

Secret Lake – Blackwater



Someone once said that calling fishing a hobby is like calling brain surgery a job. I wonder how many of you reading this would classify your fishing as just a 'hobby'? There are many reasons why people take up angling, and probably even more variants on the reasons why they continue with it. Angling is a sport with diversification's as wide apart as the proverbial chalk and cheese. Most people begin in much the same fumbling way, but it is surprising where those first childish dalliances by waterside with rod and bright float can lead, and how, in time, the sport can come to be seen in some ways almost analogous with life itself. I have fished for most of my life, one way or another, graduating first from a rickety boy's net, to ant's eggs tied to cotton, then through all the various stages of coarse, game and sea angler. I think probably my first love is still wielding a double-handed salmon fly-rod while standing up to my waist in some jostling highland river. Here the act of despatching a line to curl towards some hidden salmon lie, as you progress step by watery step from top to bottom of pool is a pleasure in itself. However, time flies, and in my case it seems, money with it, and I have far too little of either commodity to indulge this passion as I once did. Not that salmon are hard to catch. I once read that by far the greatest aid to success in that fine art is the size of one's wallet, and there is a great deal of truth in that. But my impecunious state threw me back to coarse fishing, like some discarded trout that failed to make the size limit. Not though with too many regrets for I had come to see the catching of large coarse fish on a consistent basis as one of angling's greatest challenges. It is unfortunate that over the past ten years that

has been changed greatly by the stocking of some coarse fisheries to a point that does make the fish very easy to catch. Think about this, you sportsmen; would the golfers among you like to see the holes on the green made three yards wide to make it easier for people who didn't play too well. Would you low handicappers continue to play if all courses were altered in this way? Would you still appreciate the goal-scorer's art in soccer if the goals were 60 yards across, or the snooker player's precision if the pockets on the snooker table were a foot wide? Well that's what is happening to angling. And it has also been changed by the sheer amounts of time some anglers spend on the bank, which surely, in the end, leaves little to chance. As someone once said, you could train a monkey to do that.

As my angling career has progressed, so I have gone through the classic "fisherman's stages"; the first when one wants to catch as many of anything as possible, the second where one wants only the biggest, and lastly, the pursuit of only the most challenging. I am currently at various positions within those stages, and being an all round angler, at a different stage for each of the fish I pursue. But these articles are concerned with carp, and as far as that worthy quarry goes, I do now, whilst fiddling about between categories two and three seem have found myself a fourth category. And one which probably didn't arise, at least in so far as coarse fishing goes, when the original 'three stages' were inscribed on the complete angler's pathway. That is to catch not only the biggest, not only the most challenging, but one that hasn't been caught before. Being basically a Friday night angler, that is of course a ridiculous target. But then what on earth is the point in setting easy targets - how long will that keep you interested? An allied fact here is my aversion to crowds. Whilst I will have the occasional 'social' days fishing, in the main I like my fishing to be relatively solitary, perhaps with just one or two good friends. And I like to fish nice waters. As many of you will appreciate, particularly if you too are confined to the weekends for your carp fishing, finding a water with big uncaught fish, and with no-one else fishing for them is pretty near impossible. And if you do find such a water, then the fish too seem to be pretty near impossible, usually because they are few and far between, have grown up on natural food and have never seen a bait in their lives. As you read these articles you will share some of the frustrations of seeing baits left untouched until they rotted, even though the carp had been feeding hard on natural food in the same area. I have for the last ten or eleven seasons concentrated my serious carp angling on such waters, and on such fish. In that time I have not caught many carp. But each one, regardless of size, has, for me, represented a major triumph. I am not preaching here, or trying to be-little the efforts of anglers who fish better

stocked waters because I know that, at times, carp in even the best stocked waters can be frustratingly difficult. I do not choose this type of fishing to prove what a great carp angler I am, because I am not. I have that fact brought home to me time and time again. I choose this type of carp fishing not because I believe (as I do) that it is the very quintessence of the sport, but purely and simply for this reason - I like it - it is what I want to do. There are times when that judgement is seriously questioned, but without exception, at the end of each gruelling and doubt-ridden session, I can't wait to get back and have another go. Many anglers these days fish to impress other people - on the water these articles are concerned with you fish for yourself - which is how it should be. Today you can make what you want of carp angling - there are now enough carp, and carp waters to be able to do that. Given time to fish, anyone can be proclaimed an expert whether they are or not, for the lines are not so clearly drawn as they once were, blurred by overstocked lakes and by carp anglers who spend phenomenal amounts of time on the water.

These articles set out to tell the story of a gravel pit which, up until as recently as two years ago, had hardly been fished. Carp anglers, some of them quite famous (or perhaps I should say "infamous"!), had come, and they had gone again, with their tails between their legs in search of easier prey. Up until 1996 I knew of only five anglers who had caught anything from the water. And when I tell you this water resides within the boundaries of the Colne Valley you may well be more than a little surprised. I had hoped to tell this story before the inevitable arrival of the full time anglers, which would also (inevitably) be accompanied by the dismantling of Blackwater's essential mystery. But time passed me by and I never got round to it. I have met some of these new anglers, and admit I have had some altercations with them, mainly because they fish in the close season on the water, which is an SSSI and which does have a statutory close season. This has given angling much bad publicity so far as the local bird-watchers are concerned. Relationships in that respect were not helped in the least when one of the anglers, in order to get at some carp, destroyed the nesting site of a garganey, a duck that rarely nests in this area. At the time, and indeed for several years previously, I had been in contact with the various owners of the water trying to negotiate a lease. In the face of rigorous opposition from local naturalists, acts like the destruction of the nesting site of a rare bird did me few favours. Not that the local bird-watchers weren't up to pulling a few tricks themselves - during this autumn I heard that I had been reported to the owners as having been fishing the lake for the past 3 weeks. I haven't fished there for 2 years, and I have never fished

anywhere for 3 weeks! There have also been mysterious cases of bank-side damage that could not have possibly been done to facilitate angling. Notwithstanding the above I have refrained from writing about the lake while the new anglers were on the water. Now however it is open house. It is clear that nothing is going to be done to stop people from fishing there. I have been under a little bit of pressure to write about Blackwater, and at this time I see little to be gained by holding back. I'd like to write the water's story properly before it ends up being written cartoon style in the angling papers.

I first became aware of the lake eleven or twelve years ago, at which time I knew it only by its code name of Blackwater, so named by the ultra-secretive Kevin P. Kevin has never written on carp fishing, and it is unlikely that he will ever do so. A talented builder and bricklayer by trade, like so many who are good with their hands, Kevin is a very good angler indeed. He is an angler who fishes for himself; his catches would put many of today's self-styled angling heroes to shame. To some extent he shares my ideals, and apart from some aberrations on Farlows some years ago (before it reached its present sorry state I hasten to add!) has been in pursuit of difficult carp ever since I have known him. He too suffers from the depressions and doubts that can, at times, put you on the very edge of giving up angling altogether. It is difficult to explain the apparent paradox here where an angler can be pursuing the sport for all he is worth, yet at the same time be on the point of giving it up. I will just say that it is not the difficulty of the fishing itself that causes these feelings. Some of you I think will understand.

Though Kevin and I were friends, he never told me where Blackwater was. Kevin quite rightly believes that if you want to keep something quiet, then you don't tell *anyone*. He did however make a slip some years ago in taking me to fish for pike in an adjacent lake. Looking across at the waters of the secret lake, I was immediately struck by how black they looked. So Kevin's double bluff hadn't worked, though I never told him so at the time. It didn't really matter for my carp angling attentions were elsewhere then.

Jason Hayward fished the lake with me for four seasons. We first met on the banks of the lake during the close season of 1991, both pretending not to be carp anglers. I remember I had just emerged from the lake in my wet suit, having spent 3 hours swimming around observing features. Jason was carrying a small inflatable dinghy in a carrier bag and was accompanied by the ever-present Fiona. Despite the constant jokes about my age, the fact that he catches more than I do,

and eats all my biscuits, we have been good friends ever since. Jason is a young carp angler, talented in that respect and resourceful. He is also, as I have found many successful anglers to be, something of a craftsman in that he makes jewellery for a living, and as a sideline, the most exquisite carp badges I have seen. Though he has now virtually given up fishing, Jason and his various dinghies were to become an extremely common sight on the water over the next 4 or 5 years.

I haven't yet mentioned what made me decide to fish on Blackwater, as I had known about the lake for several years before I actually did fish there, and during the latter of these years, the lake had been virtually free of anglers. Kevin had given up for two reasons - firstly, the big fish, Kinky, had died. Secondly he no longer had available the amount of time he felt he needed to fish such a difficult water. So the summers of 1989 and 1990 went by very quietly on Blackwater. I was otherwise engaged, on a 60-acre gravel pit chasing 25 big carp. Unfortunately nearly all these fish died following a (legal) re-stocking and looking around for another challenging and uncrowded water I ended up on Blackwater. On the rebound.

I mentioned the threat of back filling, and at this time (1991) that threat was very real. So real in fact that we had contingency plans to move any fish caught should back filling become a certainty. In the event it never did, and we never did move any fish (though we were hard pushed to think of anywhere we could have moved them to). It wasn't quite as simple as that though, for fighting the land-fill company was a long and drawn out business involving myself, Jason & Kevin (as well as hundreds of other local people and various local organisations) in attending many meetings and writing many letters. I think even Phil Thompson turned up to one of the meetings, though some of the other anglers professing a great love for the lake were definitely conspicuous by their absence. It was during this period that I first alerted English Nature to the possibilities of the loss of this very special habitat. This ultimately resulted in the site being made an SSSI, and ironically this will probably be the reason why no legal fishing will be allowed there in future. Oh well - you can't win them all - better that than end up as a dumping ground for toxic waste. But this is all far in the future, and even as I write, no definite decision has been made.



Though it wasn't until the third week of the season that I actually wet a line on Blackwater, I had spent some time there, mostly in the water, noting the features, and the positions of weed-beds. This is a dual-purpose exercise for me for I love snorkelling as well as fishing. It is however interesting to note that this aquatic spy-work didn't do me much good. I found some truly mouth-watering features which the fish never seemed to frequent (and I learned this the hard way). And after the first 4 weeks of the season, the weed-beds had changed dramatically rendering vast areas of the lake unfishable.

During the years in which Kevin had fished Blackwater, he had had to adopt what I considered to be dubious tactics in order to present a bait effectively. Basically this meant that when the weed made it impossible to cast a bait to a clear spot, he swam them out. I turned my nose up at this and accused him of cheating (in the nicest possible way of course!). It seemed to me at the time that an essential part of angling was being able to cast the bait accurately. I also knew that during the opening weeks of the 1991 season, Jason had been placing his baits from his dinghy. I wasn't too impressed by this either, even though after landing his first big carp from the water with the aid of a boat, Jason insisted that I also should get myself a small inflatable. Further that I was wasting my time without one, as the weed would prevent me from

landing any fish hooked. I stood my ground for a while, but in time most of us change at least some of our opinions. There was a time for instance when I would only use cane rods, and as often as I could, centrepin reels; a time when I would never have dreamed of using buzzers or bivvies. They came though, one by one, as I accepted the limitations of some of my methods and tackle particularly in relation to the type of waters I was fishing and the time I had available. And so it was on Blackwater, where I was later to come to the conclusion that if I didn't swallow my pride and on at least some occasions adopt slightly nefarious tactics then I would be wasting my time fishing the water. I know some of you will be throwing your hands up in horror at the mention of placing baits by swimming, or from a boat, and at landing fish with the aid of a boat. But Blackwater is different from most other lakes in that it has not been managed as a fishing lake. Much of it is totally overgrown and there is no room to cast. Deep margins in most areas make wading out beyond the tree line in order to cast impractical. With the eyes of all the local naturalists as well as English Nature heavily focussed on the site, cutting down branches or clearing swims to facilitate fishing was out of the question. Also the nature of the weed was unlike any I have ever encountered and by mid-summer you would find it growing from top to bottom in 30 feet of water. You would be attempting to fish in clear spots the size of a dartboard with weed from top to bottom on all sides, and these clear spots could be 60 or 70 yards from the bank. Not that the carp necessarily frequented these areas - more that they were the only ones you could find amongst the weed-beds. However slight your chances, at least you were fishing. It was impossible to cast to these small areas. Fishing on such a difficult water, and within such a restricted time frame you had to know your bait was sitting right and not caught up in weed. You may only get one take in a year on Blackwater, and you certainly couldn't afford for your bait to be hung up in weed on the one occasion the carp that was likely to make a mistake entered your swim. Even so, there were many occasions when, having cast to what I had thought was a clear area, I reeled in after perhaps two days to find the whole of the end-tackle enveloped in thick weed. Particularly during the first two seasons we fished there, by mid July it became increasingly difficult to find any areas of clean bottom on which to fish. One solution to that was to swim out and clear one - and if you think that is making things easy then I suggest you try it.



Massive algal blooms that reduce the visibility to less than an inch are common on Blackwater. The only way to find a clear spot in these conditions was to swim around on the bottom looking for one. Not easy - I can tell you it gets pretty dark 10 or 15 feet down when you have a thick algal bloom. Among the weed-beds it was virtually impossible to find clear areas by plumbing. Anyone who has tried to plumb on a very weedy lake will know exactly what I mean. Perhaps it was because I always had the feeling that time was running out for the lake, but I've never had a water grab me by the throat like Blackwater did. Certainly it was partly because of this feeling that I continued to fish there in conditions that would have long since seen me giving up on other waters, conditions which dictated that we should use unorthodox tactics. But perhaps I am making too much of this - many anglers now use inflatable dinghies or remote control boats as aids to their fishing. And for as long as I can remember carp anglers have swum out to release snagged fish. Some of you won't agree with any of that, but then perhaps you've never fished a lake like Blackwater. Most anglers who have spent any amount of time there have come to realise they will need a boat. Most of the time our boats were only used for baiting up with small particle baits. Occasionally we would place hook-baits from them, and even less frequently, use them to land fish. I've mentioned swimming baits out, but that was an extreme measure, and as you will read, a bloody awkward and uncomfortable one at that. You'll read about the problems associated with this, as well as with dropping baits from a boat. Simple? No way. Give me a nice clear bank where you can cast out any time! I know some people feel that carp caught with the aid of a boat don't count. My feelings are that of course they count - many fish are regularly landed from boats - roach, dace, chub, barbel, pike, salmon, trout and sea-trout for instance, so why should carp be any different? There is a possible evolving argument here but I think I have

enough to say without expanding further on boats. All I will add is that from my point of view, I feel the achievement is greater (so far as fishing in most carp lakes goes) when a boat is not used. My final word on that is that I'm glad I caught all my best Blackwater carp without using a boat. And having said all of the above I can honestly say that I don't believe I ever caught a carp when I had either swum out with the bait, or dropped it from the boat. Thinking about it I suspect that was because when conditions forced me into such desperate measures, then they were not really conducive to good fishing anyway. But I had to be there, fishing.

If the carp were frequenting an area of bank that had no clear areas from which to fish, then we just had to grin and bear it and hope that they would move. In fact, once mid-July was reached, it became very difficult to move around on the banks at all, and you would arrive at your chosen swim covered in cuts and scratches from the thick brambles and the almost as lethal wild teasel through which you had to drag your tackle. If it had been raining you would also get a good soaking from the vegetation as you forced your way along the paths. In this respect the wild teasel has another trick - anyone knowing this plant will know that it gathers quantities of water where the leaves meet the stem. If you brush up against one of these tall plants after it has been raining you are likely to get a considerable amount of water deposited on you. No chance of taking the gear in two trips either - anything left in a car in this area has roughly a 20-minute life expectancy. Even if you did get back to your car before it was broken into, the chances were that when you got back to the lake, the tackle you left on the first trip would be gone. I had my car broken into and vandalised 3 times while fishing at Blackwater. So everything had to go at once. No convenient car parks either, and if the wind was blowing up to the far end of the lake, and you thought the fish were on it, you had one hell of a trek to get everything up there. And once you arrived, cut, scratched, soaked in sweat or rain and bleeding, the midges would attack. Blackwater has its own brand of midges and I can remember one even attempting to bite me through my wetsuit!

We kept mostly to one bank for our fishing partly because the other bank became virtually impenetrable by mid-July, and also because we didn't wish to fish in the snags. Though the carp were often to be seen in this area we felt it was far too risky (for the carp) to fish for them there. Subsequent anglers have created new swims in these areas, or by fishing all through the close season, prevented the vegetation there from reaching its normal heights. This is something that we never did,

and no doubt this attitude did cost us fish. But as I have already said, during the time we were fishing there the spotlight was on us so far as local naturalists were concerned. If there was to be any hope of leasing the water in the future we had to be seen to be whiter than white. This doesn't seem to have overly concerned some of the more recent anglers on the lake. The prevalent attitude would seem to be that as they believe there will never be any legal fishing allowed on the lake, it doesn't really matter what they do there. In fairness I have to say that most of them have tucked themselves away well and damage in most cases has been minimal. But I should also say that it has been noticed, and reported, by some of the more vigilant bird-watchers. Whether I will ever obtain a lease on the water I don't know. I seem to have lost a bit of interest since the fish have started to appear in the papers. The magic has begun to evaporate.

Number one plan for the owners at the moment is to try to get the fish out and move them to another water. This may prove difficult, but with only 17 or so carp in there, if they only manage to take out 3 or 4 of the big ones it won't leave much to go for. I also know for a fact that some of the anglers who were fishing there during the latter part of last year were doing so with the express purpose of moving any fish caught into a nearby and newly re-opened (and once very famous) syndicate lake. Whether they managed to catch any I don't know - it's not that easy...

The remainder of the articles in this series will detail the 5 seasons I spent fishing Blackwater, a name I would like to retain even though most of you will know by now the proper name. It is a name that seems to hold mystery. Indeed, at the time of writing, despite the fact that during the past 2 years the lake has been subjected to by far the most intense angling pressure in its history, it possibly does still cling to a small part of that special and vital quality. Around twenty-five years old, it is arguably the richest lake in the country. The few fish that swim its food infested waters have been introduced over the years by carp anglers, some of whom I know, some I don't, and some I can take a guess at. Current stock would seem to be about 17 carp in about 30 acres. Probably half of these are below twenty pounds, and several of those weigh less than ten pounds. These are carp which have grown well on a surplus of natural food, and which have no competition for that food and are probably never really hungry. The lake could, if treated properly, become another Redmire, albeit much larger and with far fewer fish. The growth rate of some (but by no means all) of the carp is very impressive. You will read about the big fish we knew about - whether there are any others of that size I'm not sure. The biggest we

know of you will also read about and it has been caught more recently at a higher weight, though nowhere at all close to the ridiculously optimistic forecast of a new record.

As I have already mentioned the future of the lake, as a fishery at least, is at the moment in doubt. Having successfully beaten off the threat of back filling, it is now very likely to become a nature reserve with no fishing permitted. In many ways this is a great pity, for here is a water which could, in time, grow truly enormous carp. However, I am not alone in saying that I would rather see no fishing there than have it fall into the hands of carp angling's bounty hunters. Anglers who did nothing to help the lake through its difficult period, nor to pioneer the water when it was open to everyone, but who now want to jump in because they have heard of big fish. Just another venue to give them five minutes of dubious glory. Blackwater is a very special lake. It is difficult not just in terms of catching the fish, but in everything you do that is associated with fishing there. At times the lake really seems to resent your presence, and every conceivable thing that can go wrong does. We came to know this as the Blackwater syndrome. I believe the anglers who have fished there in the past 2 years have experienced something similar. I do miss the place. It was one of the few remaining waters in England where anglers like myself, angling anachronisms if you like, could, in terms of the challenges Blackwater offered, pursue carp angling as it once was. I know you can't hold back time, but I also know that is the way many carp anglers would have wished the sport to remain.

Alan Tomkins – 1997 www.riverwhy.co.uk