



“WE LIKE IT SHAGGY”

On famous waters once frequented by Halford, a new fishing club has emerged whose keepers don't mow the banks into bowling-green perfection, writes **Andy Anderson**




SHADED BY SYCAMORE, wafted by willow, caressed by a silken thread of chalkstream, stands a hut. It is clearly a labour of love: jauntily thatched, close-boarded in tight-packed split logs, its bright-green painted door inviting welcome. It is a hut such as a hobbit might be proud of, and it lies deep in a dreaming shire.

But this is no ordinary hut, and no ordinary shire. This is the fishing hut built exactly a century ago in 1908 by Frederic M. Halford, the high priest and tutelary genius of dry-fly fishing, and it stands on the banks of the Oakley Stream, a carrier of the River Test in the county of Hampshire, cradle of all that fly-anglers hold dear.

Inside is a soft sofa, a battered cane rod, a weighing-scale to calibrate one's triumphs. On one wall a monochrome of Halford gazes benignly down, grey bearded, eyes soft yet quizzical, observing the modern angler's carbon rod with perhaps a hint of bemusement. On another there is a set of autochromes (the earliest form of colour photograph) taken by Halford himself. They show the Oakley Stream, little changed today; the 1,250-year-old Oakley Oak which grows beside it – then, as now, the oldest living oak in Hampshire – and some of Halford's catch, meticulously recorded: "s. fario female, 1 lb 4 oz; male ditto 2lb 0 oz; 27 rudd from Peat Hole".

Outside, the first bats of the evening swoop on the succulent Mayfly performing their ephemeral dance under oak and alder. A young barn owl leaves the Oakley Oak on a speculative patrol of the water meadows; a rise dimples the languid water; history hangs heavy in the air.

And now another chapter is being written. For at Mottisfont Abbey, Halford's final fishery on the Middle Test a few miles upstream of Romsey, the National Trust (NT) has taken over the management of the three famous beats – the Main, the Oakley, the Rectory – and leased the fishing to the first new syndicate to be formed on the Test in more than 50 years: the Mottisfont Fly-Fishing Club (MFFC). With a three-year lease now completed, and a five-year one recently signed, MFFC is looking forward to fresh piscatorial triumphs... while all the time adhering to the club's unofficial motto: "We like it shaggy!" 

Left: At Mottisfont Abbey, Halford's final fishery on the middle Test, the National Trust now manage the three famous beats.

It may sound better in Latin: *Hirsuta nos delectat* (literally: "Shagginess delights us!") But in either language, it aptly sums up the spirit of what is going on at Mottisfont. Neither MFFC (who do the fishing) nor the NT (who do the work) want Mottisfont to resemble those parts of the modern Test in which the banks are manicured, the weed scalped and the record-cards dominated by easily caught, wallowing rainbows. At Mottisfont, the banks are lovingly tended, but not trimmed to bowling-green perfection. Weed is cut, but to the river's needs, rather than those of the lazy caster. Trees are trimmed, but gut-hungry branches are left to trap the unwary. All is... shaggy. And the trout, increasingly, are brown, butter-yellow-bellied torpedoes that are as wild as the hills.

The great man himself came to Mottisfont in 1904, at the height of his fame – this was before the name of Halford came (perhaps unjustly, at least in Halford's early years, according to Tony Hayter, Halford's biographer) to be associated with ultimate dry-fly dogma. Working with his new keeper, Dick Coxen, he set about managing the water along the lines he had advocated in his book *Making a Fishery* (1895). By the time of his death in 1914, Mottisfont had become the equal of the Houghton Club as the very best fishing on the middle Test.

Each April, Halford would take rooms near the railway halt at nearby Dunbridge, staying for many weeks. Over the years he, in contrast to his popular image as an aloof and awkward man, became almost a benign alternative squire in the district, quietly dispensing many acts of kindness among the poorer villagers. From Dunbridge he would take a pony and trap to the Oakley beat. His housekeeper provided provisions, and Halford and his many guests would

fish on into the twilight hours. As Tony Hayter writes, "The place seemed like a paradise".

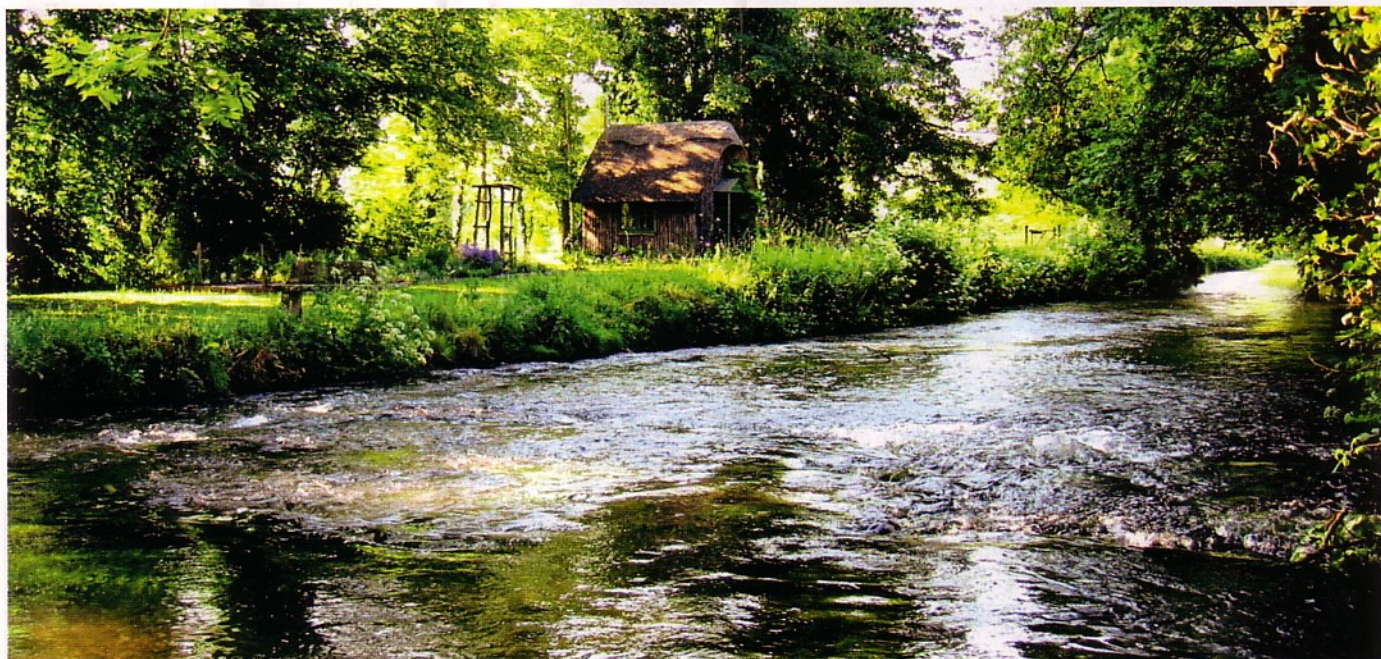
It was not so paradisiacal for the coarse-fish population: in 1905 alone, Coxen and his helpers killed 800 pike. Grayling were shown little mercy. Other pictures in the Halford hut show a glorious catch of roach and rudd, artistically arranged on water reeds – all dead. Not surprisingly, the predator problem was soon "under control", as were the coarse fish. Rightly, this is not the approach today.

Halford's preference for wild fish did not preclude stocking – he took the view that a judicious introduction of 1 lb-1½ lb stockies reduced the fishing pressure on the wild fish. And by today's standards he was no great slayer of trout. Hayter's scholarly biography notes that throughout 1906 Halford caught 59 trout (the biggest 3 lb 14 oz), his guests caught 17, and 30 grayling were also landed. His last-ever fish was a 1 lb 2 oz rainbow, caught in the autumn of 1913 on his beloved Oakley Stream.

WHETHER HALFORD WOULD have liked Mottisfont's present shagginess is open to question, but he would certainly have applauded the goal of managing the fishery in order to promote the natural spawning of wild brown trout and salmon. Phil Marshall and Dylan Everett are NT countryside wardens responsible for the management of the river, and their skill, love of the river and pride in their work is transparent.

Some sceptical eyebrows were raised in the Test Valley when the NT first took over the management of these historic waters. Especially when it appeared that they were proposing such innovations as letting reeds grow in wider, slower sections in order to speed

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PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDY ANDERSON/ROBERT BRYDGES/TERRY GRIFFITHS

the flow and clean the gravel; or not "putting the river to bed" at the end of the season, but leaving the bankside vegetation untidy and straggling in the water margin to provide cover for fry and habitat for invertebrate larvae; or cutting weed so as to manage water-flow, not primarily to expose fish.

But according to Phil: "Since taking over the river in 2004, the change of management we have put in place has already brought significant benefits to native wildlife. The fishing experience we offer is more challenging and more natural. In addition to the river works we have undertaken, the NT has altered farming and land management practices in order to protect all water courses from siltation and pollution. Our ultimate aim is to provide, through management, an excellent fishery with the highest nature conservation value."

The guiding philosophy is simple – what is best for the native flora and fauna in and around the river also provides the best chalkstream fishing for the discerning fly-fisher. And the evidence is there to see: wild fish are plentiful, especially on the beats of the western carrier – the Oakley and the Rectory Streams. This suggests that their food supply is increasing – there has been an explosion in the population of invertebrates whose larval stages are spent in the margins, such as aquatic cranefly and damselfly (the extremely rare southern version of which is now colonising the Oakley and Rectory as well as smaller carriers on the estate).

There are kingfishers nesting on every beat, and on the Main, crested grebes and water rails.

Predators (including members of MFFC, but excluding poachers) also have a place in the chalkstream ecosystem and are not discouraged –



The fishing hut at Mottisfont, here in an early photograph, was built in 1908.

fisheries: "Because the focus here is conservation we like to fish relatively lightly, which means there is always unallocated space in the diary, even in May and June. With that slack in the system, we are able to be much more flexible in accommodating members' business and holiday commitments – it's more work to manage the diary that way, but the members appreciate it." A pause. "Though one occasionally has to get a little firm with those who plead commitments from the beginning of July to the end of October!"

The fishing itself – three beats averaging a little more than 800 metres each – is a mix of broad glides, tree-shaded riffles, deep undercuts and holes and twittering shallows full of lightning-fast parr and grayling. Water clarity is excellent, weed growth, including ranunculus, is luxuriant.

The Main beat, on the principal Test itself, is more

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otters have been made especially welcome with the construction of artificial holts. Halford might have turned a blind eye to the odd otter, but somehow one can't picture him making a wigwam of sticks for them.

Says Dylan: "We pride ourselves on managing our ever-changing chalkstreams and wetland habitats as nature intended; through pioneering methods for the benefit of our native wildlife, while also providing a classic and yet unique first-class fishing experience."

The club itself was founded in 2005 by Mike Johnson and Robert Brydges, two residents of Mottisfont who felt that the time had come for local people to be able to fish "their river". Membership is not exclusive, but residents within 15 miles of Mottisfont Abbey receive a graduated discount according to distance away – more than two thirds of the 32-member syndicate qualify. Full rods get 23 days' fishing; half rods 12. A limited number of £20 "village tickets" are available for non-member fly-fishers who live or work in the parish of Mottisfont. And everyone's rod fees are partly subsidised by the sale of a strictly limited number of day-tickets and the occasional corporate day.

Mike Johnson, club chairman, highlights one of the ways in which MFFC differs from more conventional

than a good double-haul cast wide at the top and considerably wider towards the middle and at the bottom Mottisfont road bridge, below which is the Kimbridge beat. It is single-bank fishing throughout. An open-sided thatched hut splits the beat; above this it is mostly wooded, the river deep and slow, and the trout tend to lurk close to the (shaggy!) bank, picking off terrestrials blown on to the water.

Below the hut is a dense bed of rushes through which a number of wooden walkways are planned to provide access. Then comes the deep pool at Cuckoo Clump – all pools and glides are named – from which member Jeremy Weitz extracted a 28 lb pike in the close season last year; he returned it unharmed, for no fish are killed these days at Mottisfont unless they are stocked trout. Towards the road bridge, the river is shallow and weedy, the main prey grayling, of which there is a considerable number. Swans were a pest on the Main in 2007: without a nesting pair to drive off competition as many as 50 young singletons took refuge, with the inevitable depredation of weed in the shallows. The best news of early 2008 was the sight of a nesting pair at the bottom of the beat. The "black menace" is thankfully absent at present.

The Rectory beat – the Western carrier below the

Abbey – begins immediately downstream of the road bridge in Mottisfont village. It is mostly single bank, with a small stretch of double-bank fishing. It first roars into an unfishably brambly pool, then is semi-tamed to gurgle past a lovely white-walled rectory whose lawns sweep to the river. It then flattens and slows through a series of twists and turns, past another (more basic) fishing hut, until it rips through the famous Chicane turn, probably the fastest-moving piece of any chalkstream water. From there it picks up the tributary of Wallace's Ditch, enters a lovely glade of trees with a series of pools and riffles, runs parallel with the River Dun for a few yards and finally becomes part of the Kimbridge water.

The Oakley, with its famous hut, lies upstream of Mottisfont village, the river hustling and bustling through farmland. The first few hundred yards are shallow and gin-clear, whipping one's fly away in an instant from the greedy grayling. The stretch below and above the hut is a delightful mix of run and riffle. Above a small weir (one of very few on the club's waters) the river turns, deepens and slows until it becomes almost canal-like, running between rushy banks, with access holes cut here and there. It ends on the corner of a deep pool; above is Bossington's beat 1. It is mostly double bank, but the right bank is deliberately left (very) shaggy, so most anglers stick to the left.

Below the Oakley Stream and above the Rectory lies the Abbey water, which runs past the visitor-thronged lawns of Mottisfont Abbey itself and provides an unfished refuge for some of the plumpest trout imaginable. The NT's policy on foul-hooked visitors remains unknown – but guessable. Recently the Club and the NT have agreed access to a short stretch of the River Dun for the 2008 season, a delicious stretch of water, as yet untried.

HATCHES OF INDIVIDUAL fly species vary between patchy and a near-blizzard, as well as from year to year, but Phil and Dylan are convinced that the general pattern of invertebrate numbers is rising. That might be little consolation in the dog days of July and August, when the Rectory especially becomes the haunt of super-spooky fish that delight in smutting and little else. Even when conditions seem perfect, there can be a lack of visibly feeding trout, which sorely tests that Halfordian principle: though shalt cast only to a rising fish. The club allows nymphing after the first weedcut (usually the end of June) for although principles are fine in theory, the club is far from dogmatic.

As Robert Brydges, club secretary, says: "I wouldn't call us neo-Halfordians. I'd rather present it as a consciousness of Mottisfont's distinguished history and a support for the Halfordian aesthetic principle – that the best fly-fishing imitates the invertebrates that are a wild trout's natural food, and that stocking should be a balance, primarily aimed at reducing fishing pressure on the wild population. The debate has long since moved on from the 'dry-fly-good, wet-fly-bad' specific embodiment of 'Halfordism' – and so have we."



The Chicane turn on the Rectory beat is an unusually swift section of chalkstream.

So: traditional fly patterns are encouraged, but barbless hooks are now the rule and catch-and-release is encouraged. Two fish may be taken on any one day, a further five caught and released. The club has adopted a policy of killing any large (stray) rainbows that are caught. The water is stocked with browns, but not so heavily as to pressurise the wild fish, which must all be released. Salmon have been seen but not caught: they and any coarse-fish caught have to be released.

Fish are plentiful: at Mayfly time a triple-brace of big browns is entirely possible. But the MFFC member is just as likely to be thrilled with a truly wild 1 lb brown trout, or a 2 lb-plus grayling. The club's annual riverside lunches also win warm praise – particularly among those who can remember what happened at them. The club offers a particularly pure vision of fly-fishing: purist (or puritanical) it is not.

But back to the Halford hut. Above a window are four pictures of riverkeepers, and underneath them, these words: "1903-2004: nineteen Prime Ministers, thirteen Editors of The Times, nine Popes – four head river-keepers at Mottisfont." The first of the four is the splendidly moustached Dick Coxen, pictured with Halford; he was succeeded in 1919 by his son Bob Coxen; Bert Pragnell took over in 1961; Ralph Collins in 1975. Phil and Dylan are joint fifth.

Time, of course, is relative. At Mottisfont, it passes slowly.



Factfile

Day-tickets for all the Mottisfont beats can be booked through Fishing Breaks. Prices: £250 to £500. Minimum booking is two rods until August 1. Corporate rod days for parties of six to eight are offered. Web: www.fishingbreaks.co.uk
 F M Halford and the Dry-fly Revolution. By Tony Hayter. Published by Robert Hale. £25. Out of print, but available through good sporting bookshops/websites.
 For further information on the fishing conservation work and plans for the future at Mottisfont, contact Phil Marshall, countryside manager, The National Trust, Mottisfont. Tel: 01794 344 003. E-mail: philip.marshall@nationaltrust.org.uk. Guided tours of the fishery can be arranged, including group bookings. For more information, tel: 01794 344 020; e-mail: mottisfontabbey@nationaltrust.org.uk
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