

Martin Cottis on Chew

Martin started his fishing career on the Thames, purloined into providing live bait for his dad who was an avid pike angler. As a reward he was often taken down to the Royalty (Hampshire Avon at Christchurch) for a half term holiday. It was there that he encountered his first fly fisherman. Although the guy was unsuccessful, it was a moment in Martin's life when something gelled. He was also fortunate enough to have an uncle who took him to Ireland and eventually he caught his first game fish on a fly – a sea trout of about a pound – from the Mourne. His adult life started around Canterbury learning to be a maths teacher. This coincided with the opening of Bewl and he was soon a regular on the water. He met Jim Nice who was arguably one of the best fly tyers in England at the time and this provided a firm basis for Martins subsequent award winning ability in this area.

He returned to London for a short spell and fished Kempton Park and Barn Elms, neither of which has survived as trout fisheries. Kempton Park was notable as the lake where Brain Clarke did most of his background research for his book "The Pursuit of Stillwater Trout". Martin realised after reading this book that spotting the fish and roughly matching the hatch were key skills in being a successful angler. Clarke's book, although published in 1975, is still a good read and includes chapters on entomology, rise forms, leaders and dry flies.

He then moved on to Devizes, which was conveniently located close to the head of the Avon. He gained access to a stretch at Enford. His fly tying prowess came to the fore and he managed to win the Frank Sawyer Trophy for fly dressing. And then in 1985 on again as teachers do these days, this time to Bristol. He joined the Bristol Fly Dressers and soon found himself in their competition team. Although he doesn't see himself as competitive, he does at 48, regularly play rugby. He stuck up a friendship with John Horsey and often shared boats. He discovered that John was ultra keen to get on with the fishing whilst he was trying new flies and fresh ideas. Generally speaking, Martin invariably does the opposite to other anglers in an attempt to find tranquillity. Competitions also brought him into contact with Bob Worts and it was his dry flies that revolutionised Martins approach to still water fly-fishing.

Now it was generally recognised that in the 1980's, Chew had the reputation of being the hardest reservoir on which to catch fish. He proved this on one occasion by spending a fortnight visiting Bewl, Hanningfield Grafham and Rutland, where he and his partner had no problems catching limits. On returning back to Chew he found that catching the occasional trout was the norm. He attributed this to the "old fashioned" management. Fish were stocked in February and that was it for the season (See Bob Church, "Reservoir Trout Fly-fishing", 1977, p. 96). Nevertheless, there were only 25 boats on Chew at the time and the pressure on the fishery was quite low. Consequently the quality of the fish in the fertile waters of the reservoir, with an average depth of only 14 ft., was probably better than on the midland

reservoirs. The arrival of Chris Klee, a fisheries biologist, marked the advent of regular stocking of fish throughout the season, in line with the practices at most of the other public reservoirs. In the opinion of Martin, the water became vastly overstocked and the fishing became far too easy! The consolation was that Chew became a good place to try out new ideas.

We discussed the future of trout fishing. The present status of competition angling is always a hot topic. Yobs with blobs, laddish behaviour, syndicates and aggressive anglers came to mind, yet Martin saw the problem as an atmosphere in which newcomers fail to appreciate that there are other ways of catching trout. We are all familiar with the difficulty of attracting youngsters to the sport. They are looking for action rather than absorbing the environment. Yet competitions were essential in making sure that the fishery made a profit or at least broke even. According to Chris, competitions at Rutland last season accounted for 5000 anglers pre-booking, which cannot be sniffed at. Chew management have even hired unused boats to birdwatchers in an attempt to maintain revenue. There was little doubt that pike anglers at Chew made a greater contribution to balancing the books than the game fishermen but not for much longer if they have to wait until 10am for the fishery to open. Furthermore, according to our PAC pike expert Colin, none of the reservoirs have ever managed to sustain the initial phenomenal catches of pike. In his opinion, most of the pike die. Further info. on Chew and the other Bristol reservoirs can be found at www.bristolwater.co.uk/leisure.

Martin is now a professional guide. His expertise is not limited to Chew having fished all over the UK and also in New Zealand. If you are interested in tuition have a look at his website www.troutguide.co.uk. Me? I'm nipping out to buy a floating line!

D G Jones