

A TALE OF TWO BRIDGES (as printed in Angling Magazine in 1981)
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The second prolonged fall of snow had thawed and the river level was down again. There was a hint of spring in the air and birds were loudly proclaiming the seasonal change, encouraged by progressively earlier dawns and, at last, warmer weather. Ambient and water temperatures were at their highest for some ten weeks.

My short-term, end of season ambition was to capture one of the rare river carp. Two friends, Noggin Avenall and Brian "Crust" Eades, who devote much time to the lower reaches of our river, had generously tipped me the wink that carp were on the move. Although I had fished the upstream stretches of the river for many years, I'd never fished downstream of Godalming Town Bridge.



I was able to devote a whole dawn-to-dusker to my quest, so I decided to start at the Town Bridge swim. That brings me to another story. Nineteen-eighty one was Godalming Angling Society's centenary year. It was also the centenary of Godalming having the first electric street lighting in the country. To celebrate this (the 100-year-old illuminations, that is) a water-festival was organised. No, I don't understand the connection either! The river was jam-packed with more craft than it had ever seen before. Some of our club members forsook rods and mingled with the large crowd on this congested occasion. Our cynicism was not without foundation, for a featured display proudly announced the Inland Waterway Association's plans to excavate a marina directly below the town bridge, thereby destroying some of our very best fishing and, what's more, the

council had already tacitly sanctioned the plan. My club, as owners of the fishing rights for over half a century, had not been notified or consulted in any way. Anglers versus boaters – continuing saga. I accept that we have eight miles of river, but the bridge swims are about the only ones our disabled members can reach easily. Our club is endeavouring by every means at its disposal to safeguard members' interests on the Town Bridge stretch.

Back to that mild February day. When I arrived at first light, my chosen swim, immediately below the old bridge, looked promising and I relished the prospect of a morning there, before moving downstream to a more carpy location. I tackled up with my usual multi-purpose outfit – Hardy Fibatube 11 ft Avon (home-built) and 4lb line straight through to a No 12 semi-barbed hook (normally I use barbless hooks, but lively worms will not stay on them in moving water). Only a moderate flow, so one swan-shot (unfortunate name!) pinched 15 inches from the hook, would allow the bait, cast to the far bank ten yards away, to trundle down the far side and then swing slowly across the main stream to rest, I hoped, enticingly downstream. A fish might, however, be tempted as the bait moved through.

A strong south- westerly blow was coming directly through the bridge arches and this made rod-top bite detection an exercise in concentration. Third cast, and the rod just shuddered through its whole length, then nothing. I tightened into a ½ lb perch, which no doubt, had attacked the worm and then chomped it without moving away. An encouraging start, for this river is not quality water crammed with fish, and to get one under the belt early on was a good sign. The fish was returned immediately. I do not like keep-nets, except when, very occasionally, I go match fishing.

The next bite came as the bait swung across the flow. Just a gently tap. I tightly flicked into a beautifully conditioned roach of just under 1 lb. A smaller roach soon found its way into the landing net, followed by another. A bow-wave then signalled not the arrival of a big fish in the swim, but a couple of dozen geese determinedly making their way upstream to graze the water meadows above the bridge. The spring air had a mellowing effect on them, for they showed none of their usual aggression. They placidly gave me a wide berth, paddling jerkily, but impressively through the bridge arches. A pair of mallard scrambled hurriedly up the bank as the flotilla passed, but they were soon back afloat, apparently intent on increasing the local duck population! Grey wagtails erratically investigated potential nesting sites under an ancient, alder-straddled wall. A diminutive wren, disproportionately loud, proclaimed its territorial rights in the shrubs behind me.

Among the moss and earthworms in my bait tin, I found two earwig larvae. Perhaps a change of menu would be appreciated. The rod had only just settled in the rests when a sharp and persistent knock signalled early interest in the offering. I soon landed a superbly silvered dace of ½ lb. The larvae were undamaged and the next cast produced a bold-biting gudgeon. No sign of chub yet, despite having thoroughly searched the swim. Perhaps a small offset bomb, anchored mid-flow, with a long tail, might be effective. This change of tactics, with the rod set higher to reduce drag, soon gave me another decent roach. Even in the strong mid-stream flow and blustering wind, the delicate, but persistent take was easily discernible.

A slight tap followed by inactivity illustrated the greediness of a miller's thumb about three inches long – he'd managed to devour a whole lobworm! Next, a small dace tried to emulate the bullhead! My own appetite told me it was lunchtime, and time to move a mile or so downstream. I was well pleased with my morning's efforts in a swim I'd not fished before. I'll be back.

My chosen afternoon swim above Firs Bridge did not look quite so appealing. It was more exposed to the near-gale-force gusting wind and heavy showers. Friend Mike "soak up the atmosphere" Jones, who was to join me, was late arriving and by the time he did find his way to the river, I had already Freelined a perch, and a surprise bream into the landing net. Ever-faithful lobworms again did the trick. Mike was not impressed by neighbouring swims and, having absent-mindedly forgotten some of his tackle, he opted to spend the afternoon soaking up the rural atmosphere. He is a river man through and through, happy just to be beside moving water, with or without a rod!



If carp were to be found in this swim they were likely to be under the roots of the trees on the far bank, where the pace of flow was gentler than by the near-bank or in mid-stream. I used an offset-bomb outfit and plopped it right against the far bank, directly opposite, allowing the line to bow a little for ease of bit detection. Worms produced a few tentative knocks, but no fish. Perhaps crust on a longer tail would be more effective. Hardly had the bait settled when the rod-top shuddered and then shot round. A sweeping strike produced – nothing. Two smaller crust particles produced a similarly spectacular take and a solid fish, which ambled downstream. “Carp” I exclaimed, quite convinced until the fish rolled, showing dark fins and silvery flanks. I was not disappointed to net a chub of exactly 3 lb. Not a huge fish, but my best chub for a few months.

Jethro Tull, a 70 ft narrow boat, with its full-width stern-paddle frantically thrashing the water, ploughed through at full tilt – as a token gesture it hugged the far bank! A shame that, on an otherwise quiet day boat-wise, the longest, splashiest boat on the Wey should choose to navigate this stretch!

Anyhow, not to be put off by such a thing, I threw out a few more loose offerings and re-cast a chunk of crust. After a few minutes I missed a gentle, but persistent nod. Re-casting with several tiny pieces of crust threaded on the barbless hook, I hardly had the rod back in the rests before I’d had a more positive indication – a swift sweep of the Avon set the hook into something more powerful and lively than the recent chub. The fish fought fast and furiously for two or three minutes before showing itself to be a magnificently conditioned common carp, half as deep as it was long and tipping the scales at 5lb 4oz.

Light was fading, the wind had dropped, and so had the air temperature. Home for tea, in front of a log fire. Not a bad day: Eight species from two unfamiliar swims, in appreciative company. No huge fish, no enormous bag, but my first river carp and bream, and a memorable day on my favourite river. A hint of frost was in the air, and just one lone blackbird hesitantly trilling as I walked contentedly up the lane. Perhaps spring was still a while away.