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END OF THE GOLD RUSH

Falling numbers of stillwater trout fisheries should concern us all, warns Simon Cooper



LEW GRADE, ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF commercial television in Britain, famously described it as a “licence to print money”. For a while it seemed that a few years after the arrival of *Crossroads* to our screens, opening a trout lake was a similar route to riches.

All over the nation trout waters became our own gold rush. Pioneers such as Sam Holland at Avington carved out a niche for big trout. On the blue riband stillwaters, waiting lists for membership were the norm. For the less fortunate, tapped-out gravel pits were pressed into action and we competed with sailing clubs on reservoirs. And everywhere you went farmers were turning dirty ponds into larger dirty ponds, which we paid good money to fish.

I soon became one of those wealth providers as the lure of bigger and more exotic fish took me from river to lake. Once, I had delighted at wild browns not much larger than my hand. But I was seduced by the likes of Bob Church. A rainbow of 5lb? I quivered at the prospect. Boat fishing on big reservoirs? Now that was good fun. Lead-core sinking lines? It was incredibly exciting. New flies. New kit. New techniques.

A generation on, the gold rush is over. Around the chalkstreams in southern England the number of stillwaters has fallen by at least half, maybe even two thirds since “peak trout”. To an extent that is simply a reflection of basic supply-and-demand economics: boom, bust, then equilibrium. But things might be worse than that.

Recently, I’ve been visiting stillwaters by way of a marketing project. It has been fascinating and in many respects heart-warming. But nobody who runs a trout fishery is doing it for the money. They do it because they love it. One manager of a prestigious fishery confided to me that they average just two tickets a day across the

year. The bottom line is most trout lakes are unable to sustain a single employee on minimum wage.

If that is the reality, the next question is why? It seems to me there are three main reasons: ageing customer base, unrealistic pricing and changing social habits. One guy I met more than adequately illustrated the last of those when he told me how his father-in-law went fishing every Sunday regardless of family commitments. We both agreed he was a dinosaur, though I secretly wish there were more like him. As to age, take a quick look around next time you are fishing – I guarantee you’ll rarely see anyone under 50. And 2020 day-ticket prices are way out of kilter with true costs. In my fishing book from 1974 I recorded that I paid £7 (plus £1 for a boat) for a four-fish ticket at Peckham’s Copse, a fairly standard gravel pit in West Sussex. In real terms that ticket would be £73 today but, as the editor demonstrated [*Editor’s Letter, March*], the most the market could stand for the now demised Peckham’s would be something around £40.

But does it matter if stillwaters go the same way as the village pub? I think it does. Aside from being useful to the rural economy, trout lakes provide great sport in themselves, as well as being a bridge to all the other kinds of fly-fishing, not to mention other angling. The current buoyant state of coarse fishing shows there is a demand for a great outdoors that involves fish. What we have to figure out is how to capture that market. ■

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.