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BUY ME A RIVER

Should you, if you can?
Simon Cooper has the answers



THERE IS AN APPOSITE SAYING ABOUT the economics of pleasure: “If it flies or floats, rent it.” If you’ve ever thought of owning a river, you could add “or flows”.

Recently, there has been a spate of high-end chalkstream sales. Some were public offerings, others of the fashionable off-the-market type. I’ve seen more activity this year than I’ve seen in the past ten. Why? Well, it would be tempting to come up with a fancy explanation, but really it comes down to the eternal triumvirate: death, divorce and money. Values are as high as I have ever known them, but that is not something peculiar to rivers, which largely follow the gyrations (mostly upward in the past two decades) of house and land values.

So, if you have cash to spare and the urge to own your own river, should you? It’s a question I’m regularly asked, and the answer is simple. Yes! Owning beautiful things is something to which we should all aspire and there are few things more beautiful than the perfect chalkstream. However, it is not without pitfalls.

The first thing you must accept is that owning a river is not going to make you money. Yes, you can make an annual profit in the sense that, if properly managed, income will exceed expenditure, but in terms of a return on investment it would be the sort of proposal that would send any half-competent wealth manager screaming for the hills.

You must do your due diligence before buying. If I come back in a future life with a desire to be rich, I’m going to train as a lawyer specialising in riparian law. I barely know any river that has not been subject to legal wrangling in the recent past. The areas of dispute are largely boundaries, access and flows. Whereabouts exactly (I mean to the nearest yard) does your fishing begin and end? Title deed maps are notoriously inexact. Do you have direct, unfettered access to the river from

a public highway? Is there, for instance, a farmer who has the right to ford the river four times a day with his dairy herd? Who controls any hatches that might affect the free flow of water? The questions are legion.

Once you’ve satisfied yourself of the legals, there are things you must accept are outside your control. Footpaths. Flight paths. Highway noise. Neighbouring housing. Sadly, in the increasingly urbanised regions through which the southern chalkstreams flow, these are becoming more of a nuisance, but for the most part they are factored into the asking price. Whether you’re able to live with one, all or any of them is a personal judgment.

Finally, it is the state of the river itself. Assuming you’ve satisfied yourself of all the above, this is probably the easiest aspect of any purchase. And the most fun. A restoration, done well, can turn a lifeless ditch into something spectacular. Beyond that, river management is far from an exact science. Some like it wild and woolly. Others manicured. Stocking, assuming you’ve the correct permit (another note for due diligence) can be your personal choice. Essentially, this is about how much time, passion and money you want to expend.

In the end, if you have the wherewithal and energy, never hesitate to buy a river if one comes your way. As my farming grandfather always used to say, we are not making any more land. But I will give you one word of warning: you’ll end up fishing less but loving rivers more. I know this for sure, and that when I’m dead, it will be the rivers I miss, not the fishing. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters’ Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk