

The man who fished the Test using a bite indicator,

or how to lose friends and alienate people. It was an amicable angling contest in aid of a good cause and on hallowed water but *The Field's* Editor, **Jonathan Young** just had to let the side down

IT was as offensive as shouted obscenities during sung Matins. Or ordering brown sauce with a Cornish lobster. Had the thousand-year-old Oakley oak ever witnessed such a blasphemy without shedding a gnarled bough in protest? It seemed doubtful, for the sin, if not mortal, deserved a light barbecuing in hell-fire. The Editor of *The Field* was taking his dry fly, clipping off its wings, clamping on a split shot and suspending the butchered offering beneath a bite indicator. Proper fishermen should now fortify themselves with strong spirits and assume the brace position. For a bite indicator is a piece of non-sinking fluorescent yarn that suspends your weighted nymph and signals a bite. It is, in truth, a float.

The scene, the crime scene, was the Test. And not just a workaday stretch of that hallowed chalkstream but the Oakley beat at Mottisfont. It was here that FM Halford created the Victorian religion of dry-fly fishing, finally producing his bible, *Dry Fly Fishing in Theory and Practice*. He was the ultimate dry-fly purist, championing his method against all comers in *The Field*. And yet here was its Editor, float-fishing in front of his very hut, the holy of holies.

My fall from grace was gradual. I'd arrived at the Peat Spade Inn on 24 April with steely determination to fish a floating confection at the One Fly competition. The rules of the game are simple. You pick a pattern and fish one fly all day. If you keep that actual fly attached all day, you get 100 points. If you catch fish, you receive more points. If you change the fly or allow a sallow to swallow it in its branches, you lose points. Altering the fly is allowed, however.

The event, now in its second year, was organised by Simon Cooper, founder and managing director of Fishing Breaks.

The Field team's more useful members: Charles Rangeley-Wilson (right, with fish) and Nick Zoll (centre right, standing on the river-bank)

Smothered in best Rupert Bear tweeds, he stood on a chair in the Peat Spade's beer garden and addressed the olive-clad and Polarised throng. Twenty-four contestants and their guides stopped masticating bacon butties as Simon asked us to remember absent friends. It seemed a top fishing magazine team had been called away to an "unmissable" trade show – the very team that had won the utterly uncoveted "Duffers' Delight" prize last year.

It now seemed all a little serious. No one minds getting skunked on a normal day. But in front of an audience? There was a mass fumbling in fly boxes and Orvis carrier bags looking for the killer pattern.

HAIRY MUTANT KLINKHAMER

The Field team seemed pretty confident though. Charles Rangeley-Wilson, our fishing correspondent and president of the Wild Trout Trust, can wrinkle a trout out of moist blotting paper. Our team-mate, Nick Zoll, has been running fishing lodges in Argentina and is the UK and European director of Nervous Waters, a specialist fishing holiday company. That's his official CV. In reality, he's the 007 of angling, with a licence to creel any fish that swims, worldwide. And then, well, then there was me.

Under the rules, each team member is allocated a different beat to give the competition a smidgen of fairness. Steve Harrison, my guide, knew the Oakley beat well.

"So what do you reckon, Steve?" I asked as I opened up a junior chest-of-drawers stuffed with flies. He produced a rather splendid and effective-looking daddy-long-legs, the *plat du jour* of all successful dry-fly fishing that week. Naturally, I ignored his advice and recent results, plumping ➤



John Graham (above with guide Chas House) had the third highest score of the day. Marcus McCorkell (below) was Nick Zoll's guide. In best Rupert Bear's, Simon Cooper (below centre) ran the day. In ninth place with a score of 335 was Angus Kinloch (below right with guide Martin Batten)



“ ‘There are wild ones in good order and hunger-ravaged specimens in need of a loving mother and good home-cooking’ ”

for a mutant Klinkhamer fly of my own dressing. It wasn't an entirely insane choice as I'd used this fly to great effect on another Mottisfont beat last season. On that occasion, the water was similarly empty of rising fish but I'd induced takes by ginking up the fly and skating it over the surface on a short cast. My fellow competitor on the beat, Neil Patterson from *Country Life*, was having no such nonsense. He went straight for the nymph before we set off on either end of the water for our fishy duel.

We met again at lunch. I'd seen two trout all morning. Neil also had seen two – the same two, we agreed – but he had at least managed a sardine-sized grayling. “This,” I pronounced over a warm beer, “is like fishing a fish desert.” “Or saltwater fly-fishing,” said Neil. “Except you're only allowed to cast on the beach.”

POINTS TO PONDER

I was in no hurry to abandon the sandwiches and crisps. Unknown to Neil, I'd received intelligence of our lunch-time scores (or in my case, lack of one). Rumour was flying up and down the Test Valley that the rest of *The Field* team was doing rather well – winning even.

Nick Zoll had drawn the Wherwell Priory's park beats. “I'm fairly sure that I'm the first rod this season to roll a fly line across the water,” he texted. “Apart from the wild ones, in very good order, there are hunger-ravaged specimens in need of a loving mother and some good home-cooking. They're taking a tan-coloured lead Gammarus (shrimp) pattern, developed and tied by the Stancevs from Macedonia.”

Charles R-W was also scoring. He'd been given the Parsonage beat, where “the Test is of Lower Tay proportions and currently running the colour of a ‘special clinic’ urine sample”. He had taken three “on a hirsute little black number I pulled out of the darkest corner of my tackle bag called the Tasmanian Devil, best described as an untidy fuzz rolled on to a size 12 long shank – but fished upstream as only the best purist would, naturally.” This left me with an ugly choice. If I kept to just my one fly and didn't touch a fish, I'd score 100 points for my team. But if I changed – and caught a small fish – I'd still be down on points.

That's when I succumbed to sin and gave my fly a Brazilian, fly “modification” being allowed under the rules. Steve and I wandered upriver with this shaven nondescript, attached the violently orange “bite indicator” and split shot and hurled the contraption upstream. It should have resulted in a banshee wail from Halford's ghost but nothing broke the silence or the water, especially not a hooked fish. As a method, it was about as exciting as the *EastEnders* omnibus on the fourth repeat.

There was a brief flash of a decent trout working the shallows and had I kept the dry fly I'm sure I could have induced a take. But

This page: David Profumo (far right with his guide Clayton Moorhouse) finds himself in a spot of difficulty. **Happy Howards:** second-placed Taylor (below) and his guide Bennett (below right). **Opposite page:** Nicki Bergman-Brown (top) had the biggest fish of the day, a 28in brown trout. Jo O'Brien (centre) scored 260. Karin Norman (bottom with guide Keith Poulton) was the highest-scoring lady contestant. Neil Patterson (bottom, far right) was on *Country Life*'s team





he was a properly brought-up fish, saw the orange bobber and gave me the Bateman look: I was "The Man Who Fished The Test Using A Bite Indicator".

Neil Patterson might also have used this ghastliness but at least he'd done so successfully, having caught and released three fish the size of a salmon parr.

We agreed we'd fished like heroes, certainly deserved a pint, probably two. And since one of the happier rules demands all fishing cease at 4.30, at 4.35 we were off down to the Peat Spade with the easy speed of a Hampshire hare.

Charles R-W arrived 10 minutes later. His guide, Peter Roberts, said he'd never seen anything flogged harder. "But it worked," said Charles. "I hooked five more, and landed two. One came off at the net and counted as half a fish. So I caught five and half for the day and kept the hirsute number on all day for an extra fish's worth of points. The final fish came at the whistle. Four on and only one in the net for the afternoon and I was on the edge of despair. Peter said "Think Liverpool, think last minute," and at 4.29 and 30 seconds he said 'Charles, we are just about out of time,' and as he said 'time' I had my fifth - in the back of the net."

HALFORD'S REVENGE

But the olive-clad crowd was clamouring for news of Nick Zoll, rumoured to have been devastatingly effective. The results confirmed it. He and his guide, Marcus McCorkell, had landed 25 trout and a handful of grayling during the day. "In the afternoon the harpoon of choice was a Hare's Ear nymph, cunningly tied by your very own CR-W." His fishy finesse had given him top honours and propelled *The Field's* team into first place. Far better, the team had raised over £2,000 for Trout in the Classroom, a project to encourage children to become practical conservationists by placing fish hatchery units

in schools around the country. There, the children oversee the development of eggs into 12-week-old fry before releasing them into their local river.

But though this suffused the award ceremony with the sunshine of a good deed done it could not conceal one stark fact. I was luxuriating in the glory of a team win and my net contribution was zero. As a guide pointed out, I could have stayed in the pub all day looking at my one fly and still scored the same number of points. But we had won and I was left holding a very splendid glass trophy to prove it.

Natural justice could not permit this to continue. As I accepted a pint from the Editor of *Country Life*, I placed the trophy on the Peat Spade's all-too-rustic table. It slipped and splintered prettily across the flagstones. Back on the Oakley Beat, the weird noise akin to an old washing-machine ceased. Halford had at last stopped spinning in his grave. ■

To find out more about Trout in the Classroom, click on www.wildtrout.org. For details of next year's One Fly competition, email Simon Cooper, simon@fishingbreaks.co.uk. To beat The Field's team you will have to buy a Tardis. We are retiring with laurels worn.