

Blackwater - Part 3

June 1992. The close season had seen some changes at Blackwater. The threat of backfilling still loomed and the owners, ARC, had created a small subsidiary company euphemistically named Greenways who were to deal with this matter. In turn Greenways had sub-let another local pit also owned by ARC to a local fishery owner. Part of that lease required him to stop people fishing at Blackwater. Learning of this I contacted the fishery owner, offering to bailiff the lake in return for being allowed to fish there with a couple of friends. Negotiations were somewhat protracted, but the week before the season started Jason and I met with the fishery owner and his representatives on the banks of the lake. It was agreed that we should bailiff the lake, and also be allowed to fish there. There were to be a maximum of 4 anglers fishing at any one time. Also they would arrange for a local security company to visit the water from time to time, and to put some signs up. All this was good news. Now we would have some control over what went on there.

Throughout the final weeks of the close season that year the weather was pleasantly warm. The Blackwater carp responded to this by showing far more than usual, and mopping up nearly all the bait we were putting in. Jason was still on the corn, whilst I had switched to a mixture of moth beans, and trout pellets in addition to sweet-corn. The swims we were baiting were being regularly cleared of bait and we could hardly wait for the season to start. It would be like knocking over old ladies! Of course these days anglers don't wait for the "season" to start, and are only too ready to take advantage of the carp when their guards are down. In foregoing all the excitement of the build up to June 16th though, surely these people are missing something. Perhaps though in these days of high profile angling kudos, such emotions must take a back seat.

Late on the 15th June I arrived at the lake. It was to be another 2-nighter, whilst Jason was down for a week or so, and already in his swim. The first thing I noticed was that the wind direction had changed completely. The second thing was that on the end of this wind the temperature had dropped by about 15 degrees. As suspected, the carp had abandoned the areas where they had been feeding so encouragingly; we could find no sign of them. But as this was a new wind, we set up on the end of it, in swims about a hundred yards apart. As usual Jason cheated and put his baits out before dark. Clinging to some of the remnants of the traditionalist in me I refused to cast out until midnight, then lay back on the bed chair to sleep, or not, as the case may be. At 4.30 a.m. I had a 6-inch drop back on the left-hand rod. I sat for a while carefully watching the rod-top for any sign of movement. But it didn't even tremble, so I left it. Mid afternoon I walked round to find Jason sitting shivering in the teeth of the wind. The swim he was in never really got the sun, and with the wind blowing straight in it was bloody cold in there. Returning to my own swim I decided on a move, and 2 hours later was set up in "My" swim, the scene of my successes the previous season. Nothing happened through the night and at 4 p.m. the following afternoon I saw a very small common of around 7lbs swim under my rods. Told you they weren't all monsters! I packed up an hour later.

The algae arrived early this year and by the second weekend of the season visibility was again deteriorating. I set up in my swim in the early evening for a 24-hour session. To some extent I'd given up on the corn as I'd noticed fish spooking off beds of it, particularly the bigger carp. I was still using the moth beans and trout pellets to which I'd also added some groats. As hook-bait I was still using corn on two rods, and trout pellet on the other. At 7 p.m. a big fish rolled close in, and an hour later another stuck its head out about halfway to the baited area. Sometime during the hours of darkness I was roused from my slumbers as another big carp crashed out close by. Barely had I got back to sleep again when the buzzer on the left-hand rod screamed out. I hit it immediately - nothing. I reeled in to find the bait, poly-ball and hair-stop all gone. Another chance missed, though I was at a loss to know what else I could have done. You may note that I mentioned I was using a poly-ball on the hair

with the bait. The reason for abandoning the yellow rig foam was that I had found it would lose its buoyancy after a period in the water. In this respect, the poly-balls were far superior and didn't seem to put the fish off, even though they were a different colour to the bait. I'm not sure if carp can tell the difference between white and yellow anyway, and besides, I'd also noticed that the corn lost some of its colour after a few hours in the water.

The weather turned very hot during the following week, and for almost the whole of the next month. Even if it cooled down a bit in the middle of the week, by the time a fishing night came round again it was blistering. The undergrowth around the lake had run riot and it was a major effort to fish anywhere but the first swim. And the first swim is crap! In those days the lake didn't attract so many walkers and bird-watchers as it has since it became an SSSI. One advantage of this extra attention is that it helps keep the paths free. But in 1992 Jason and I were virtually the only people there, and walking to a swim was like a trek through the Burmese jungle! One night I was actually fishing the Box swim when a loud "Oi!" from the back of the bivvy awakened me. It frightened the life out of me! It was none other than the man from the Security Company doing his rounds.

"You aint supposed t' fish here" he said.

"Oh yes I am" I replied, "I've got permission". I showed him my permit

"Hmmpphh" he said, "anyone else here?"

"My mates here" I replied.

"Has he got t'permit?"

"Yes - same as me".

"Well I'd better go up and check it" he said, "where is he?"

"Up there" I replied, pointing vaguely up the lake. I'll give this bloke credit - he was keen. The last thing I heard of him was the sound of cracking branches accompanied by much cursing as he attempted to find Jason. He never did find him - he hadn't a hope in hell of finding anyone in that jungle at night. I never saw the security man again, but he eventually caught up with Jason a few weeks later, this time during the day.

"Can I see your permit" he demanded. Well as luck would have it, Jason had left the permit at home.

"Can't fish wi'out t'permit" said the security man (he was from up north you see).

"But I've got one" protested Jason, and went on to explain the situation. The security man was un-moved.

"Can't fish wi'out t'permit" he repeated.

Jason then gave him a detailed account of how we had obtained permission, and who from. Security man pondered on this for a few seconds then said:

"Can't fish wi'out t'permit - you'll 'ave ter pack up"..

"I'm not packing up," said Jason - "I've only just got here and it took me ages to set up".

"Well if you've not got t'permit, you can't fish - can't fish wi'out t'permit".

Again Jason protested, and this time must have touched a soft spot. Security man gazed thoughtfully into the sky for a few seconds then came up with a brilliant idea.

"Right - if you've got permission, you'll know which security firm I work for". He obviously thought he had Jason there. But Jason isn't daft - looking at the security man's shirt he read off the logo emblazoned over the breast pocket...

"Cobra Security".

"Raight then, I suppose that's alright," he said before turning and disappearing down the track. Neither of us ever saw him again.

By the time August came Blackwater was suffering from one of its massive blue-green algae blooms. Visibility in the water was nil. Neither Jason nor I had caught anything, and my diary records many rather monotonous weather reports, and accounts of being cut to pieces moving up and down the lake trying to follow the rather fickle winds. The algae was the last straw, and I went off to fish for Thames carp while Jason retired for a few weeks. I didn't hear from him until almost the end

of the month, when he phoned me just prior to the bank holiday weekend. We chatted for a bit, then he asked for a favour.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Can I fish your swim" he said - "I know conditions are still bad, but I just want to get down there and I know it'll be clear in your swim."

"Well, I was going to fish it myself" I replied. "I've been baiting it up for 2 weeks". He went a bit quiet. I waited and let him suffer for a little longer before telling him that I hadn't yet started baiting it, though I was intending to during the following week with a view to fishing there through September.

"O.K. - of course you can fish it" I told him, "Just so long as you don't catch the big one".

He laughed.

I can remember that weekend very well - the wind howled and it poured with rain. I also remember spending a very uncomfortable Sunday morning scaling mountains of junked cars in scrap yards trying to find a spare part for my wife's Volkswagen. When I returned home there was a message on the Ansafone. It was Fiona. The message was short, but to the point.

"Alan - you'd better come down the lake - Jason's caught the big one".

I dropped everything, grabbed my camera and set off. But I was too late - Jason had already returned the fish and packed up, and as I arrived he was just coming through the gate with Kevin. Kevin had been at home when Fiona called, and had gone down to see the great fish, and take the photos. I doubt whether Jason will ever tell this story, but I can give you the bare details. Jason had set up in "my" swim on Friday afternoon. During the Saturday afternoon he had seen the fish, the Black Mirror, swim under his rods. He had told it in no uncertain terms that he was going to catch it. During the afternoon and following night the wind howled across the lake. At 8 a.m. in the morning, with waves crashing into the bank one of the buzzers sounded. Jason struck and the fish immediately charged a further 50 yards out into the lake, putting itself among some extremely thick weed-beds. Then it gave up, came up on the surface and allowed itself to be reeled into the margins, right across the top of some horrendous weed. If at any point that fish had dived, Jason would have had a serious problem. But remarkably, it didn't. Once in the edge it proceeded to chug up and down the margins and at this point Jason's knees went to jelly as he spotted the distinctive tail fin. He knew then that he had the big one - the Black Mirror - a fish he had been obsessed with and used to dream about. I can only imagine how he must have felt during the final minutes of the fight. I think I know how he felt when it went in the net. It weighed 46lbs 4ozs, a fantastic achievement. The fish was trapped by a cunning tactic on Jason's part, based on the observation of the carp feeding in the lake. He deserved the luck he got in landing it. I'm not saying exactly how Jason fooled the Black mirror - that is his secret. So far as we knew, this fish had never been caught before. Having said that, it must have been caught at some time for it to have been transferred to Blackwater, but it is one of the few fish in there of which's origins we know nothing. Someone must know.... Many of you will have seen a picture of it at the time, for it deservedly won the Cobra cup that year. I have to admit that, as much as I thought the fish deserved some form of recognition, I wasn't happy that Jason had publicised it. Initially he did attempt to keep it secret, but as Kevin has said - if you want to keep a secret you don't tell *anybody*. Jason told a few friends and within a week the capture was common knowledge. Despite the fact that the location was never revealed, most carp anglers who were in the know knew very well where it had come from. I also have to admit that I was surprised after that to find that the full-timers and glory hunters took another four years to catch up on the place.



Jason & his dream - the black mirror

During my lay-off I'd been having a re-think on bait. With so few carp in the lake it was difficult to bait in the right places. I felt sweet-corn was nearing the end of its effective life, for a few years anyway, and wanted to use something more substantial. I'd tried peanuts, and tiger nuts, but they hardly ever seemed to get picked up as the carp were so preoccupied on natural food. We were also using large quantities of hemp and groats, but sometimes you can also get the carp preoccupied on these small seeds and they won't pick up anything larger (now there's a clue!). On another difficult water some friends had been catching well on trout pellets. I'd been putting the odd few in, but they had not so far been taken with any enthusiasm. I'd been thinking hard about this and decided I needed to put more in. The theory was that if I put them all over the lake, then after 24 hours they would break down and wherever the carp went down to the bottom to feed, they would get a taste of them. I talked this over with Jason and he was quite keen on the idea. To bait the whole lake, we needed quite a few pellets. So we bought "quite a few pellets". I hesitate to tell you how many we put in, but it was a lot. And it didn't work at all.

During the autumn I fished a mixture of baits - moth beans, hemp, groats, corn and trout pellets. But despite seeing fish roll over my baits on many occasions, all I could get was the odd bleep. I remember that autumn we had serious trouble from the tufted ducks. They homed in on my baits almost every night and drove me to distraction. So many times, after carefully casting the baits just before dark, you would get a single bleep in the middle of the night and know your hook-bait had been snaffled. You then had to attempt to re-cast to the small clear areas in the darkness. We eventually came to the conclusion that the tufties spooked the carp out of the swim. Apart from this, it was at this time of year that the great beds of elodea would uproot, and drift up and down the lake. Often weed clumps the size of a double-decker bus would go through all your lines during the night and you would have no choice other than to reel in and re-cast, not at all conducive to success. Towards the end of the month I decided to don my wetsuit during the week and swim out to clear some fishing areas among the weed in an area in which I had seen a few fish rolling. This I did, and it nearly killed me. Weed is amazingly heavy, and once you have dived down and pulled up the first clump, the water goes completely murky with all the mud and silt you have disturbed. It is quite some time before the water becomes clear enough for you to repeat the process. And you have to swim each up-rooted clump away from the area else it just sinks back down again. But after a couple of hours of hard work I had cleared and marked three areas. The following weekend I fished these areas after baiting them during mid-week. Typical of Blackwater though - while fishing in this new swim the only carp I saw were back in the swim I had fished the previous week. So the following week I returned to my original swim. After the first night Jason arrived, not knowing where to fish. He wandered off up the lake, then came back and asked me if I minded if he fished my markers, the ones on the spots I had recently cleared. I said I didn't and a couple of hours later he was set up with a baits on each mark. Early the next morning I wandered up to his swim with a cup of tea. All I'd had during the night was

a tuftie. As usual, though it was almost 9 a.m., he was fast asleep. I woke him up. As we chatted the buzzer on his right-hand rod started beeping, and the bobbin started doing a little up-and-down dance. Jason looked quizzically at me, then realising I was nowhere near his line jumped out from his sleeping bag and struck. Another big fish was hooked. I can't remember much about the fight now, nor even if we had to use the boats to land it. It was the linear - again and back up to 35lbs12ozs.

So we fished into October, and the weather turned very cold indeed. There wasn't much activity at the far end of the rods, but the Blackwater syndrome, for me at least, was in full flight. Here's some examples taken at random from my diary. "Tufties massing at the far end of the lake for a midnight attack, Massive weed-beds hitting the lines regularly and I'm having to keep re-casting. Accidentally pissed in my shoe this afternoon (yes - it was that cold!). In fact it was so cold I desperately needed to wear the shoe before my foot got frostbite. In attempting to dry it on the cooker it caught fire! My water container has been leaking, I'm out of tea bags, I knocked over the milk and the matches won't light. Also no food or bog paper left. Why do I do this? Boat is knackered - only just made it back to shore yesterday with the boat rapidly deflating all the way! My new waders are leaking already & are soaking wet, the far marker has disappeared and the reel on the plumbing rod has jammed solid".

On my way back to the car, and a long way from the car, one of the wheels fell off the Fox trolley - the pin had broken. And when I got back to my car the tailgate lock had been smashed and the side window broken. They had done £300 worth of damage to nick a few bits and pieces worth about £10 in a car boot sale. Believe me, I don't exaggerate - that was typical. Another time I got my sleeping bag wet and in attempting to dry it over my stove, I set light to it and ruined it. Also at this time of the year there was an increasing panic to get set up before dark. I don't finish work until 5 p.m. and once October has arrived it doesn't give you much time to grab your gear, get down to the lake and set up. It's a wonder I never had a heart attack! Through this period I was fishing "my" swim, while Jason was in the snake, the swim from which he'd caught the linear a few weeks previously. And he was still fishing my markers!

That October was bitterly cold and frequently I would boil the kettle, screw the lid on and slide it down to the bottom of the sleeping bag to warm my feet up. Much of the day, as well as the nights were spent "in the bag". Jason had one other fish from the snake, a small common of 11lbs, caught early one evening just a few hours after setting up. That was his last fish that season and the cold weather drove him into retirement. I continued to do battle with the tufties, and by that time the tuftie scarer was in regular use. Trouble is the balloons kept going down (see diagram). During this period there was quite a bit of carp activity over the baited area, but still no takes. There wasn't enough daylight to go diving mid-week to see if the bait was going. Even if it had been, I wouldn't have known whether it was carp or tufties. On the night of the 25th October, the second night of a 2 night session, I was camped out by the lake alternately warming myself up by drinking tea, then getting freezing cold again by having to go outside for a pee. A bit self-defeating that eh? By midnight I was fast asleep. At 2.50 a.m. one of the buzzers gave a few uncertain bleeps. I poked my head out from under the covers and as I did so the bobbin smacked up into the rod and the baitrunner fizzed. I jumped out and grabbed the rod. Almost immediately the fish stopped. Slowly I increased pressure and it felt like the carp had gone into a weed-bed. I really didn't fancy going out there in the boat - it was freezing and there was quite a breeze blowing. Apart from that, by now the boat was definitely the worse for wear and with someone in it, wouldn't last more than about 10 minutes before deflating. No way was I going to risk that. In the end I didn't have to make a decision as the fish suddenly decided he wasn't safe in that particular weed-bed after all. At my end of the line there was a sudden massive surge of power as the carp took off again. Before I could react to this new rush, the rod went straight. I reeled in and found the hook had been demolished - it was the

straightest hook I'd ever seen. I'm convinced that was a very big fish and it took me some time to get over it. The hook now resides in a little plastic tub in which I keep hooks that Blackwater carp have destroyed - there are quite a few of them... There is a drawing of the hook in my diary. The entry reads:

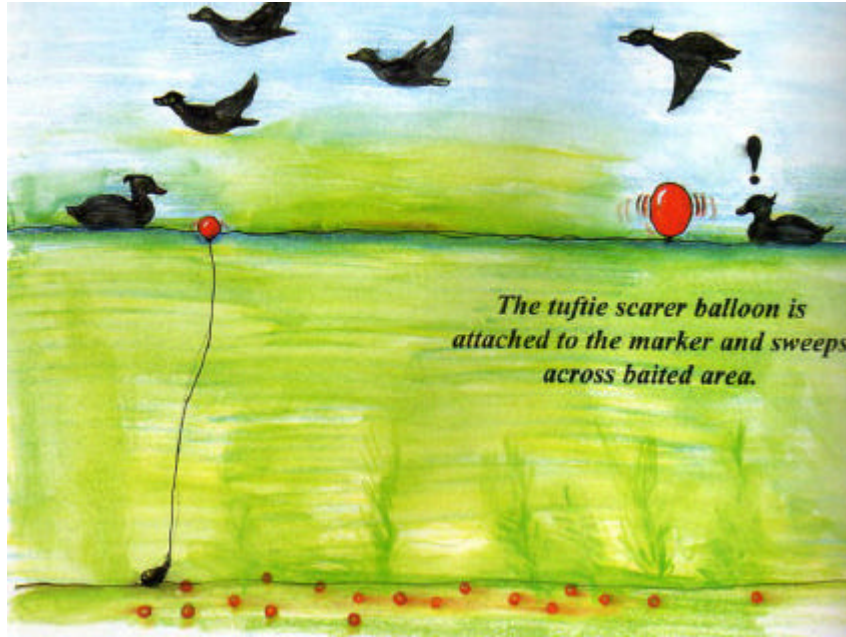
"hook almost straight - and there wasn't that much pressure on it. It all happened so quickly I don't think there was much else I could have done about it. What a terrible sickener after this difficult season. I know it's a horrible expression but I really am gutted - I am convinced that was one of the big ones".

At 5 a.m. I was up again - the tufties had invaded. I needed a cup of tea. I switched on the torch and looked around for the milk. The carton was empty. As I'd jumped up to strike the run, I'd trodden on the milk and the carton had exploded. The contents were splattered all around the bivvy. Blackwater really knows how to kick a man when he's down. Tea-less, I bravely stuck it out until the following morning - surely there had to be another carp around. After all, it only takes one doesn't it? But there wasn't, and the following morning's hurricane almost blew me all the way home.



The next session was shorter than I'd planned. I arrived at the end of October for the usual two-nighter. It was freezing cold, and that night there was a hard frost. Only the tufties seemed oblivious to it. But by the afternoon, things were looking more promising. Cloud cover began building up from the west, and around 4 p.m. a big carp rolled right over the baits. Half an hour later my wife arrived at the lake with my two young children in tow. She was suffering from a migraine. I had to pack up..... I must however record a curious event which took place sometime during the night. I had heard nothing at all, but in the morning, some 5 yards behind the bivvy, I found a fresh pile of excrement complete with equally fresh pink Delsy. It definitely hadn't been there on the previous evening. Very curious. I don't think I'm doing that in my sleep yet.... I tell you, Blackwater does attract some odd people.

So desperate was I that though I knew I was really up against the odds, I stuck it out right through 'til Christmas that year. I'll tell you now I didn't catch anything, so you may want to skip the next bit. However, for completeness, I'll briefly record the bare notes I made in diary during this period.



the tuftie scarer

14th-15th November: After being unable to fish during two weeks of low pressure and mild cloudy nights, am now back accompanied by frosts again. However, after a freezing night last night it is now cloudy, showery and with a moderate SE wind which is a bit chilly. Put some bait in yesterday at midday, and despite this being in the form of minute seeds (partblend) tufties were diving in the swim when I arrived. Rain was forecast this afternoon, but by 10 a.m. it was pissing down which completely bugged my leisurely set up. Eventually settled in by 11.30 a.m.

(arrived about 8.30 a.m.). All free-baits put in tight to hook-baits by means of the PVA'd cork. Chances must be very low now but as this may be the last year for the lake I'm going to have to persevere if I want a fish. 12:00 Rain stopped but no sign of the sun. The enemy is about in force (tufties). I suppose I'll have to chase them off later though I do have the tuftie scarer out. 12.45: been raining for half an hour or so - not the required warm rain, but very cold rain. A horrible day indeed, Morning 15/11/92: Well... it was a good night weatherwise - wind dropped, cloud stayed and kept the mild air in, some rain. No trouble from the tufties (which I chased off last night). However - no trouble from carp either. I do feel this is all too late and the cold weather of last month might have slowed the fish right down - which is O.K, when you have fifty fish per acre - but not so good when you only have about a half a fish per acre. 08:30: weather good - mild, cloudy no wind.

Fishing bad - no fish or signs of any. 10:00: Gotta go....

(I referred to having chasing the tufties off. This tactic worked well, but nearly killed you. What you did just before dark, when all the little blighters had arrived for the night, was to go out in the boat and chase them all off. This was hard work, as you invariably had to paddle up and down the whole lake. And there was always one tuftie that wouldn't go until you almost hit him - and that one was always as far away from your swim as he could get. Most of the time there was a wind blowing, so though going in one direction you might get wind assistance, you would then have to paddle back 3-400 yards against what was sometimes a really stiff breeze. So far as preventing tuftie molestation of the baits though, It did work quite well).

20th/21st/22nd November 1992: Weather cold, overcast, dry and no wind. Usual tight bait presentation. 17:00: Big fish came out near the baits, then broke surface gently with its back a few seconds after.

Morning 21/11/92: Bloody tufties all night. A cold still night, no frost, but a foggy morning. Not at all nice - really wet and mucky. Can't see many tufties about - but

then I couldn't last evening - they must be coming in after dark. I have seen a goldeneye and four goosander. Why are the only ducks that nick your bait also the most numerous? Been reading Flora Thompson's Lark Rise to Candleford. What a lovely book - what a lovely time. But time changes, and "like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away, and its daughters too, and the tastes and ideas of each generation, together with its ideas and conventions go rolling downstream like so much debris....." - Flora Thompson.

15:30: wind getting up - better tie the boat up. 19:00: wind now very strong indeed - probably force 6 or 7. 01:30: wind blew boat onto rods. Curiously it lifted them all from the back rests, then dropped two of them neatly on the next rest along! The third one fell on the floor. 02:30: 6 or 7 beeps on the right hand rod - no significant bobbin movement, but no tufties out there, so wound down and felt for a fish. Nothing - wonder what that was - a line bite?

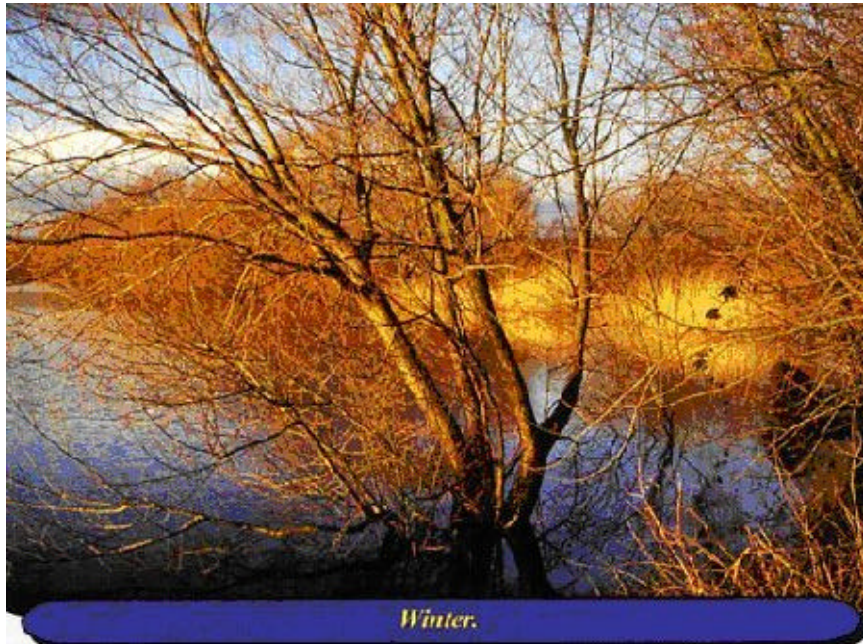
Morning 22/11/92: Wind dropped around 5 a.m. Now heavy persistent rain - ughh - a wet pack up. Very disappointing - felt very confident in this weather - even bought a phone card to call the lads down! It is definitely not to be for me. This has to be the worst season I've ever had; yet on here just one fish could reverse that. I seriously doubt that it's worth persevering with so few fish and so many tufties. I can't say it's all that enjoyable either, but then should it necessarily be so? Going for something special is always going to involve some suffering in any sport or pastime (or passion eh!). I shall doubtless endure much suffering as I walk back to the car - it's going to be like a swamp. A mile of swamp carrying full pack! Then I'll have to dry it all when I get home - ughh! Ughh! Ughh!
10:00 a.m. Left.

28th/29th November 1992: 09:00 a.m. Just 24 hours to catch one - huh! Weather mild clear and sunny after a cold frosty night. 23:00: still mild, heavy cloud, much rain. 02:30: 6 inch drop-back left-hand rod. No ducks about - wound down to lead - nothing - left it. (When retrieved the next morning only a small piece of one of the four baits was still on the hair). 04:00: 3 inch drop-back middle rod. Again nothing there but this time bait intact. One tuftie spotted 20 yards past baits - might have been the culprit. 09:00: home - another blank, but at least some activity.

4th/5th/6th December 1992: 15:00: After much mild weather we get a cold and frosty Friday and Saturday. Bah! 16:45: Looking out across the lake for signs of life when a carp rolled mightily over the baits. That's good! Morning: 5th December: Frost last night - cold bright and calm this morning. Single bleep to middle and right hand rods last evening - weed or bats? 09:15: fish rolled over right hand bait. Didn't look big, but too big to have been anything other than a carp (or pike?). 16:00: bitter cold west wind blew all day and there was no heat in the sun at all. Morning 6th December: 08:30: Sharp overnight frost - tufties all night, No fish seen. Very cold SE wind. Forecast is cloudy and mild - I picked 2 good nights didn't!! Looks like I've had it - a great disappointment. Nothing seems to have gone right for me this year. The fish have been eating my bait, but usually when I'm not here, though I've seen evidence of them in this swim - just can't get them to make that one mistake with the hook-bait.... 10:00: home.

19th/20th December 1992: Had all sorts of weather this week - mild, wet, freezing fog, frost, winds all directions. Now wet with a cold NNE wind. No doubt it will freeze tonight. In an attempt to attract fish to the swim (without feeding them, or the tufties) I've just sunk a plastic bag of Ambio and Noddoil in the swim with the top PVA'd. This is now producing a massive slick from the Noddoil, but the Ambio will stay on and around the bottom. Worth a try. 10:45: Raining now - but thank-you God for keeping it off until I got set up. Trying a boilie this time, on one rod, garlic-mint, fishmeal and casein. 02:30: 2-3 inch lift on left-hand rod - one more beep and I'll hit it.... Morning: 20th December: What a grim day and night we've had with cold rain from the north-east for hours on end. No action except the tweak on the left-hand rod, which I may have hit had it not been 02:30, freezing cold and wet. Wonder what

it was - those indicators take a bit of budging. Going soon - another blank - think I'll get the chub rods out".



And I did - at least until mid March when the feeling that this might be my last season on Blackwater drew me out for the last days of the season. I won't go into detail save to say that the weather couldn't have been better - beautiful spring days. Again I saw a carp move over the baits; again I didn't catch him. The best moment was when Jason arrived on the last morning with a frying pan and a big bag of eggs and bacon.

I wondered where June 16th would find me.

Alan Tomkins – 1997 www.riverwhy.co.uk