

## Pilgrimage Special April 2017

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### **Pilgrimage Memories.** **Article by Steve Middleton**

With the 2017 Pilgrimage rapidly approaching I thought that I would look back on some of my experiences in fishing this annual event.

It will be difficult for me to get across the excitement of the early years because Chew and Blagdon were magical places and the people we fished with were inspirational.

I think that Norman Shippey was the instigator of the original contest and I first went down to Chew with him over 30 years ago.

Chew was the venue because the dry fly fishing towards the end of May was second to none and for this inexperienced angler it was a great and exciting challenge.



Invicta at one of the earliest Pilgrimages.

The format was that we were to go down for three days, fish Blagdon on the Wednesday, practice at Chew on Thursday and have a friendly match at Chew the Friday.

Fishing was from 10am to 10pm, only twelve hours each day, with a meal arranged each evening.

It would be physically impossible for me to fish at this level today since we did a full twelve hours and every one stayed on the water until 10pm because, no matter what had happened during the day, the water would come alive after 9.0pm and big fish could be caught on dries.

At the end of each day there was a mad rush to get to the Pub to catch up on the days' fishing and of course have a couple of pints before dinner, dinner being served around 11.00 pm.



Outside The Blue Bowl near Chew reservoir

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Disclaimer: Statements, opinions and claims expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of Invicta FFC or of the Committee.

Any questions or suggestions on the running of our Club or ideas for subjects or speakers for our Winter Meetings should be sent to Paul Stevens for inclusion in a future Committee meeting. It should be noted that the programme needs to be finalised several months ahead.

Then it was back to our accommodation, clean any fish that we had caught and put them in the freezer and retire to bed after midnight.



Alan Taylor, John Rolph, Steve Middleton, & Bob Ayres, with their B&B landlady Christine, at Chew Magna.

Breakfast at 8.00am, after tying a few 'must have' flies, and then back to the water to do it all again.

After 36 hours of fishing we came home for a rest on Saturday morning, all feeling a bit jaded with aching backsides and arms.

On my first trip down I was ill-prepared and had no idea of what to expect.

The first day that I had fished Chew was memorable because Norman and I had pods of fish in the surface swimming up the wind towards the boat and we could not catch them. We had very few dry flies and didn't really know how to fish them so we came off the water very frustrated.

We were given lots of helpful advice from the Llanilar boys and on future trips we were better prepared, however having the right flies was only part of the battle.

Norman and I went down a few years later with a good supply of Shipmans buzzers but we underestimated just how powerful the fish were and how ineffective 6 and 8lb subsurface Drennan leaders were against the way the fish took the fly.

On one sunny and breezy morning we started a drift down the centre on the lake armed with the three Shipmans buzzers that we had been told to use one orange, one claret and one black.

Big mistake, in our first couple of casts we were both smashed off and re-tackling with the same combination produced the same result on the next cast.

We quickly realised that the fish were taking the orange fly on the top dropper so we went down to a single fly and no matter how careful we were we were smashed up every time.

In the space of twenty minutes we had lost eleven orange flies between us and we had to go back to the lodge to buy some more.

Successfully hooking a fish produced the next major problem since the fish took off into the distance and you were lucky to get them under control before the line broke.

I remember hooking a good fish on a small dry on a calm hot day and I immediately checked that the line in the boat was not snagged and stood on the seat with my rod in the air to let the fish run.

All I could do was to listen to the spinning reel and watch the fish cartwheeling in the surface between two boats about 70 yards away before it came off.

We did all improve over the years and had some wonderful days fishing and the Pilgrimage became a must do event and it was the first days to be entered in the diary.

Whilst the fishing was fantastic we also had the privilege of fishing with some amazing fishermen and characters, many of whom will be at Grafham in May.

Tony Bevan, the Welsh wizard who sadly died at the end of last year was something else and was probably the best fly fisherman, excluding Bob Ayres, that I have ever met.

When we first saw Tony fishing we could not believe the speed at which he stripped flies, he needed water cooling on his left arm and we often joked that if he caught ten fish he probably also caught twenty fish heads.

Any fish taking his flies at that speed would risk losing its head or at least part of its face.

He wasn't only fast when stripping was the only option but he could keep up the pace for twelve



hours without his arm falling off, it was said that he wore the left arm off a Barber coat and no one would dispute that.

Tony usually fished with our John Reynolds and they invariable won the best boat, best bag and the second best bag.

Sadly for Tony he was not invincible because one day he was drawn against our own Awesome Ayres and Bob beat him 1-0, Bob must have told you all by now.

We struggled to beat the class of the Llanilar boys because they were good at all methods, particularly dry flies, and I witnessed this when Brian Crouch totally thrashed me 14-3 fishing dry flies all day with unmatched presentation.

Our Scottish friends Leslie Club also have some stars and Willy Patrick is a great fisherman, he can squeeze nine swear words into a five word sentence when he misses a fish, not that we can understand him.

His finest ten minutes was late one evening when nothing was happening on the water and at 9.50pm Willy saw the first fish rise and dumped three shipmans on it head and caught it, shook it off in the boat and preceded to catch two more in two casts.

I just sat and watched with three fish thrashing about in the bottom of the boat, never having seen anything like that before.

There are too many tales to tell with each of the characters that we have fished against having their own special stories.

The pace of fishing has thankfully dropped over the years, thanks to the onset of age, so the event is much more relaxed than it used to be but the characters are still there.

We have also won the event several time since we now fish at Grafham but for me the result is irrelevant, it's the joy of meeting up with old friends and having a good laugh.



The successful Invicta team with the Llanilar/Leslie/Invicta Pilgrimage trophies at the post match celebrations held at The Racehorse, Catworth.

A delighted Bob Ayres led his Invicta team to a momentous win in the annual pilgrimage with our friends from Wales and Scotland. The first time for many years our men topped the table and earned bragging rights until next May at least.

Results:

Invicta	50 fish for 118lbs
Llanilar	37 fish for 90lbs
Leslie AC	28 fish for 70lbs



The picture above shows me collecting the trophy from George James on one of our rare victories. George, along with Norman Shippey were the main organisers of the event for many years and one of the trophies that we fish for on the match day is named in his memory.

### **Another Character.**

I have mentioned a couple of characters from the Llanilar and Leslie teams but Invicta has a character or two.

We have often discussed the lack of young people coming into the sport but would you let this so called fisherman teach your children to fish.



People have been arrested for this kind of behaviour in a public place.

### **Tony Bevan, Llanilar.**



I mentioned Tony Bevan because above everyone else he was an inspiration to us all, his dedication and enthusiasm had to be seen to be believed.

He was totally dedicated to fly fishing, and a little shooting in the winter, and he fished and enjoyed every minute of the day.

Regrettably Tony was diagnosed with cancer and given six months to live some three years ago but he battled on and never stopped fishing.

When I first asked him about his illness he told me that the hardest part was telling his wife about the money that he had since he had never told her about the money he set aside for fishing and shooting, he said that it broke his heart to tell her.

He did not fish the pilgrimage last year because unbelievably, he had qualified to fish for Wales again, this was some guy.

In September last year his time ran out and he was given just six weeks to live.

I last saw him at the Fry Bash competition at Grafham, three weeks after he had been given that news and he was fishing for the two days despite being in a lot of pain from the cancer that was spreading through his body.

I often think how he must have felt on that Sunday afternoon when he put a cast out for the very last time.

Tony loved fishing our local waters and often said that we did not know how lucky we were to have such wonderful fishing on our doorsteps.

He will be sadly missed but he will often be mentioned on Pilgrimage days.

If anyone would like to join in for a good couple of days fishing and socialising then please let me know.

**Steve Middleton**

