

End of Season Newsletter 2017



An October morning on the Upper Test at Middleton

Welcome to the end of season newsletter. You will also find enclosed the Weed Cut dates for 2018 (“The Greens”) and an invitation to our Members’ Day on 17 November – you should have received copies of these documents by email some time ago.

The fishing

The end of the fishing season can be a somewhat depressing time of year, but you will hopefully have had some good days on the river this summer to sustain you through the winter gloom. My own season started on a cold and windy day at Tufton on the Test in April, thanks to the generosity of one of our members. Once I had worked out that the fish could be tempted to rise to a hawthorn fly I had a good day. I had read much about the hawthorn fly and its use as an early season fly. And I had seen plenty of them flying around with their suspended undercarriages looking like planes preparing to land on an aircraft carrier deck. But I had not until that day at Tufton ever had any success with one on the river.

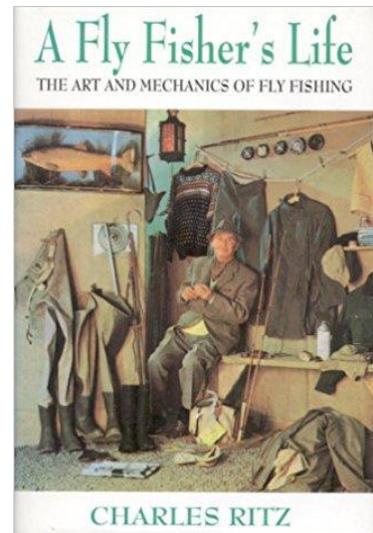


Hawthorn Fly



Adams Irresistible

My season ended in early October on the Dever at Barton Stacey, fishing with our weed cut wardens. We probably spent more time in the pub than on the river, but I managed to catch a good fish with my last cast, flicking an Adams Irresistible backhanded under a bridge to where the fish had been steadily rising. A satisfying way to end my fishing year. In between those two days I have had some other excellent days fishing, many of them thanks to the kindness of our members. Thank you. There is of course widespread and justified concern about the lack of invertebrates and the absence of rising fish, but I have seen some excellent hatches up and down the river throughout the season. One July evening at Hockley on the Itchen, the river was boiling with rising fish. I had not seen anything quite like it since a May evening on the River Chess in the Chilterns about 40 years ago, the sight of which persuaded me to spend some of my pocket money on my first fly fishing outfit and a copy of Charles Ritz's *A Fly Fisher's Life*, the start of the journey which led to this role with the Association.



There were of course some less good days. I went over to the Meon at Fontley one September afternoon and found the river no more than a dirty brown trickle. The only fish I could find once I had battled through the invasive Himalayan Balsam was a chub. I left disheartened and headed for Mislingford on the Meon, one of my favourite fishing spots. Trying to extract my made-up rod from the car, I broke its tip. I think we all need days like that to make us all the more grateful for the better ones.

Enough of my fishing highs and lows. But I included them as I am regularly reminded by some of our members that, notwithstanding all the problems facing our Hampshire chalkstreams, we should not forget just how magical they remain, and not be shy about sharing the pleasure they give us with others.

River flows

In April and May many of us were worried about low river levels. The 12 driest months since 1976 had left the aquifers depleted. The rivers were well below where they should have been for the time of year. The heavy rainfall in July and August helped alleviate the short-term concerns: in the Lower Test and Itchen valleys the combined July and August rainfall total was the third highest in a record going back to 1910. River flows responded, with the Test and Itchen recovering to normal for the time of year. The exception was the Meon which remained below normal.

Groundwater levels have stabilised or begun to recover. But we need a wet winter to restore the aquifer to good condition. A second dry winter in a row would have serious consequences for river flows next summer.

Abstraction

Low river flows bring the issue of abstraction into even sharper focus. It can be an impenetrable subject for the uninitiated, but the essentials are that too much water is being extracted from the rivers and the aquifer and the principal abstractors are the public water supply companies. The Environment Agency have recently sought to impose tighter abstraction licences on Southern Water. Southern Water have predictably appealed and the issues will now go before an inspector at a public inquiry. This will happen in the second half of March next year.

The Association has already made formal representations on each of the three licence changes (Testwood on the Test, Otterbourne and Twyford on the Itchen and the Candover Brook Augmentation scheme) and is considering whether it should participate in the Inquiry. This would be expensive – the required legal representation costs in the region of £2,000 per day – and the advice to date is that unless the Association has something significant to add to the case being made by the Environment Agency, it would be best advised to forego the right to be represented. But we will keep the position under review as the Inquiry process and the positions of the two key protagonists, Southern Water and the Environment Agency, become clearer. To date we have supported the more muscular approach being adopted by the Environment Agency and that is likely to remain our position.

On the subject of water, we are reaching a key period in the development of Southern Water's (and Portsmouth Water's) next Water Resources Management Plans (WRMP) and Drought Plans. These don't sound hugely interesting but they are key documents which will set out where Southern Water is going to get its water from over the next five-year period and what it would do if it started running out of water in a drought.

The Association has been heavily involved in the informal consultation process which leads up to the publication of the draft WRMP in November. There will then be a three-month period of public consultation starting in January 2018. The main points the Association will be continuing to make are that the water companies need to start investing now in alternative supplies of water and end their almost total reliance on pumping water out of the rivers and aquifer. Alternatives do exist with desalination, water storage in reservoirs and water recycling through more and better waste water treatment amongst them. There is also more effective use of existing water supplies through better connectivity between areas of water surplus and water shortage.

Once we have seen the published drafts we will be writing again to make our views known. We will also be encouraging you to write as well and will provide templates for you to draw on should you wish to do so. The water companies cannot ignore large numbers of representations so the weight of correspondence advocating the development of alternative supplies of water is as important as the quality of the argument being made.

Weed

The 2018 weed cut dates are enclosed. The length of the weed cuts on the Test are the same as this year, retaining the one-day reduction in weed cut periods on the Middle and Lower Test we introduced on a trial basis a couple of years ago.

In response to feedback from the membership, the start of the June weed cut in 2018 is about one week later than this year, with the July and August weed cuts also being pushed back by one week to retain the same gap between cuts. Over the last few years the start of the June weed cut has been moving forward one day each year as it has traditionally started on a Monday, as opposed to the same calendar date. If we had continued the progression it would have started earlier in 2018 than it ever had before, which is the opposite of what the membership wanted. The 2018 dates will allow for more weed-cut free days for fishing in early June which is what the membership wanted. The dates for the Itchen are the same as this year.

The weed cuts on the Test will be supervised by our three wardens, Ron, Nigel and Keith. They are volunteers and all enjoy the role, but we do try and recognise their contribution by offering them fishing provided by our owner members. We like to avoid going back to the same owners each year with a request for a day's fishing for one or more of our wardens. If you are able to offer a day in 2018 do please get in touch with the office. The days offered tend to be towards the end of the season. Offers of a day towards the start of the season would be particularly welcome, but all offers will be gratefully accepted.

The Board of the Association has asked me and a couple of the Association's Directors to take a fundamental look at weed cut dates on the Test for 2019 and beyond.

Ideas for consideration include having the same calendar dates each year, allowing fisheries to plan ahead; looking at the pros and cons of a two weed cut period system as opposed to the current three; and continuing the process of reducing the length of the weed cuts in some (not all) parts of the catchment. To be clear – and to avoid too many howls of protest – these are just some of the ideas we will be looking at. They are not Association endorsed proposals. Please let me have any views or other ideas you might have before the end of November.



Wardens at work!

Swans

Earlier this year, the Association surveyed the membership on the damage swans were doing to river weed. The survey showed that swans were damaging – sometimes to a devastating extent - the ranunculus community in many but not all parts of the Test and Itchen catchments.

The worst damage was concentrated on the middle stretches of the rivers, from Whitchurch to Romsey on the Test and Alresford to Winchester on the Itchen. There were localised problems on the Lower Itchen. Most of the headwaters did not have a problem. Some of the larger tributaries of the Test, such as the Dever, had a problem whilst the smaller ones on the whole did not. All those owners and keepers who responded to the questionnaire (40+) supported the acquisition and implementation of a swan control licence, including those who did not themselves have a problem, often because they recognized that their resident breeding pairs might be exporting the problem elsewhere in the shape of chased off cygnets. Only one owner indicated that they would be uncomfortable providing a response to the questionnaire and implementing any licenced control measures. Some of the owners who did not respond might feel the same way.

There are reasons for believing that Natural England might look sympathetically at a control licence application. The officer who would consider a licence application has visited the Middle Test and seen for himself the extent of the problem. The Environment Agency have indicated that they might be supportive. Based on the Upper Avon precedent, I had anticipated that the licenced control activity would be the removal of some eggs from nests. That would control numbers in the longer term but would not deal with the immediate problem of excessive numbers of immature swans in groups of 30 or more which do the worst damage. But Natural England also seem willing at least to consider the relocation of large groups of swans outside the catchment, which would have an immediate effect. Anything the Association could do to deal with the problem would clearly be widely welcomed amongst the membership although action would not be without potential difficulties, in terms of practical implementation and public perception.

The Board considered next steps at their meeting in September. The discussion covered the precedent on the Upper Avon, public perception, the practicalities of running a control programme, and the potential role of the Association in coordinating the programme. The Board supported the proposal that I should collate the swan damage evidence from the survey and present it in the form of a control licence application to Natural England. This work is underway. There will be a session on the swan damage survey and follow-up action at the Members Day on 17 November.

Heritage Lottery Fund Bid

A good news story to end on. A public announcement will be made in early November that the Test and Itchen Catchment Partnership's (TICP) "Watercress and Winterbournes" Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bid has been successful. The Association is part of the TICP, contributed to the bid document – although our suggestion that Wild Trout should be added to the bid title sadly didn't make the editor's cut! - and will be one of the partners involved in implementing the projects which will be part-funded by the HLF.

The bid included a variety of environmental, scientific, sporting, cultural and community projects in an area covering the Test and Itchen headwaters. The Association is likely to be most involved in citizen science invertebrate monitoring and initiatives to get more people interested in fishing – "Getting Hooked".

An 18 month planning phase will be followed by a 5 year implementation phase. The HLF contribution will be £3.2 million over the course of the project, a significant sum of money. The adage success has many fathers has sprung to mind a few times in the days since news of the bid success began to do the rounds, but all the organisations involved in the partnership have a good history of collaborative working so I am reasonably optimistic that there won't be a too unseemly scramble to get sticky mitts on the dosh.

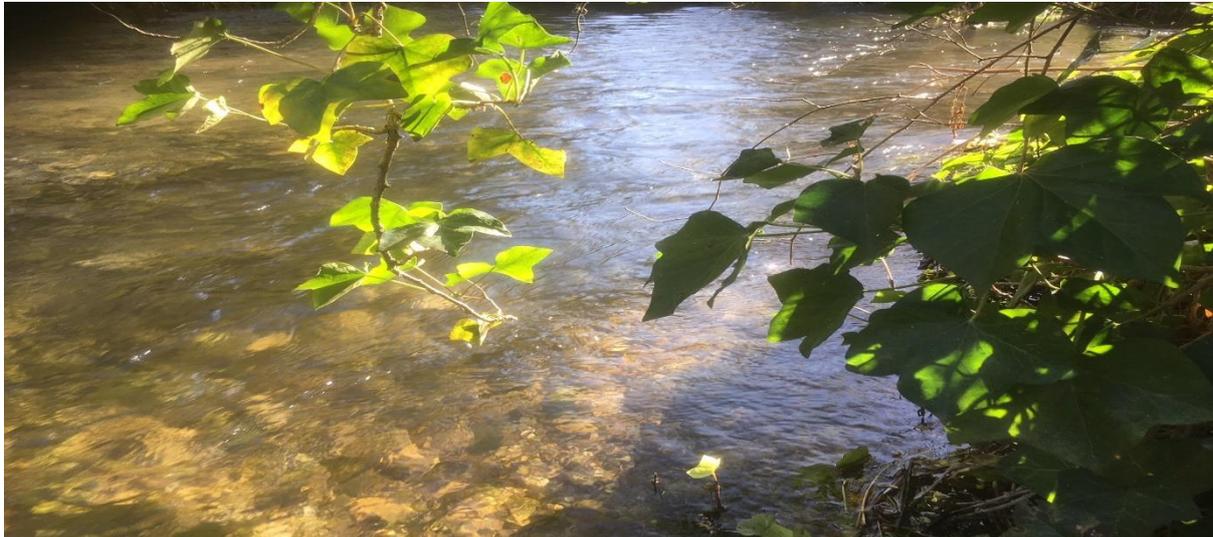
Looking ahead

The Members Day on 17 November is the next main Association event. It should be a good day. If you have not already replied please let us know by 13 November if you are able to attend. We have some good speakers in the morning and a really interesting river visit in the afternoon to Bossington to look at a major restoration project currently underway and the success of another restoration project completed a couple of years ago.

In the next few days I will be commissioning reports and articles for the 2017 Rivers Report, our annual "glossy" publication. The 2016 report was well-received and I will be endeavouring to put together a similar magazine. If you would like to contribute an article and have not been approached to do so, please let me know what you have in mind. The deadline for contributions will be the end of the calendar year. We will aim to publish the report in February 2018.

The next Board meeting is in mid-December. Directors will be agreeing the programme for 2018 and setting the budget. Possible new events will include two social-sporting functions, one in July and the other in October. We will be looking to build on the strong collaborative programme we already have with some of our key partners. I hope that we can continue the work we have done this year with Salmon

and Trout Conservation UK on invertebrate monitoring. And we have already started planning a Public Interpretation Board project with Wessex Chalk Streams and River Trust, with the Upper Itchen being the likely pilot area. And much else besides.



October sunshine on the Upper Test at Chilbolton

That is all for now. Do get in touch if you would like to know more about any of the subjects covered in this newsletter. And please do some rain dances.

Jeremy Legge, Executive Director

1 November 2017