

LEISURE

# THE LIFE-CHANGING POWER OF FLY-FISHING

AFTER YEARS OF RESISTING THE CALL OF THE ROD  
STUART HERITAGE FINALLY SUCCUMBED, AND NOW HE'S HOOKED



**T**HERE COMES A point in life when you look around and realise that you have too much stuff. Too many objects cluttering your home. Too many obligations to fulfil. Too much noise, too many distractions, too many notifications buzzing from the phone you bought in the mistaken belief that it would simplify your life. When this point comes – and, believe me, it will – there is every chance that you will embrace fly-fishing.

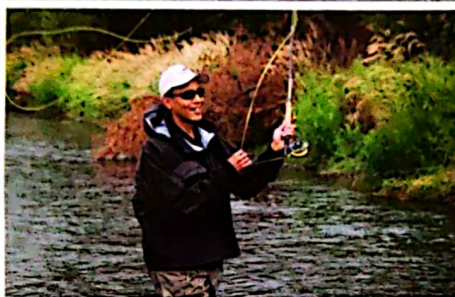
Many high-status figures have already done it. In 1963 Herbert Hoover wrote that “fishing seems to be one of the few avenues left to presidents through which they may escape to their own thoughts, may live in their own imaginings [and] find relief from the pneumatic hammer of constant personal contacts”. Celebrities including Harrison Ford, Liam Neeson and Henry Winkler have been known to find solace in a rod. Emma Watson is such an avid fly-fisher that in 2008 she donated a hand-tied Grey Wulff fly to a charity auction. The Queen Mother loved to fish in Scotland and New Zealand whenever she found herself overwhelmed by the pressures of whatever it was that she did.

There is, of course, an element of the flex to this, because fly-fishing is one of the rare hobbies with no upper spending limit. Although a beginner can buy a perfectly adequate fly and rod for about £50, a more discerning angler will start shelling out thousands for specialist axial fibre rods and compression-moulded Gore-Tex waders and waterproof bags made of ballistic nylon.

When that particular itch has been scratched, the holidays will come. Maybe they’ll go to Cumbria and stay in a lodge with a hot tub. Maybe they’ll fly to Iceland and fish for Atlantic salmon in the Midfjardara with a private guide and a personal chef. Or they could do what the writer Ruaridh Nicoll did last summer and spend £30,000 on a nine-night fishing trip to Bhutan.

But why stop there? If you’re really serious about fly-fishing, you’ll want to buy your own stretch of river. Two thirds of a mile of the River Wye will set you back £175,000. Alternatively, there’s a four-bedroom house in Worcestershire that has its own fishing lake. That’s just been reduced in price to £1,195,000. Get going, bargain hunters.

Of course, nothing will get the fly-fishing community glowering like turning up with top-of-the-line equipment you don’t know how to use. My dad is a fly-casting instructor with awards and national records, and a long list of happy clients to his name, and he loves to tell one particular story about a dim-witted pupil. The client became gripped by the idea that buying an £800 rod would improve



From top: the Queen Mother in New Zealand in 1966; David Beckham; Barack Obama in Montana in 2009

his performance more than anything else. “But you haven’t learnt how to fish yet,” my dad frowned. “Give me half of what you’re planning to spend on the rod and I’ll get you casting twice as far with the kit you already have.” But the man wouldn’t listen and, to the audible dismay of all the instructors within earshot, bought the rod and disappeared into the night where, you have to assume, he remains an objectively terrible fisherman.

The lesson seems to be that, if fishing is something in which you plan to invest a lot of time and money, it might be a smart idea to know how to fish first. And this is how I came to spend a day last autumn being taught how to fly-fish in Hampshire’s wonderfully named Nether Wallop Mill.

Perhaps surprisingly, given my father’s expertise, I am a total novice when it comes to fishing, save for a couple of coarse fishing trips as a child during which I was bored out of my mind. The idea of

standing around doing nothing never really appealed to me. Of course, that was before I had a wife and two kids and a job that mainly seems to involve a million different people asking me to do several different things for them all at once, around the clock, every single day. Now, the thought of spending a quiet day in the middle of nowhere with barely any phone signal sounds like nothing less than heaven on Earth.

It has to be said, Nether Wallop Mill is just about as close to heaven on Earth as you can get. Threaded with Wallop Brook, a tributary of the River Test, the mill is home to the country’s longest-established fly-fishing school. It was founded in 1968 by Dermot Wilson, a legend in angling circles, and taken over in the 1990s by the gregarious author and conservationist Simon Cooper. What he has achieved with the place is staggering.

Unbelievably beautiful and serene – save for the occasional Apache helicopter hurtling across the horizon, courtesy of an Army Air Corps base – its centrepiece is a lake fed by the chalk-stream brook and stocked with rainbow, brown and blue trout. More experienced anglers can wander off and try their hand at catching fish in the brook. Novices like me, however, will spend their day on the lake aided by a guide. Mine was Malcolm Price who, on the basis of his treatment of me, might just be the most patient human being in all of history.

Perhaps this comes with experience. Thousands of people have fished at Nether Wallop Mill over the years and if even a small percentage of them were as crap as I was, Price can boast an expert-level tolerance for the inept. My dad has always maintained that he can teach someone to fish by making them spend half an hour simply ticking their arm back and forth like a metronome. I am living proof that this categorically isn’t the case.

During a friendly, if frustrating, session, Price carefully corrected my various casting errors (elbow too low, wrist too loose, overextended backcast, rod too high, errant left hand) only for a dozen more to spring up in their place. Fly-fishing, it turns out, requires complete concentration and complete coordination. It’s basically like being a one-man band but for food. And yet, wow, I loved it. I might have been rubbish at the actual act of catching fish but the experience of it – the fresh air, the nature, the vanishingly rare opportunity to concentrate on just one thing in a world determined to pull your attention in a million different directions at once – was wonderful.

Cooper wasn’t surprised. “When you ask people what they like about fishing, catching fish usually comes fourth or fifth on the list,” he said over a plate of burgers he had barbecued for lunch.

In the money-swallowing world of fly-fishing this day of tuition is a bargain too at £215, which roughly equates to a quarter of a fancy new rod that you don’t know how to work. Despite my inherent ineptitude I have the feeling that fly-fishing is something I’m going to come back to again and again. I had better start saving for that two thirds of a mile of river. [fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)

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