

Perch for old times' sake

Big stripeys still respond to simple tactics that have worked for decades.
Adam Fisher prospects a favourite river for the fish of his dreams ▶

Words Mark Parker Photography Mick Rouse



'Bobbing' for perch

THE only contradiction of the day was that Adam Fisher had arrived in his car, not on a pushbike – otherwise it could have been a scene from times long past. A pair of float rods, a selection of brightly-coloured perch bobber floats and a tub of lobworms for hookbaits were the sum total of his 'luggage'.

We had met up on the banks of the Warwickshire Avon, and Adam's plan was to trot his simple rig - which wouldn't have looked out of place on the pages of Mr Crabtree – around lock gates, bushes and other classic holding areas in search of the day's prime target – river perch.

"Perch are the first coarse fish most people catch, and it was no different for me," he said, just before flicking the striking red float into the river's gentle flow.

"More years ago than I care to remember, I caught a few small 'stripeys' from a reservoir while on a school summer camp. Catching such brightly-coloured, beautiful fish was a pure joy. There's nothing like the feeling of catching your first fish. Making those first tentative steps into the world of coarse angling is a magical experience."

Today was set to be another blast from Adam's past. Around 11 years ago, he fished the same lock gates on the Midlands river, without success. However, the huge perch he saw that day more than whetted his appetite. But would the fish – or one of its impressive descendants – still be there?

Previous close encounters

Living in Herefordshire, Adam's local river is the mighty Wye. Although widely considered one of the UK's finest waterways, it is strangely lacking in the stamp of perch that modern specimen hunters desire. Adam's heard of the occasional 2lb specimen from around Hereford in the past but, in general, the Wye is not a happy hunting ground for those targeting the species.

"My perch fishing has always involved a short trip up the motorway to target the

Lock gates are among the best places to target big river perch



Warwickshire Avon," said Adam, who each year gets the yearning for perch at the first signs of summer turning to autumn.

"I was always taught that when the first leaves begin to fall it's time to have a go for them. It's something I look forward to each and every season."

For today's encounter, Adam had returned to an old stomping ground. Just over a decade

ago, while at university in Cheltenham, he regularly fished the Avon, usually targeting the growing population of zander using small rubber jigs. After stumbling on the Birmingham AA-controlled Pershore stretch, an area with little angling footfall, it seemed the perfect place to target predators, which thrive on neglect.

With the water being gin-clear, he started chucking his small jig and around the lock gates, not really expecting to catch in such poor, clear conditions.

On the third retrieve, however, Adam was left rubbing his eyes in disbelief as six 2lb-plus perch followed his jig all the way back to the bank, turning away at the last moment.

Thrashing the water to foam for the rest of the day, Adam had the fish repeatedly follow the lure right to the bank, but he never had a single take.

He promised himself a return visit the following week, armed to the teeth with lures, worms and maggots. These fish would be his, come hell or high water, he resolved.

"For some reason, now long forgotten, I never did go back. Today is the first time in more than a decade that I've seen the stretch, let alone fish it. Will they still be here? I can't see why not."

Locating your quarry

Selecting a location to fish for perch is half the battle when targeting the species. Luckily, they exhibit particular preferences and characteristics in both rivers and stillwaters.

They can often be found near permanent structures, man-made or otherwise, with fishing platforms, bridge stanchions, lock gates and overhanging bushes all good bets as holding areas. Other productive spots often include dark or shaded areas of slack water, underwater snags or lily and bulrush beds. In short, anywhere that you would find small prey fish, or areas that afford the perch an ambush opportunity, are good places to look. Finding them is half the battle, but then you have to entice them into taking the bait, which is not always as straightforward as it might seem.

"Perch can hang stationary in the water for long periods of time. They might spend 30 minutes or more just looking at your carefully placed lobworm, never taking it. But, as soon as you twitch it, they'll pounce on it just like a kitten on a ball of wool," said Adam.

"As long as they are looking at it, they feel they are holding court and in control. They're thinking 'I don't have to eat that now, but it is mine all the same'. It's almost as if they have a cocky, teenager-like attitude."

Staying mobile

Perch will often hang around in large shoals, while at other times they will also remain solitary for long periods. This means you often need to cover large tracts of water until you locate them. When you do, the chances are you'll have a decent hit of fish from the one spot before it dries up and you have to move on.

"They might spend 30 minutes or more just looking at your carefully placed lobworm"

"No matter how good a spot might look, if no fish are present then you could spend many hours fishing behind a gorgeous-looking sunken bush with a lobworm, for a perch that simply isn't there," said Adam.

Turning back time

When it comes to his chosen set-up, Adam combines a through-actioned Avon rod with



A traditional bobber float like Adam's hand-made 'Buttcracker' pattern is perfect for the job in hand



Adam likes to hook his single lobworm hookbaits just once, through the tough 'saddle' section

a 4lb mainline straight through to a size 6 hook. If the area is snaggy, Adam will step up to 6lb mainline, paired with a 4lb hooklink for better presentation.

The float he uses is as traditional a perch pattern as you could ever find – an 8BB 'Buttcracker' perch bobber. Round-bodied with a thick bristle and stem, it resembles a mini pike float, which fits well with how Adam describes his perch fishing – 'pike fishing in miniature'.

"The beauty of a proper perch bobber float is being able to read the bites perfectly. Just like pike fishing, you will often get a couple of bobs before the float pulls confidently away – for me it's one of the most exciting sights in angling. It's that 'you never know' moment of truth. When you pull into the fish, it could be a tiddler, or the fish of your dreams. It's real stirring stuff," he said.

To set the float, Adam again follows pike fishing lore, with the bait set to fish well overdepth and the shot (usually an AAA) just off the bottom, combined with a 12in-24in hooklink. Adam always uses lighter shottings if possible because perch, like all predators, dislike resistance and will instantly drop a bait if they feel that something is untoward.

Another important skill in perch fishing, just like piking, is not to strike too early – it's ▶



Baits fished tight to moored boats also work well

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vital to give the fish a few seconds to take the bait confidently. At the sharp end of his set-up, Adam uses a Korda Wide Gape hook – a mega sharp pattern that is perfect for mounting a large single lobworm.

"The problem with perch is that they have really bony mouths, so as well as giving a sharp strike to set the hook, you need to regularly check the hookpoint to ensure that it hasn't blunted," Adam suggested.

They're still here!

With his rig all set to go, Adam headed straight for the same spot he'd seen those big perch many years before.

After slipping a juicy lobworm on to his hook, piercing it once through the 'saddle' so that it would wriggle enticingly once on the bottom, he lowered the offering into the margins of the lock.

On this occasion he'd set the rig to fish 12 inches overdepth, but Adam revealed that trotting a worm just off bottom can also be deadly, especially if there is a little flow.

"I only use a single hookbait when I'm perch fishing. I have fished it over chopped

worms in the past, but have always been pestered by eels. If the going is tough, I may feed a few red maggots just to get the little fish going, but on the whole, I have found that a single lobworm, fished in the correct place is more than good enough."

Watching the float wobble its way in and around the back eddies of the lock gate structure, Adam didn't have long to wait for the first fish of the day.

As predicted, the bobber shook slightly as rings of disturbed water emanated outwards from its colourful body.

"Looks like we have our first customer," he grinned, barely able to contain his childlike enthusiasm. The anticipation was electric.

Seconds later his float bobbed again and rocked a little more violently, before it slid away effortlessly into the Avon's depths.

Giving the fish a second or two, Adam gave a sharp strike and his float rod took on a pleasing bend. Keeping the tension on what looked like a good fish, Adam played it as hard as he dared.

After a couple of minutes of heart-in-

your-mouth action, he was able to slide his prize into the folds of his landing net. The job was done – a magnificent fish, which didn't look a long way off 3lb, being the result of his labours.

After waiting more than a decade, Adam had proved to himself, and to us, that the monsters he saw on that day more than a decade ago were indeed real and, perhaps more importantly, very catchable.

Moving down the river, he spent the rest of the day trotting his float in and around the moored boats, but no more perch were to materialise.

Yet Adam was far from downcast. His traditional tactics, combined with a dash of watercraft, had allowed him to land the type of fish dreams are made of.

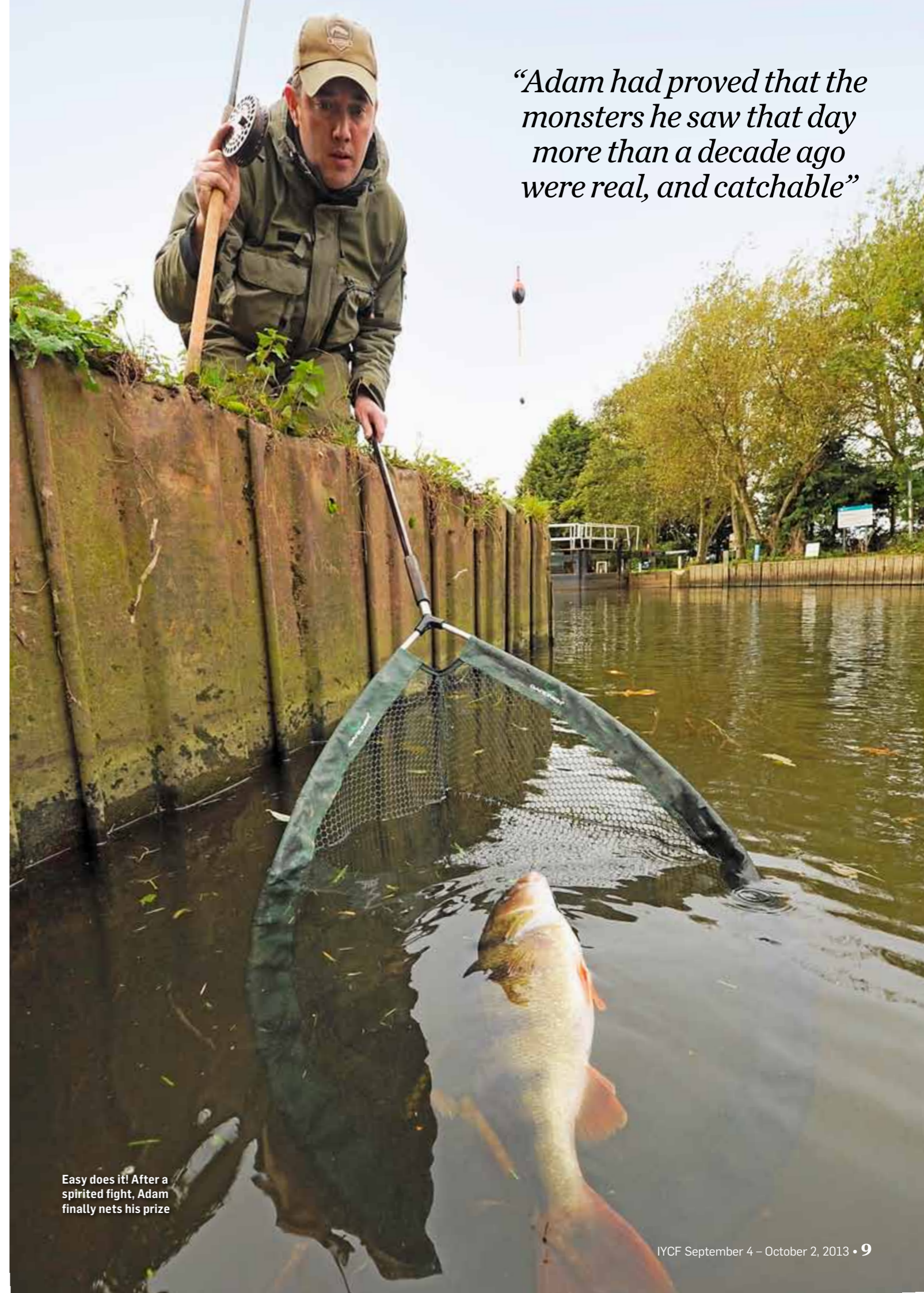


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A smiling Adam shows off his fine river perch which served as a fitting end to the day's exploits



"Adam had proved that the monsters he saw that day more than a decade ago were real, and catchable"

Easy does it! After a spirited fight, Adam finally nets his prize