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# LIGHTS, CAMERA...

Simon Cooper selects his favourite  
six fishing shows of all time



**T**HE PANDEMIC HAS BEEN GOOD FOR angling; fishery visits have surged as regulars have fished more, lapsed anglers have returned, and newbies have discovered our outdoor delights. We have also been blessed with the TV series *Mortimer & Whitehouse*. In my conversations, it is regularly cited as the inspiration for picking up a rod again, or better still, for the first time. Which got me thinking: what are the most influential fishing shows of all time?

6. *The Old Man and The Sea*. The 1958 film featuring Spencer Tracy, a rubber marlin and stock fishing shots is hardly a cinematic masterpiece. Filmed largely on a sound stage, you can almost see the film crew hurling buckets of water over Tracy as he heroically survives in a boat you know is being hand-rocked. But it is iconic, as is the book, featuring as it does, a cameo role for Hemingway in the final scene.

5. *A Passion for Angling*. Such was the falling-out of the three participants, Bob James, Chris Yates and director Hugh Miles, the series, first shown on the BBC in 1993, was never going to be reprised. Which is a shame as the six episodes charted a journey through the quiet pleasure of British angling in the hands of two loveable eccentrics, gently narrated by Bernard Cribbins, which appealed to an audience far beyond fishing itself.

4. J R Hartley: not a TV show or film, but I'd wager this advert for Yellow Pages in 1983 has been seen by a larger audience than any of the others combined and was voted the fifth-most memorable advert of all time in 2015, spawning a series of books that sold hundreds of thousands of copies. You might argue it was the worst-ever advert for fly-fishing, embedding in a whole generation the ideal of us as tweed-clad old fools.

3. *Mortimer & Whitehouse – Gone Fishing*. Too early to be judged a classic? I'm pretty sure not. With 26 shows

and four series since 2018, Mortimer and Whitehouse's unusual take on fishing and life, inspired by recovery from ill-health for both lead characters, has been a huge hit for the BBC a quarter of a century on from *A Passion*.

2. *Go Fishing* with John Wilson. I was tempted to put this at number one as it was John who kept the angling flame burning through the 1980s when no other TV station other than Channel 4 would touch fishing with a bargepole. Remarkably, the series ran for 16 years from 1986 to 2002, with hundreds of episodes and John expanding his horizons to ever more far-flung parts of the globe. Before streaming and YouTube, it was my armchair pleasure, fronted by a man voted "Greatest angler of all time" by *Angling Times* readers in 2004.

1. *A River Runs Through It*. It's said director Robert Redford had to beg reclusive writer Norman Maclean to allow him to make this film, their shared love of fly-fishing allowing Redford to succeed where others had failed. This first major Hollywood outing for Brad Pitt tells the story of how a father and his two sons, largely incapable of emotional connection through normal family life, find contentment fishing together in rural Montana.

I am slightly biased as the year the film was released, 1992, was soon after I started Fishing Breaks, and the film was such a sensation that it was the perfect vehicle on which to piggyback to give me exposure in the media. However, I will argue to the death that the combination of story, scenery, fishing and filmmaking (it won an Oscar for Best Cinematography) easily puts *A River Runs Through It* in the number-one slot. ■

*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.*