

FISHING ON THE ARLE

by

JACK ORR.

The Arle rises in a spring welling up in a field on the north side of the A31 near Ropley. At first it is little more than a ditch but it widens out through the cress beds behind Bishop's Sutton. These must be the cress beds which spoiled the delightful trout stream referred to by R.D. Baird in his book "A Trout Rose". He records how he used to survey the fishing from a spot on the railway embankment which he called "Heaven" because of the steep climb thereto! There is still half a mile of good fishing until the river enters Alresford Pond. The stream leaves the Pond and flows under the partly Norman Bridge at the foot of Broad Street, then north past the old Town Mill and through more cress beds, until it turns west into the gardens of Weir House. There are two or three carriers, or side streams, here, but the main river is a clear sparkling chalk stream with many good trout. The owner speaks of several six pounders being there in the summer of 1977. It continues past the Fulling Mill to the bottom of the Dean, then through what were old water meadows, now greatly changed, by Arlebury House under Drove Lane to join the Tichborne Brook becoming the Itchen proper (according to O.S. of 1946). The total length from source to junction is some eight miles.

The fishing rights of consecutive stretches of the river are reserved for individual riparian owners and are indicated on the map. The definition of the limits can be a matter of dispute to be settled by a gentleman's agreement, and boundaries are sometimes the name of a mill, a holly tree near the tail race of the Town Mill, or a stone on the river bank. One such stone was removed a few years ago and can now be seen behind the first seats on the path leading from the Dean to the Fulling Mill. Dr. Sanderson has deciphered the legend on the stone. On one face the letters FM/EH were incised and these initials stand for Francis Marx who lived at Arlebury House and Edward Hopkins the owner of Weir House. Underneath the initials is the year 1859.

Writers of popular history must always remember that myth is more tempting than facts. Did Alresford in fact get its name because there was a ford by some Alder trees in Saxon times? Was this then the only section of river joining extensive marshes to the east with the Alresford Common Marsh to the west? Is the Ship Inn at Bishop's Sutton so named from barges which came up the Arle to supply the Bishop's Palace? It is known that in the early thirteenth century Godfrey de Lucy, Bishop of Winchester, constructed the Great Weir thus flooding the marshy area to the east and so forming Alresford Pond. A.J. Roberston in his "Short History of Alresford" quotes a charter of 1214 in which John granted to Godfrey all the revenue coming from the navigation of the Itchen, "which the said Bishop hath now caused to be trenched and made navigable at his own expense", no doubt a profitable investment. But did barges indeed come as far as Alresford? It seems more probable that the damming of the Arle was to give water power for the corn mills and provide water for the numerous fulling mills in and around Alresford for its cloth trade. D.A. Hinton, in "Alfred's Kingdom", writes that a hundred years later the then Bishop was petitioning against improvement of navigation on the river because it would have involved destroying his Alresford Mills.

Whatever the reason for its formation Alresford Pond became the home of much wild life. It is said to have been about 200 acres in extent and to have stretched for over one mile in length from the Weir to Bishop's Sutton. It is now much reduced by mud and reeds. A great part became water meadows and, ultimately, watercress beds. It abounded in coarse fish, pike, perch, carp, roach and eels. It is reported that pike of 30 - 40lb. were taken and in one single night in the eighteenth century 2 tons of eels were caught. Fishing then, and even much later, was more than a sport. It was an essential part of the economy of the town providing fresh food to balance the salted meat of winter. Trout were found at the entrances of the tributary streams to the Pond. R. Baring writing in the Hampshire Magazine in September 1966 tells of two or three pounders being caught in the Arle not half a mile from its source and, in the water immediately above the Pond,

Dermont Wilson had one of 7 lb. 5oz. Surely an inhabitant of the Pond which had moved into the stream? The writer fished this water some years ago but caught only a half-pounder.

Waterfowl of all kinds were also to be found in the Pond. A visit to the gardens of the Globe Inn will show many species. The mallards, coots and water rails are in large numbers, while a fair number of the little grebes, the charming dab-chick, are found. An occasional heron can be seen and one pair nested there in 1976. This paper is more concerned with fishing, but those interested are referred to the Ornithological Survey conducted in 1976 where some thirty varieties are recorded, excluding geese. One member of the Survey regrets the passing of the otter. She observed one about two years ago, but says that none have been seen since the establishment of the fish farms. Starlings were always there in great number. Joan Spurgin in the Hampshire Magazine of September 1965 tells that Col. Hawker records in his diary of 1821-5 "the first shot I fired, nearly half a pound of small shot, and I can swear to 105 in one shot!" The famous fowler complains that in his later days the shooting was ruined by the making of the lake at Grange Park, where fowl were attracted by artificial feeding "merely to ornament the water". He asserts that half the fowl in Hampshire were there, "I am confident I saw no less than 8,000!"

The cress beds up and down the Arle have already been reviewed. Most of these were made in the second half of the nineteenth century and were there before Baird was fishing. Perhaps those which disturbed him were the ones established at Western Court Farm in 1925. There may have been "acres of watercress beds planted where once wild trout rose." However cress beds did not really affect the fishing. In the early days water was extracted from the river and then returned, but M.J. Isaac of Fobdown says that, according to the Code of Practice, water is now drawn from bore-holes and then goes into the river. Thus the flow is in fact increased. There were still delightful stretches below the town where the river had reached full stature, and many trout could be seen in the crystal water. The very clarity of the stream making it necessary for the angler to approach with great caution. One need only walk from the Dean to the Fulling Mill to see that this is still so. This stretch of water is also a highway but this does not entitle anyone to poach for the privately owned fish. There are early records of inhabitants being brought before the justices for "unlawfully taking fish between the Fulling Mill and the Town Mill." Poachers standing on a bridge will tell you that they cannot be poaching as they are on a public highway. This is not so. They are still guilty of theft if they remove fish which are privately owned. The Test and Itchen Association is continually concerned at the amount of poaching that goes on on the rivers, the theft of trout by net from stews and ponds, the poaching of trout by rod and line, and the totally inadequate penalties imposed. The owner of the fishing at Weir House reports the theft of several big fish in July 1977.

After the coming of the cress beds the river remained unaltered for some fifty years and then a new industry sprang up. Fishing Lakes were founded to cater for the growing popularity of angling, and now Fish Farms are starting in order to supply the table and stock the Lakes. As well as old Arlebury Lake there are several others on the south side of the water between the town and the end of Arle. Here one may hire a day's fishing or take a season ticket. Mr. Denning's Ladywell Lakes to the east of the Dean, on what was once the Common Marsh of New Alresford, are the most recently established. Remembering the old trades of the town he has called them, "Tanners", "Weavers", and "Fullers". The lakes contain brown, rainbow, and American brook trout, the latter being a new variety of this area. 728 fish of average weight 1lb 4oz. were taken in 1977, the largest being a rainbow of 5lb12½oz. But the two Fish Farms have made the greatest difference in the appearance of the lower Arle. It is difficult to discern the course of the river as it threads its way between the extensive works of the Farms on both sides of the river below Arlebury Park. At Ladywell Lakes the surroundings have been planted with shrubs and trees. It is to be hoped that the fish farmers will follow a similar course.

What has been the effect of all this on the fishermen? Baird speaks of the fish as being "all glorious, wild, clean-bred, native Itchen trout - no stew pond varieties." Parts of the Arle have been stocked with browns and rainbows from other Farms and most of these are taken almost as soon

as put in. "Put and Take" fishing according to some anglers. The presence of brown "stockics" is of little account but rainbows are a different matter. They are voracious eaters and may drive the native fish away. At the end of 1977 there was an escape of a great number of small rainbows into the lower Arle. These fish could be seen rising all over the river and it was impossible to find a brown trout. So great was the nuisance that the River Authority had to electric-fish the water in an attempt to remove the rainbows. This operation involves the insertion into the water of a charged electrode which temporarily stuns the fish so that they may be netted. Many still remain but rainbows do not stay in one spot as browns do and already they are disappearing down stream. However this was an accident which one hopes will not occur again.

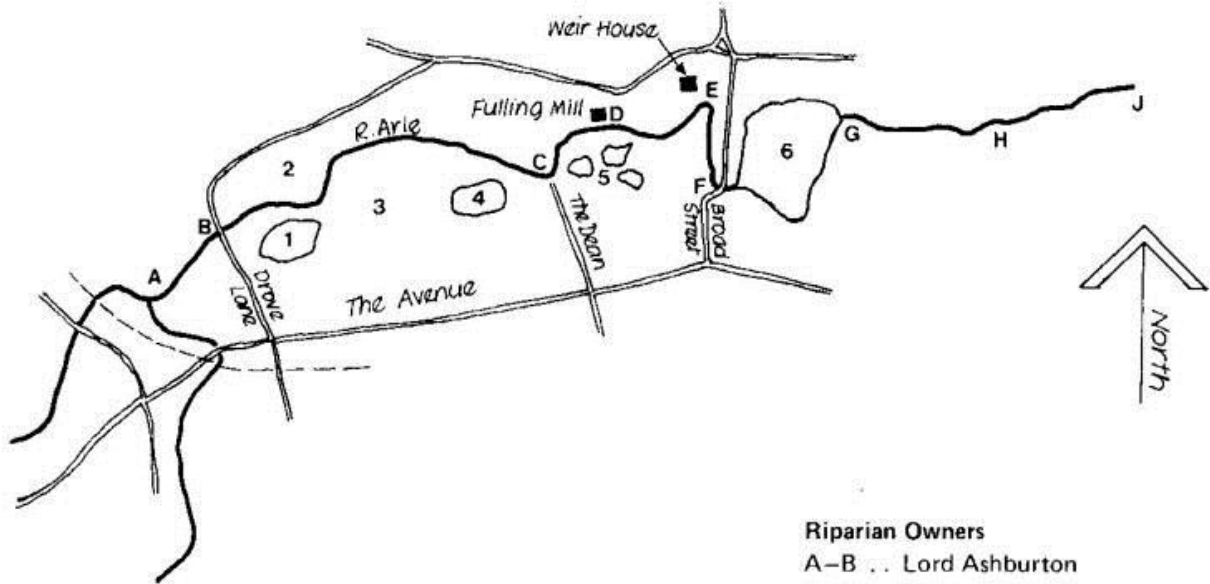
Lest the river angler be thought selfish it should be stated that the Lakes, and Farms which feed them, provide pleasure and profit to many people. This is a new development with which we must learn to live. The establishment of a Commercial Fish Farm is a very technical matter requiring a great deal of expertise. It is a matter of concern to the River Authority that they can be founded without the need of planning permission. An attempt to introduce legislation on this matter is under way. The Test and Itchen Association has also commissioned a paper for submission to the Nature Conservancy, and other interested bodies. It is hoped to preserve "only the stock of native wild brown trout", and also that the introduction of rainbow trout and char from other sources into the river "shall hence-forward be prevented". It is desired to preserve the ancient ways of this ancient stretch of fishing. It is hoped that the Nature Conservancy shall declare the Upper Itchen and its tributaries a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Disease is another aspect which disturbs the Association. The Minister of State in his letter of 1977 states that "It should be borne in mind that this incidence of disease in farmed fish seems to be largely due to the artificial conditions in which they are kept, including density of stocking". Fish farmers obviously wish to avoid disease (and the loss by escape such as that referred to above). However they can affect rivers by discharging effluent into the river. Will this happen to the Arle? Responsible farmers will certainly wish to avoid it.

Apart from possible abstraction of undue quantities of water for fish farms, reference should be made also to the increasing calls being made on the waters of the Itchen and its tributaries for public supply. In 1976 the Southern Water Authority carried out the Candover Pilot Scheme. In essence the scheme is to use the river to convey water. The summer flow of the Candover Stream was augmented by using ground water pumped from boreholes sited in the upper catchment area. This water was piped 4½ miles to be discharged into the brook at two points near Northington. Anglers had feared the effect of the scheme on their fishing but the result was most agreeable. The level of the water was maintained throughout (in summer and the pure cold spring water dispersed the algae and caused the necessary river weed to grow. The fish rose well and seemed more active. Of course the normal summer groundwater level is depressed in a cone round the boreholes but this is restored by the winter rains. Similar schemes are likely to be introduced elsewhere in the area.

Such then is our river Arle; a river develops with the local community as much as does farmland or a village street. Time brings its changes and has done from the days when Bishop de Lucy built his "Great Ware" until today when the fish farmers lay their concrete troughs.

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The ARLE



- 1. Arlebury Lake Gay
- 2. Fish Farm Jennings
- 3. Fish Farm Gay
- 4. Lake Jennings
- 5. Ladywell Lakes Denning
- 6. Old Alresford Pond Constable-Maxwell

Riparian Owners

- A-B .. Lord Ashburton
- B-C .. N. Jennings
- C-D .. G.B. Gush
- D-E .. J. Addison
- E-F .. J.J. Flood
- F-G .. Mrs. Constable-Maxwell
- G-H .. R. Coles
- H-J .. P. Mills

Editor's note. Although the official O.S. spelling of our river is ARLE, the author has wished to retain the spelling used by CAMDEN in his BRITANNIA of 1586 and followed by A. J. ROBERTSON in his 'Short History of Alresford' of 1937.