THE DEATH OF A CHALKSTREAM

Richard Holman mourns the decline of the river Darent, once a hugely popular venue for Londoners, just 15 miles from the heart of the capital

The Darent, a chalkstream on the outskirts of London, was once a famously prolific trout river. In Victorian times, renowned anglers such as Alfred Jardine, who fished the river throughout his life, recorded catches of 33 brace in a day – and such accounts were not exceptional.

Other most notable fishermen included Robert Bright Marston, editor of *The Fishing Gazette*; William Senior (better known as Red Spinner), angling editor of *The Field*; and CW Gedney who wrote quite extensively about the Darent in his book *Angling Holidays*, published in 1896.

The wild trout ran to an average of 12oz, with fish of 2lb and even 3lb not uncommon. For many years, a trout of 6½lb was exhibited in the saloon bar of The Plough pub in Eynesford, having been caught in the village mill.

The Darent has its source just above Westerham in Kent. Fed by springs from the hills south of Westerham and below Limpsfield Chart in Surrey, it flows 21 miles (34 km) by Otford and Shoreham, past the castle and the ruined Roman villa at Lullingstone, then by Eynsford, Farningham, Horton Kirby, South Darenth, Sutton-at-Hone, Darenth and eventually draining into the Thames at Dartford. North of Dartford, the Darent is tidal and just before entering the Thames, it receives the waters of the river Cray at Dartford and Crayford Marshes, where the rivers form administrative boundaries between Greater London and Kent.



Playing a trout from the Darent in its golden days: from the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News of 1900



The Lion in its glory days: fishing its waters cost more, but the hospitality and the fishing meant it was always busy

In Victorian times, large numbers of fishermen were attracted to the river because it flows only 15 miles as the pigeon flies from Trafalgar Square in central London. In Victorian times, the South Eastern and Chatham Railway, which was known as the "slow, easy and comfortable", had a regular service from Victoria to Farningham Road station.

A number of hotels held fishing rights. Anglers put up either at the Old Plough at Eynesford (owned by the widow Humphries); Dunton Green Mill, or the Fighting Cocks at Horton Kirby, whose proprietor Jack Lewis was by all accounts a most amiable host. Further along the valley towards Dartford was The Chequers, whose landlord George Mackay and his famously comely wife also welcomed anglers.

But the most important hostelry in the Darent valley was The Lion at Farningham. It described itself as "delightfully situated on the banks of the Darenth, for families and gentleman. Trout fishing can be had from the grounds. Charges, moderate."

The Lion boasted an elegant Georgian facade. It was built beside a natural ford just opposite Farningham Mill, with its weather vane modelled on the huge trout mentioned earlier. By the bridge across the ford was an ancient and decorative red-brick screen of three arches designed to prevent flotsam from floating downstream.

In front of the hotel, a manicured lawn stretched down to the river, which at this point formed a broad and slow pool, described by *The Fishing Gazette* of October 1880 as "a sight to gladden the heart, rows of trout in an ascending scale, the smallest in the shallows, the largest skulking under the bridge, watching the angler all of the time".

The hotel offered accommodation in low-ceilinged rooms, their wallpaper decorated with roses and hollyhocks. Rooms had their own large fireplaces and windows, which either looked out across the river or over the hotel gardens. The windows were framed by dimity curtains "white as snow and scented with lavender".

The hotel had fishing rights on about a mile of river and sold daily tickets for 5 shillings (compared to 2s 6d at The Plough and The Fighting Cocks). One hundred yards of the fishing was reached directly from the lawn in front of the inn.

At one end of the lawn, the Darent was overshadowed by a magnificent, ancient chestnut tree under which a wily old trout of more than 3lb took station. It was crafty enough never to leave the cover of the chestnut's boughs. The story goes that it was only ever hooked once: by Samuel Phelps, a great Shakespearian tragic actor and fisherman.

On this occasion, Phelps took great pride in his own cunning, deliberately casting a fly onto a leaf that had fallen from the chestnut tree and allowing it to drift over the trout, tickling it from the leaf just at the right moment. The trout took his fly but fittingly, the story ended in hubris for the tragedian as the fish broke him in the roots.

The main part of The Lion's fishing was separated from the inn and was reached by a short walk downstream. Guests would access this section by walking into the village, past the medieval church dedicated to the saints Peter and Paul, then turning left into the adjacent meadows.

Accounts of the water meadows and surrounding orchards describe how they were covered in daisies and primroses at the beginning of the trout season, giving way as the season progressed to blossoms, commencing with almond, apple and pear, plum and cherry, then horse-chestnut and sweet hawthorn and lastly the roses, honeysuckles and peonies of high summer.



Covering a rise under the opposite bank, from the June 1900 issue of the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News



This two-page photograph from an October 1903 edition of Army & Navy magazine showing a trout being netted on the Darent at Farningham notes that the river 'has been the scene of some good sport this year'

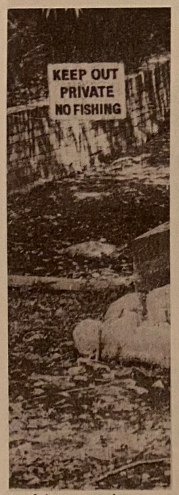
The village, it was said, always echoed to the chants of rooks, church bells and skylarks. The water through the meadows was at first quite fast and shallow, bordered by pollarded willows. It gave way to slower and deeper water that ran through woodland to Franks Hall, a manor house dating to 1220. (If that seems old, there is a whole series of Roman villas down the Darent valley). The Lion owned the left-bank fishing, with a cattle fence over which fishermen had to cast. By all accounts, it was not easy fishing.

But the beauty of the location and the welcome and companionship offered by The Lion made it a favourite for fishermen. The hotel. It had two proprietors during this time: Tom Pawley and Mr Haviland. They encouraged the tradition of the Good Friday Angler's Carnival, which was held annually. It became an important event for London fly fishermen: a gathering of anglers who travelled for the opening of the trout season.

The Field's angling editor William Senior described it. "Year in and year out, time out of mind, this Angler's Carnival has been held on Good Friday. The event is not advertised or placarded to the world, nor proclaimed from the housetops; no special trains are laid on to the scene of action; but it is a momentous event, for all that, to a select company of the Waltonian brotherhood."

Perhaps the most entertaining account of the Angler's Carnival appeared in the weekly journal *All The Year Round*, published by Charles Dickens, describing the 1879 carnival. The company that year was "from the north and south; those accustomed to the dainty fishing of the Itchen and Test, and others less delicate but equally killing in their method; fishers who swear that the upstream cast is your only wear; others who fish downstream for choice, and pooh-pooh the curious in trout flies."

The quantity of food consumed would have put an army of young farmers to shame.



No fishing, says the sign on this stretch of the Darent, but there was no water either



The bridge over the Darent at Farningham: scene of some epic battles with large trout in Victorian times

"Towards nine o'clock, there was a general determination towards breakfast and the consumption of the excellent fare of The Lion is swift and great. Salmon and soles, home-cured hams and new-laid eggs, mutton chops and kidneys in relays, flanked by huge joints of cold meat and great edifices of pie-crust, and guarded by outworks of jam and marmalade, vanished like a dream." The fishing, despite taking place on a cold and wet Good Friday, was equally impressive, with 42 dozen trout being taken and news of 4-pounders.

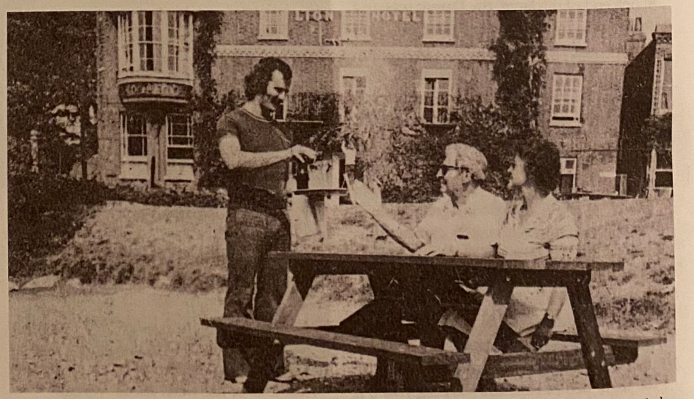
It would be difficult to imagine a happier culmination of elements that could combine to make the fishing so special for that group of anglers in 1879. They were fishing a clear and pristine water with plentiful stocks of wild fish. But it was not to last.

At the age of 79, Alfred Jardine published an article in *The Fishing Gazette* of 1907. It was about the life he had spent fishing the Darent and it seemed an acknowledgement that an era was coming to an end.

In January 1910, the great angler died and the magazine printed photographs of some of his outstanding catches – catches the like of which would never be seen again.

Pollution, the scourge of the 20th century, was soon after to bring desolation to the river. If the 19th century brought railways and visiting fishermen to the valley, then the 20th century brought cars and roads.

The expansion of trunk roads linking the valley to the London metropolis involved the use of water-soluble tar macadam, which disastrously escaped into the river through a combination of heavy rain and poor drainage. Almost immediately and for much of the length of the river, chemicals ravaged the plant growth and the wild trout population.



This is what abstraction has done to the Darent: customers of The Lion Hotel in 1976 drinking on the river bed

The June 24, 1924, issue of *The Fishing Gazette* carried a tragic story. The magazine had received a letter from an army officer barracked at Woolwich, south London, who was looking for fishing on the Darent. The editor at the time, Robert Marston, was forced to pen the following.

"I told him that I very much feared that the Darent had never recovered from the dose of tar-poisoning from the roads in its lovely valley, but that he might ask The Lion at Farningham still had trout fishing. He did so, and I am sorry to hear the reply was: 'No trout fishing now.'"

There is still trout fishing on the Darent today, although it seems unlikely in the extreme that the river will ever return to its former glories. Much work has been done by local clubs, the Wild Trout Trust and the Environment Agency to improve habitat and to preserve and encourage remaining stocks of wild trout, while there are still fly-fishing clubs like the Darent Valley Trout Fishers.

The Darent River Protection Society (DRIPS) formed in 1985, has for many years highlighted the issues blighting the river, and it combined with government and other agencies to draw up strategies for the river's future. But the greatest threat now is not pollution but abstraction as water companies, responding to increasing demands from the ever-spreading London suburbs, suck the river dry.

The Darent was once listed among the ten UK rivers most likely to disappear, and it continues to suffer from low flows. It is one of the most over-abstracted rivers in England, and being in an area with the highest growth of population and lowest rainfall, it doesn't look like the Darent story will end happily. Last year's hot summer saw many reports of fish in distress because of low flows, while in some areas, the river dried up or was just inches deep.

The fish still survive, with some brown and rainbow trout, though coarse fish dominate the lower reaches, with populations of roach, dace, perch, pike and chub, though the fish are mostly small.

Most of the trout come from artificial stocking. Some years ago, a large number of small brown trout were introduced. But changes in trout stocking policy by the Environment Agency now recommend that no fertile, hatchery-derived trout are introduced to rivers.

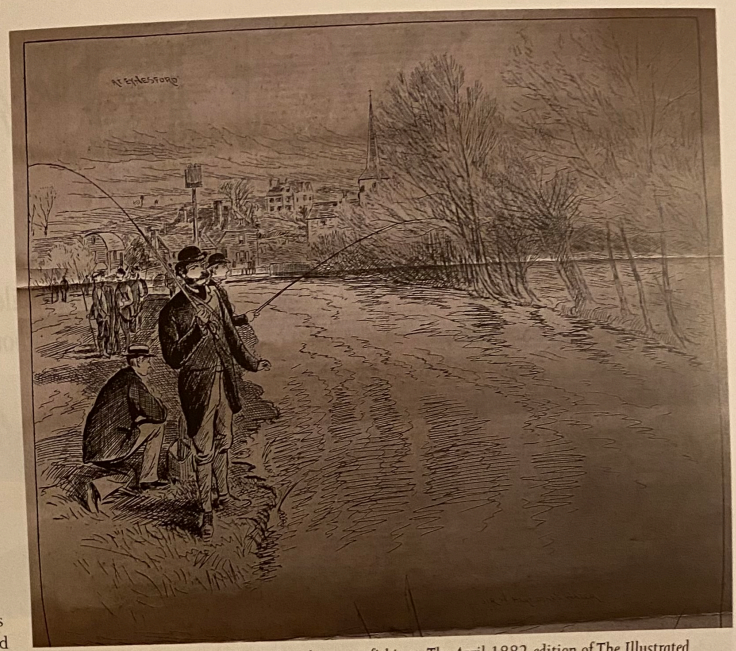
This gives clubs a dilemma. The trout clubs are committed to improving the wild component of stocks, but equally they are concerned that precious few true "wild" Darent trout are left in the system. The critical mass might well be too low to kick-start a genuine recovery in wild stocks.

Continued introduction of juvenile trout, either via incubators or direct from a hatchery, are masking any attempts to boost natural wild production, it is feared.

The Lion Hotel continues to welcome guests. but no longer offers accommodation or fishing. Its location is still undeniably very beautiful, as is the village of Farningham. It is now part of a chain of public houses.

Sadly, most of its interior has been changed, but it still has a lawn down to the river. Although it gets very crowded in the summer, it's quite possible, on a warm evening, to take a glass of beer, find a quiet spot and conjure memories of bygone days.

The fate of the big trout that once lived on the hotel's walls is unknown.



Ah, those were the days when gentlemen dressed up to go fishing... The April 1882 edition of The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News devoted a whole page to these two illustrations of trout fishing on Sir W Hart Dyke's water on the Darent, with the lower one showing an angler opening his creel to display a sizeable trout

