey hackle; when paler-bodied duns appear I use a parachute-dressed Grey Duster (16-18). I do carry some Tup's Indispensables (for pale wateries) together with some olive spinner patterns (Pheasant Tails, Sherry Spinners, Lunn's, sizes 16-18), but would generally in daytime be content with the Storey, the Funneldun

*"To catch a four-pounder
would have been like lassooing
a gorilla in a flower-bed"*



ABOVE Working a dry-fly between the weedbeds on the captivating Meon.

and the Duster. On the Meon, and because its looped mallard wing makes it easy to see, I initially put up a size 16 John Storey.

If you're fishing from the right bank of a small river it's too easy to imagine that all the trout are found under the left bank. On the Meon, the cut of the current through the crowfoot meant that there were gaps in the weed upstream of as well as across from me. In many places it was feasible to cast almost directly upstream - taking as much care as possible not to line the fish - and then to make casts successively across the river until the Storey was bobbing down in the shadows thrown by far-bank willows. It was pretty, intricate fishing of a kind I had almost forgotten. I'd forgotten, too, how satisfying this intricacy can be. As you work slowly upstream, every few yards there's a new set of technical challenges - branches, bankside herbage, different currents and undercuts - and if you can meet even some of them then you'll begin to fall under the spell of the stream. Naturally there'll be times when you'll get hung up, but at those moments you must, as my

dear old Mum would say, possess your soul in patience. Go carefully and quietly.

Drag was a constant problem though by changing the angle of the cast I did my best to overcome it. By 11am, still no fly had appeared. All the same, by late morning the Storey had been annexed three times. They were remarkably bonny little trout - one a quarter-pounder still with parr-smudges on its flanks, the other two, better fish of 6oz. I hoped for something slightly bigger and didn't hope for long. As we worked upstream towards the footbridge that bisects the beat the Storey was taken decisively by a fish that leapt multiply between the crowfoot beds during the play and went all of 8oz.

It was warm. After an hour or two I began to think of ice creams, cool drinks and possibly, pies. Fortunately, a fine hostelry - The Shoe - lies within five minutes' walk of the beat. There's a pub garden hard by the stream and a menu suitable for anglers and other honest persons. So long as you don't miss a hatch of fly, sometimes it's good to stop for lunch.



Eat, sleep and fish

Fishing at Exton

Manor Farm - April 3 to September 30 - is offered by Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk/chalkstream/meon.htm). There is one beat of around 600 yards. The week is cut every month but do check before your visit.

Chris and Richard stayed at the **Bugle Inn**, Twyford (bugleinntwyford.co.uk), which lies close to the Meon and the Itchen (where they also fished). This has twin and double

rooms (called The Meon, The Test and The Itchen) and offers excellent food.

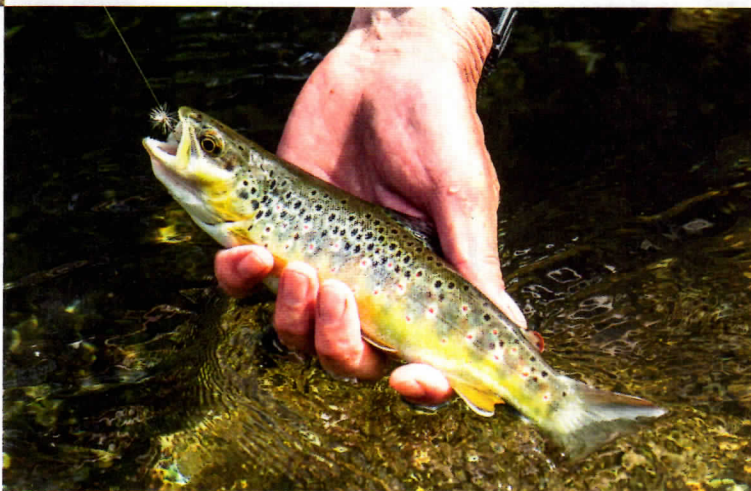
The Shoe Inn ([facebook.com/theshoeinnstagram](https://www.facebook.com/theshoeinnstagram)) is within easy reach of the beat.

The Meon Valley Partnership has worked with local landowners and the Wild Trout Trust on a number of projects aimed at habitat restoration. See: meonvalleypartnership.org.uk.

When - quenched - we returned to the Meon, things were changing. Wagtails stood, alert and dipping, on the edges of crowfoot beds and the shadows were filled with insect wings. Since the hatching olives weren't large dark olives, nor olive uprights, nor iron blues, nor pale wateries nor blue-wings I guessed at medium olives and changed the Storey for a Grey Duster.

It was lovely work. In one pool - more of a scour in the gravel than a pool - three trout were feeding. I'd like to be able to write that I got all three of them but I did get two, with the best of them touching an admirable, indignant 10oz. As I waded slowly upstream, trout could be found in almost every run. It was possible to set oneself small challenges in difficult places. There, for example, where the current ran under overhanging branches... I made a back-hand cast and watched the Duster drift through shadow. Yes, just... *There*.

When I eventually reeled up, the Meon had been temporarily relieved of ten of its residents. I asked myself how our day on the Meon had compared with what we'd experienced the previous day on the Itchen. It was true, of course, that the Itchen had offered bigger fish (some stocked, some wild) but that had been on an altogether more expansive reach of river where there was rarely any need to cast into a tight place under trees or into a channel the width of a floorboard. So the Meon had satisfied me in a quite different way to the Itchen. Above all, however, the little Meon and its half-pounders had allowed me to reconnect with the boy for whom half-pound trout had once been the apex of both loveliness and ambition. **T&S**



**CLOCKWISE,
FROM ABOVE**
A jewel on the
Grey Duster.

If The Shoe fits,
eat at it.

This loop-winged
John Storey travelled
well to Hampshire
from Yorkshire.

A 50-year-old
Mucilin tin.

