Your place in paradise

IYCF editor Kev Green heads for a newly-opened stretch of the River Wye which can be reserved through the 'Passport' system. Exclusive fishing is now available to all

Words: Kev Green Pics: Mick Rouse

STOOD thigh deep in the freezing River Wye I was oblivious to the bone-chilling water rushing by – this was fishing paradise and the only thing that mattered was the float meandering downstream.

Shifting my feet in the stony riverbed to gain a firmer foothold I dipped my hands into the bait apron strapped around my waist and threw a pinch of maggots upstream of my position. Chub had to live in this pacey run and drip-feeding maggots is the way to draw them into the open water.

Half a dozen runs with no bait on the hook allowed me to gauge the depth and the shotting pattern required. The necessary adjustments were made and the large 4g Bolo float was set six feet deep so my double maggot hookbait would trot without tripping too often on the deviating riverbed.

There are few rivers that match the majesty of the Wye and this newly opened stretch at Canon Bridge, five miles upstream of Hereford was as nice a water as I've visited.

Boasting deep glides, sweeping bends and fast rapids it offered the full gambit of swims and I'd picked the most dynamic run to target – if I was going to enjoy a few hours on the Wye I wanted to surround myself with water. Nevertheless, I started fishing with a deal of trepidation.

Hook a chub in this steam train of a swim and I was in for a serious scrap.

Gone in a split second

Flicking out the rig and holding the rod tip high to control the float I eased the float downstream, the lessons from our Underwater Angling series in last month's IYCF were recalled from memory.

As our diver Stuart Morgan discovered, the water under the surface and near the bottom moves much slower than at the top. To get natural movement of the hookbait it is vital to reign in the movement of the float like training a dog. Tame it. Bring it to heel.

There was a tendency to let the float run away from me but I followed the lessons from another recent IYCF feature with Hadrian Whittle. For the first time in my life I backwound the float down a river rather than letting line peel off the reel with the bale arm open.

I felt like that old dear Barbara Woodhouse screaming 'heel' at the float from 30 yards away!

Then, blow me, it happened. As if under orders the orange tip jagged under the surface. For a split second all I could think was 'don't be daft' but I knew it wasn't dragging on a rogue rock or piece of weed – the indication was just too enthusiastic. ▶

Every fish I saw at Canon Bridge was immaculate

Wading for chub is one of the most enjoyable ways to fish

Adam Fisher of the Wye and Usk Foundation nets a Canon Bridge chub

From the moment I struck I was clinging on and prayed the hook and hooklink were up to the job of fishing by the seat of my pants.

Eventually, I gained the upper hand and slowly pumped the chub against the current – it felt like a good 'un. I've heard of the odd Wye six-pounder and I'd had a stroke of luck, I coaxed the taught line slightly upstream of my wading point.

As I gained the last few feet of line a bronze flash arrowed through the clear water: "Odd..." I thought, "that didn't look a big 'un".

Then it sounded. The five or six-pounder I was hoping for was somewhat smaller – this was its grandchild and barely went 2lb!

Now, I'm not 'sizeist' when it comes to fishing a beautiful river like the Wye but this fish made me laugh – if a chub like this could make me grunt like a Russian shot putter what would a fish twice the size do?

Looking at my watch I'd got just enough time for another trot (or two). I'd arranged to meet the gaffer of the fishing, the Wye and Usk Foundation's Adam Fisher, who was already stationed further down the stretch.

The man on the end of the phone when you book your ticket, Adam had told me Canon Bridge was the latest addition to the Foundation's list of waters and was an apt venue to mark the tenth anniversary of their Passport swim-booking scheme.

Four trots later an action replay saw me put through the mill again with another two-pounder which used every ounce of the river's flow to boost its considerable strength.

With a brace banked in less than 15 minutes I put the hook in the keeper ring and headed half a mile downriver to find Adam, stopping several times to drool over yet more magical stretches of water. This truly is a tremendous venue. No wonder it was crowned Britain's best river in 2010.

A new model club

The River Wye has long been one of Britain's finest waterways whether coarse or game fishing is your bag, picking its way 134 miles from the Welsh mountains near Plynlimon down to the Severn Estuary it runs through rocky gorges, lush countryside and a host of lovely towns.

Home to salmon, trout and grayling it's also the residence of chub, barbel and dace shoals with more than its fair share of specimen pike, roach and even carp to add extra spice.

The only problem with coarse fishing on the Wye has been getting access. Some fishing has long been available in towns like Ross and Hereford while numerous clubs such as Hereford DAA and Cheshire's Prince Albert AS deliver excellent water to their members.

But for every mile that's open to coarse fishermen many more have remained locked away, some the sole preserve of game anglers, other stretches shut off completely as they run through private farms or estates.

From its establishment in 1996 the Wye and Usk Foundation has sought to change this situation. A registered charity, the WUF was set up to improve the habitat of the Wye, Usk and the tributaries that flow into them with a view to fostering the spawning of salmon.

The organisation implemented a plan of fishery management to make the river more conducive to salmon and to open up miles of water that had run wild. In many areas landowner indifference to the water had resulted in a river that was more like a jungle than a fishery.

With a team of angling and environmental experts joining forces to give the WUF the know-how to work with government agencies, they began to make headway.

Considering anglers frequently complain about our inability to represent our sport's interests effectively, the WUF was soon proving itself to be a breath of fresh air.

"The Passport booking system is the key. It has opened stretches that would be shut to coarse anglers"

The organisation achieved objectives. New stretches were opened, access points made, grants were secured and in 2003 a new system of booking a swim – The Passport – was launched.

The principle of the Passport is simple – the booklet lists all the waters the WUF controls, detailing rules and giving you the information needed to make a booking.

Most radically, the Passport limited the number of day-tickets available on each piece of water – anyone could book but only up to the limit for that fishery.

As a general rule, for every mile of riverbank the WUF controls just four anglers a day are allowed to book on. Think of it as an exclusive day ticket and you're on the right lines – an admittedly hefty fee of £20 a day gives you certainty that the river won't be crowded.

As many anglers have realised it also gives a group of mates the chance to 'own' a piece of the Wye for a day or two, knowing nobody else will get in their way.

As Adam explained when I pitched up beside him, the Passport also gave sceptical landowners confidence to welcome coarse anglers, it got water owners on our side: "The Passport booking system is the key. Many owners just wouldn't have it any other way.

"By limiting the number of anglers on their land and making them book tickets in advance the fishing is open to anyone but is still controlled. This has opened stretches that would be shut to coarse anglers.

"The way coarse fishing is sold by us means there is a value to the fishery - it has provided owners with a new source of revenue.

"The Passport also has sustainability. When landowners see the habitat improvement work we do and they see a financial value on their asset by opening for coarse fishing it encourages them to look after the river.

"This just wasn't happening when miles of river were unmanaged and the habitat for fish was poor."

Of course, there are those who view the success of the WUF differently. Some believe the Foundation has caused rents to increase as their exclusive day tickets generate more money for the owners than clubs can afford to pay through membership fees.

It must also be said that a £20 day-ticket is expensive when viewed against annual club membership costing £30-£100 which gives you unlimited access. Some parts of the game fishing fraternity also bemoan the growth of coarse angling on the Wye.

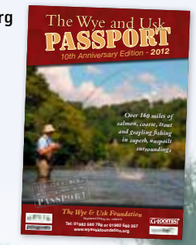
It's a criticism Adam's eager to answer: "Twenty pounds is expensive compared to a £5 day ticket but it's not a lot of money when you compare it to a round of golf or a ticket for a football match. Anglers have told us they value the fact that they can book on and have the place to themselves, they look forward to a special fishing trip – £20 for that exclusivity is not a lot."

"I'm not blowing our trumpet but we do provide a good service. When you make a booking we provide advice, the maps we send out are good and the fishing is great. ▶

In just a couple of hours Adam banked pristine fish like this superb 4lb-plus chub

10 Years of the Passport

1998 – The Foundation's first major project is the Wye Habitat Improvement Project (WHIP), this enabled riparian owners to earn money from wild brown trout fishing where habitat works had taken place. It was a blueprint for how the future 'Passport' would work.
2001 – Disaster. Foot and Mouth Disease strikes. The Wye valley is virtually shut down.
2003 – A post Foot and Mouth fund enables WUF to publish the first brochure, 'The Upper Wye Passport'. It listed nine trout beats and just £1,845 worth of day tickets were sold.
2004 – The Upper Wye Passport increased to 17 beats and a booking office was created.
2005 – The first Usk beat joins the scheme along with a necessary change in name!
2006 – The Leader+ project enabled the trout and grayling fishing in the Lugg and Arrow catchment to join.
2007 – The Rural Enterprise Scheme (RES) allowed the WUF's biggest yearly expansion and for the first time the Passport contained coarse fishing on the middle and lower Wye. Historic fisheries such as Middle Hill Court, Backney, Caradoc and Holme Lacy 3 join.
2008 – Online booking system launched.
2009 – The first stillwaters joined the Passport, including six Dwr Cymru/Welsh Water reservoirs.
2010 – The Herefordshire Asset Restoration Project (HARP) begins, allowing further expansion in Herefordshire. Famous middle Wye beats such as Lower Ballingham sign up. Participating fisheries number 110.
2011 – A year of record growth for both season and day tickets. In a year of drought and economic gloom, booking office day tickets were up 37% and angler visits top 8,700. Passport beats number 149.
2012 – The 10th Passport (right) is launched containing details of 163 day-ticket fisheries. To order your copy of the Passport or make an online booking just go to www.wyeuskfoundation.org or call 01982 560788.



Your place in paradise

with Kev Green

Another chub is drawn upstream against the racing River Wye

"We're well aware that we're often arranging holidays for anglers – days off work, valuable time. It's important we help them have a great trip to the river.

"I think of it as being a bit like business class on a plane but an awful lot cheaper. We get a lot of repeat bookings and new customers are increasing every year. You only have to look at the feedback section of our website to see how much anglers like the system.

"All anglers rely on a healthy river but it takes a lot of work and money to restore and sustain the quality of fishing in rivers such as the Wye and Usk. The core costs of the work have to come from fishery owners and the Passport is a mechanism that enables them to make the necessary reinvestment."

Statistics suggest it's a new model fishing 'club' that's working. Last year over 8,700 days fishing were booked and as you read this the tenth anniversary 2012 Passport has just been released (go to www.wyeuskfoundation.org) containing details of 163 fisheries.

In addition to 42 beats on the Wye the WUF now offers fishing on 13 stillwaters. Again Adam believes the booking system is central to these waters being made available: "When we go to a landowner and say we only want their lake for a few days a week, we're going to handle the bookings and can guarantee them a good revenue, then the fishery is opened.

"I think we'll open some very special estate lakes in the next few years that would otherwise have remained shut."

What makes it special

As we chatted about the river Adam kept sending his float downstream, using maggots then bread flake. He soon banked a couple of 2lb-plus chub before his float was stopped by a bigger fish.

On the end of a long trot that saw him steer his float past an overhanging tree he struck into the better specimen and, for a few seconds, success hung in the balance as his line courted the tree. When his experience of Wye fishing eventually told a 4lb-plus chub lay in the bottom of his net, as perfect a fish as you could wish to see.

With the deadline date for the Passport's completion taking Adam back to the WUF office for the afternoon I returned to my wading swim for a final hour, resuming the pattern of feeding and trotting.

With weak sun peeping through the cloud I was bathed in light as chub came back on the feed. Although I didn't have any giants I banked fish to over 3lb that put up a great fight in the fast water.

But with a three-hour journey home it was soon time to hit the road feeling robbed of my fishing.

When I was thigh deep in water and trotting a float down this spectacular river I simply didn't want to go home. Why, oh why wasn't I booked on for another day...or six!

As I swung my gear on to my back and started the trudge back to the car I made myself a promise to return to this stunning fishery. Roll on June 16...