A day to remember

The commoners of Hungerford, in Berkshire, enjoy the rights of fishing the River Kennet in those parts. It is a right they exercise on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays throughout the season. The Hungerford Fishery is leased by the proprietors of the Berkshire Trout Farm, from the Trustees of the Town and Manor. This was originally bequeathed by that worthy man, John of Gaunt, "Time-honoured Lancaster." The management control the fishery, and themselves let a number of rods, without prejudice to the commoners' rights. The season is of the usual Wessex duration, from May Day to the end of September, and the limit is two brace of trout. The water holds some big grayling, and is famous for its Mayfly hatches in June.

Dry-fly only

The Kennet at Hungerford is a biguish river, by chalkstream standards, and an imposing bridge of several arches carries the London to Bath road over it into the town. It was close to this bridge that I parked my car on a recent Saturday morning, having received a kind invitation to fish with one of the commoners, Mr. Jerry Golding, who had attended my Salisbury course earlier in the season.

As I put my rod up, I noticed a fish rising only a few yards away. It must have seen us, but if it had, it was in no way disturbed. Presently, when I was ready, I pointed the trout's position out to my host, who invited me to try for it. The rule being dry-fly only, at that time, I had on an Imperial, which was taken as soon as it dropped accurately in the teasing wind. The trout promptly tore after it, it was very difficult with the long cast necessary to drop the fly close enough to them. After 20 minutes hard work I got the first. I had just started on the second when my kindly host suggested we adjourn for lunch. I agreed, tout asked for a few minutes grace to catch my fish. After half an hour, during which I never once put him down, I had to give him best and knock off.

The compensations were great. A flagon of cool ale to start with, and then the nice foil of a choice prawn curry, with a blend of subtle flavours impossible to describe. The trifle which followed had quite a bite in it, too. A lot of thought and hard work goes into the preparation of a riverside repast of this nature, and I am mighty appreciative of such hospitality. When the fishing is commensurate with it, you have a day to remember, always.

Below the bridge . . .

In the afternoon my friend took me down to see something of the water below the bridge. There were quite a few other fishermen in action there so we strolled back up, along the beautifully kept path. I had never fished the Hungerford water before, and I was much impressed with it.

Not far short of the bridge, a good nose showed for a moment, well out in the stream. Golding's attention was elsewhere at the time, so he insisted that I have a go. The Imperial soon dropped right and the trout rolled boldly into the take. How the line hissed through the water as he ran, first hard downstream for some willows, and in due course we got the net under him. He was deep and fit, and later I weighed him at 1 lb. 12 oz.

. . . and underneath the arches

From the bridge itself I could see a good trout, lying in a small gravel pocket behind some flowering ranunculus. He was rising now and again, and he took my Imperial, first chuck. He turned at once, and ran straight down under the second arch. After about ten yards of line had been stripped off my screaming reel, I felt him snag in weed. He had succeeded, no doubt inadvertently, in transferring the fly to a weed stem, and this I eventually reeled in. The fly was still intact. Another round to the trout!

An even bigger fish was lying above the middle arch. I reached him from the far side. It was a longish cast, and as he rose to my fly, the drag whisked it away. However, although he went down, sullen, I hadn't pricked him, and presently he moved up and started to feed again. I cast once more, and left my one and only Imperial in the water below. I could feel him thrashing, and his hold so far seemed secure. Slowly, so as not to fray my line too much on the pier, I walked him back up. Some weed hairpinned round the pier helped prevent serious fraying, but it also provided one last snag, in which my fish duly became slightly strangled. The crowd overhead provided a helpful running commentary, and at last the trout kicked free and came, still sullen, to the net.

The spectators wanted to know his weight. "About a pound and three-quarters," I said, but I told myself privately he was just 2 lb. I suppose I must be getting wildly imaginative, for he proved to be only 1 lb. 15 oz., and my two brace, all told, went exactly 7 lb. I have rarely seen redder trout, anywhere. They matched a salmon for both colour and flavour of flesh. I salute them, my generous host and his wife, the management, old Lancaster, and the noble Kennet, and rejoice to see it in such good hands.

A matter of perspective

Lest anyone suppose that I praise this fishery on the strength of a few modest brown trout aggregating 7 lb., let them reflect on the fact that the day I was there, Mr. George Devlin of Maidenhead caught a rainbow of 8 lb., in the little River Dunn which joins the Kennet at Hungerford. Mr. L. R. Peart, of the management, says it is the biggest trout caught on the Hungerford water for 40 years.