

TRAVEL SECTION OF THE YEAR

The Daily Telegraph

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TRAVEL



Returning to the hobby Dad loved, I'm finally hooked

Bored by angling as a child, Simon Horsford gives it a second chance on a fly fishing break in Hampshire

Fly fishing was one of my dad's great loves. When I was growing up, he tried to instil in me a similar passion. It didn't work. Even when he told me about the artfulness of hooking his prey, I wasn't swayed. That I hardly ever caught anything didn't help, nor did getting my line entangled in a tree. It was frustrating and, to my younger self, boring.

Now, 50 years later, I am back by the water with fishing rod in hand, having a lesson from a Fishing Breaks expert at Nether Wallop in the Test Valley, Hampshire. Will I feel differently and – more importantly – will I finally understand what it was about fishing that so attracted my father?

I am here because, when he died in 2018, my mother gave me his collection of fishing rods, together with several boxes of beautifully made flies and his old leather-bound fishing book. This book details his successes since the first entry in September 1949 and includes the rivers, lochs and loughs he had fished on around England, Scotland and Ireland, together with the type of fish (salmon, rainbow or brown trout), its weight, the fly used and other remarks, such as: "taken on [the Who vocalist] Roger Daltrey's water" in Sussex; "lost one from the net" and "used a fly found in car park!"

Reading this and taking possession of his rods made me wonder whether I had missed out on a crucial bonding moment with my dad; we didn't really share any other hobbies or interests.

"It is the family connection that brings most people to fly fishing," says Simon Cooper, who runs Fishing Breaks, which offers opportunities to fish, plus guiding and tuition, on various chalk streams throughout England. "But in the end it doesn't matter who provides the incentive: the key thing is that a lifetime passion begins on the first day on the water."

The clear chalk streams that Fishing Breaks favours emerge from underground chalk aquifers and springs, and flow over flint gravel beds, ensuring their cleanliness and endowing them with minerals – ideal for fish to thrive.

Essentials

Fishing Breaks (01264 781988; fishingbreaks.co.uk) offers opportunities for single and group bookings on chalk streams in eight English counties. Tuition and guides are also available, as is a "fish camp" – staying overnight by the river. Prices from £55 a day

Where to stay
The Grosvenor (01264 810606; thegrosvenorstockbridge.com), in the heart of Stockbridge in Hampshire, dates back 200 years and has long had a connection with fly fishing. Doubles from £192, including breakfast

The fly fishing season runs from April 1 to October 31, with some local variations



"Chalk streams are the apex of fly fishing," says Cooper, "the equivalent of playing on Centre Court at Wimbledon."

My guide is Bob Preston, a veteran fisherman who has spent his working life involved with river management and appears to know everything there is to know about fly fishing. And there is a lot to learn. Initially we concentrate on the basics and after a chat over a coffee by the thatched fisherman's lodge at Nether Wallop Mill, home to a fly fishing school for more than 50 years, we begin with



a lesson on how to cast – on the lawn.

Preston tells me how the rod hand and the line hand perform key functions at the same time and why, in fly fishing, the back cast is every bit as important as the forward cast – it is all about projecting the line smoothly and gently onto the water, and it is also all about timing. If you get it wrong – as I discover – the line can fall in a heap and the fish will scarper (something that brings back old memories). After a while, I get the hang of it, but rarely match Preston's skill in landing the fly on a precise spot.

It is soon clear that fly fishing has become increasingly sophisticated in terms of the types of rods and reels available. Then there are the intricacies of flies themselves (dry, wet and nymphs) and when to use them. All are mostly made using natural materials – Preston makes his own – and their names alone are amusingly esoteric: Parachute Adams, Tup's Indispensable and a Flying Condom among them.

By now I am itching to have a cast on the lake. I get my wish as Preston sets up my dad's old rod – an early graphite model by Hardy dating from the 1980s – which prompts a nod of approval.

Although I can see the fish swimming around the well-stocked lake in the grounds of the mill, this doesn't mean they are any easier to catch. The key to success is "observation and awareness", Preston tells me. "It's called fishing, not catching," he adds knowingly. I recall



▲▲ The reel thing: Simon Horsford gets a bite during a lesson with guide Bob Preston

◀ Net gains: our writer with his catch

▲ Simon inherited his late father's rod, flies and log book

that my dad always found being in the countryside and appreciating his surroundings part of the attraction.

Suddenly, I get a take. "Fish!" shouts Preston – but before I can react, it is gone. Half an hour later, I land a 2lb rainbow trout – managing to "play" the fish, using the line to let it run, then reeling it in – before Preston has it in the net. We admire it as he removes the hook and gently slips it back into the water.

With renewed confidence and only the occasional tangled line, I relax and a while later, using Preston's modern, lighter rod, catch a couple more – including the more elusive blue trout – both of which are returned to the lake.

After a night at the Grosvenor in Stockbridge, a long-established and

popular fishing hotel because of its proximity to the River Test (one table at breakfast is reserved for the Houghton Fishing Club, which dates from 1822 and has a restricted membership of just 25), I am set for a morning's fishing on the River Nadder, a chalk stream and a tributary of the Avon at Dinton Mill, near Salisbury. Preston tells me its chief attraction is that it hasn't been "mucked around" by the water authorities and is allowed to meander naturally. Surrounded by alder trees and willows, the "beat" we are on is idyllic, overlooked by grazing cattle, with the odd kingfisher swooping by as a pair of swans glide past.

Casting is a lot trickier here than on the lake, with trees by the bank and reeds in the river to negotiate. It begins to rain, but as we switch between the slower-moving pools and faster flowing sections, it seems the fish are being particularly crafty; a couple of times I get a tug on the line but the fish spit out the fly. No luck on the final morning then, but it doesn't matter: just being here has made me more appreciative of the allure of fly fishing itself.

In *The Compleat Angler*, the 17th-century fishing writer Izaak Walton suggested that "rivers and the inhabitants of the watery element were made for wise men to contemplate, and fools to pass by without consideration". Next time I pass a river, I will have my dad's fishing rod to hand. I think he would be pleased.