

Wild about the Wellow

Jon Beer fishes a remote Westcountry brook where 19 years ago anglers pioneered a grassroots approach to trout conservation

PHOTOGRAPHY: JON BEER



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*Jon Beer is the president of the Wild Trout Trust. He fishes all over the world and is author of three books, *Gone Fishing*, *The Trout and I*, and *Not All Beer and Bezenenet*.*

I HAD A wooden jigsaw when I was a little boy. Each piece was a county of England and Wales. These were proper counties, mind: none of your Tyne and Wear and West Midlands. There was Westmorland and Cumberland, Middlesex and a little piece for Huntingdon. Each piece had tiny pictures showing industries in that county. I loved that jigsaw. I knew every piece by touch, by its idiosyncratic shape, moulded by history and distorted by the odd lump where some rogue parish encroached into its neighbouring county. Nowadays I live in one of those lumps, a single parish of Oxfordshire, almost surrounded by Northants and Warwickshire. And on a day last June I found myself in another.

The county boundary between Wiltshire and Somerset runs north-south past Bath, along the east bank of the River Avon. And then, for no apparent reason, it turns west, following Midford Brook for a mile or so upstream. On that warm morning in June I did much the same. At the small village of Midford the county boundary realises its mistake and turns smartly round, heading due east, back to the Avon before resuming its way to the south. But I carried on upstream, making for the next bridge along the brook. I was meeting a man about some fishing.

Fred Scourse is vice-president of the Avon and Tributaries Angling Association. The ATAA is one of the oldest fishing clubs in the country, founded in 1876 in a golden age of trout fishing. It was a time redolent with great fly-fishing names, of George Selwyn Marryat and Francis Francis, of the Houghton Fly Fishers Club, created by Dr. Whickham in 1875 and joined two years later by an aspiring F.M. Halford. But that was on the limpid waters of the Hampshire chalkstreams. The waters of the ATAA lie further west, strung along the border of Somerset and

“It is not easy to look dignified in this hat. Even for a rear admiral”

Wiltshire where the rivers run a trifle siltier, the native trout a trifle smaller on the Bristol Avon and its southern tributaries, the Frome and the Midford, Wellow and Cam Brooks. Not that the native trout would have troubled the self-confident Victorian fisherman, ever inclined to improve on nature with generous stocking. Today the waters of the ATAA are a mixed fishery with coarse fishing predominant on the Avon and Frome and trout fishing on the Midford, Cam and Wellow Brook - which was chuckling under the bridge where we met. We left Fred's car here and took mine to the lower end of the Wellow.

We parked and looked down on the sumptuous valley of the Wellow bathed in morning sun. And Fred discovered he'd left his hat in the car. Fred is not blessed with much in the way of natural protection from the sun so I offered him my hat, which was scrunched in the bottom of my tackle bag. This disreputable hat has a floppy brim that swells into a small peak. It is not easy to look dignified in this hat. Even for a rear admiral. Particularly if you choose to ▶

LEFT
Wading up the Wellow. Its gravelly bottom and ranunculus much like a chalkstream.



Fred Scourse, first director of the Wild Trout Trust, looks over the pastoral idyll of the Wellow valley.

wear it sideways with the peak over the right ear. But it keeps off the sun. We made our way down to the river beside a field of ripening barley.

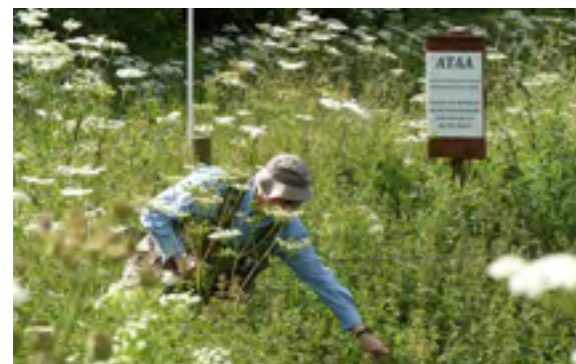
It's an extraordinary place, this Wellow valley. It's as remote and tranquil a spot as you could find, a perfect pastoral idyll - less than three miles from the city centre of Bath, invisible beyond a wooded hill. The brook wasn't easy to spot, either. It wound in tight meanders between high banks crowded with the clamorous growth of early summer. We could see the thing down there - but how to get down and fish it?

The answer emerged as we made our way

upstream. But only just: it was poking through a bankside cloud of cow parsley - a white pole, betraying the location of a ladder down through the lush vegetation. Fred stepped on to the ladder

and disappeared down into the greenery like a submariner descending the conning tower - a fitting image for a man who spent much of his naval career at sea in nuclear submarines at the height of the Cold War. I followed Fred on the ladder, down into the deep green world of the Wellow Brook.

What a difference a dozen feet can make: down here it looked, for all the world, like a minor chalkstream. There were all the usual fixtures and fittings - the gravelly bottom, the luxuriant weed and diamond-



The white pole betrays the top of the ladder to the river. The sign marks the start of the catch-and-release section.

studded beds of ranunculus wafting the stream into channels. I turned a stone, disturbing a cluster of freshwater shrimps, found nymphs scuttling away from the light and caddis cases moulded from fine gravel. Upstream, a late Mayfly staggered from the surface and climbed between the steep banks towards the sunshine and trees high above. And a trout rose. And then another.

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Casting needs a little care down here between the banks. Side casts, a habit - almost a vice - of mine after years of casting under trees on little streams, are a problem down here: On the other hand, it was

simple enough to make an overhead cast beneath the trees on top of those high banks. We'd both cast and missed a few times before Fred's little dry-fly disappeared in an eager flurry and our first

Wellow trout was bending his rod. He brought it to hand, a fine fat little wild fish of perhaps eight inches.

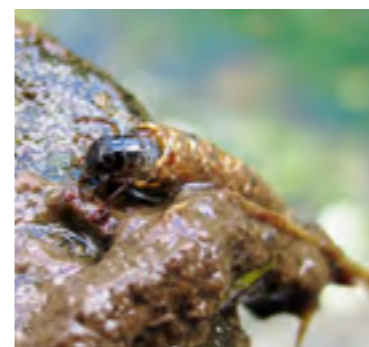
1997 was a good year for wild trout. Somewhere in the heart of chalkstream country a small group of enthusiasts with a vision for the future of trout fishing hatched the Wild Trout Society, promoting and encouraging habitat improvement over stocking. Further west, on the waters of the ATAA, John Lewis, with a similar vision, began the Wellow wild trout project, setting about a neglected section at the top of the Wellow Brook to create an unstocked, catch-and-release wild trout fishery. And in that same year, Rear Admiral Fred Scourse retired from Acting Controller of the Navy, and had a little more time to fish the waters of the ATAA. He threw himself into the work of the Wellow wild trout project. Four years later that pupal Wild Trout Society emerged as the Wild Trout Trust - with Fred Scourse as its first director. That little gem of a wild Wellow trout was in good hands. Fred slipped it back in the water and we fished on up the Wellow.

It was friendly fishing down on the Wellow. It had to be. The only way to move up the little river is to wade, so one bloke fished while the other bloke spotted rises, plucked the first bloke's fly from the lush

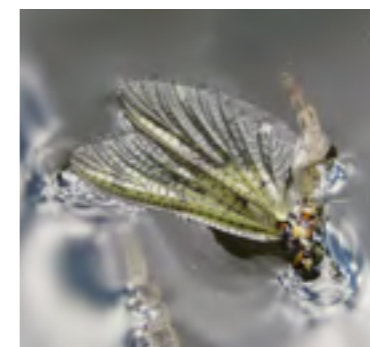


Fred fishes up the Wellow between the deep, steep banks of summer foliage.

"I followed Fred on the ladder, down into the deep green world of the Wellow Brook"



A caddis peeps from its gravel case.



Mayfly dun beside an empty shuck.

vegetation, sucked in breath when the first bloke missed a take and marvelled how anyone could have missed it. Then the first bloke caught a fish and it was the second bloke's turn to cast at a rising fish, get caught in the surroundings and miss the take. And so we went on up this charming little stream, catching wild trout up to 12 inches and enjoying ourselves.

Most of the Wellow and Cam brooks are now managed as a catch-and-release wild trout fishery following advisory visits from the Wild Trout Trust. Anyone with a wild trout population in the UK or Ireland can call on the Trust for practical help, advice and support. This usually begins with an advisory



On the upper Wellow after lunch – and now Fred wears his own hat.

visit and report. The reports for the Wellow and Cam suggested getting more light to the stream on the over-shaded bits, keeping farm animals out of the stream with fencing, controlling the Himalayan balsam and creating more diversity of flow and depth with large woody debris. “Large woody debris” has become something of a mantra of river conservation in recent years. LWD, essentially tree trunks and branches, is the very stuff that keepers have been hauling out of their rivers since rivers have been kept. So why should we be chucking it back?

In a word – diversity. As water flows round, over and (best of all) under a tree trunk it creates diversity of flow and direction, scouring here, depositing there. This cleans and sorts the stones and gravels, creating deeper holes and shallow riffles and spawning gravels in between. The more diversity in a stream, the more niches there are for trout at different stages and the creatures they feed on. The wood itself offers cover and safety for the trout and a home for bugs – I’m not getting too technical, am I? But LWD needs to be managed or it can all end up blocking the next bridge downstream. Trunks are tethered to the bank with wire or pinned to the riverbed. The Wild Trout Trust is on



A stunning wild brown trout of the Wellow, testimony to the success of the habitat improvements.

hand to advise how this can be done. But you’ve still got to do it. The ATAA has weekly work parties, coppicing or hinging trees along the brooks. And, on this section of the Wellow, pinning a dozen or so long aluminium ladders to those steep banks. We climbed one of these up into that sunny afternoon.

After a bite of lunch we fished the top of the Wellow, where the wild trout on these brooks had begun 20 years ago. The banks are lower here, bringing another problem – farm stock in the river: young girls from the nearby trekking centre would trek their ponies up the brook on a summer’s day. Barbed-wire fencing daunts animals, horsey girls and fishermen alike so up here Sunday work parties are putting up stiles and squeeze gates.

And so it goes on, the job of turning a neglected stocked water into a vibrant wild trout fishery on a delightful little Westcountry brook.

There are no day-tickets to be had on these waters of the Avon and Tributaries Angling Association. So what’s the point of me singing their praises and telling you all this? Well, they have guest tickets. So do most of the private clubs, syndicates and private fisheries that the Wild Trout Trust has helped and supported over the years. And many of them, in their turn, have helped and supported the Trust by donating a guest ticket or two for the annual auction. I’ve listed a small selection (see panel, right). And, of course, the ATAA is one of them. So this year, as ever, Fred Scourse will be taking another happy fisherman on to these waters.

All you have to do is bid.

And in case you were wondering: were it not for that erratic kink in the Somerset-Wiltshire border, a pretty village on the west bank of the Avon would be in Somerset. And Limpley Stoke surely belongs in Wilts. **TA**

WILD TROUT AUCTION

THERE ARE more than 250 lots in the Wild Trout Trust auction (March 4-13) including a couple from the Avon and Tributaries Angling Association. The following selection may whet your appetite:

- One day for two rods on four miles (double bank) of the River Dove below Ashbourne: offered by the Norbury Fishing Club
 - Two consecutive days for two rods on the lovely River Coln near Fairford: offered by John Paine.
 - One day for one rod on the Hampshire chalkstreams, Loddon and Lyde: offered by Gresham Anglers and Tony Richards, accompanied by Denise Ashton of the WTT.
 - One day for one rod with *Trout & Salmon* editor, Andrew Flitcroft, on his private stretch of the River Gwash, near Oakham. And another day on the Guash offered by the Guash Fishing Club (same river, different spelling)
 - One day for two rods on the River Chess between Latimer and Chenies near Amersham, Bucks: offered by Chess Valley Anglers.
 - One day for one rod on the Upper Great Stour near Ashford, Kent. This has been restored in partnership with the WTT: offered by Upper Stour Restoration Project.
 - One day for two rods on a two-mile private stretch of the River Wharfe, Derbyshire: offered by Huby Angling Club.
- To bid for a lot, visit www.wildtrout.org**
To find out more about the ATAA, visit www.ataafishing.net