



{ CLUB FISHING }

CASTING IN THE COTSWOLDS

Meet a thriving modern fishing club that offers desirable wild trout sport on miles of idyllic streams

WHEN A TROUT-fisher thinks of the Cotswolds, they will probably picture the archetypal English village, complete with thatched limestone cottages and bright, bubbling streams winding past garden gates and vivid pastures. They may imagine wild trout swaying nonchalantly in the current, waiting for a mayfly or olive to drift close. These musings on spring and summer days are the stuff of dreams for many, but for a lucky group of dedicated fishers and conservationists, this idyll is a reality. The 250-strong Cotswold Fly Fishers (CFF) club, with members from near and far, has access to some of England's finest lime and chalk rivers. The club's diversity means that members could be swapping flies with anglers from the Netherlands, North America, Australia, as well as South Wales, the Midlands, London, and the Cotswolds and Upper Thames region.

The Cotswold Fly Fishers club has grown substantially from its early beginnings almost 75 years ago. In recent times, the membership limit has been raised as the portfolio of fisheries has increased.

In addition to local waters, the club has gained access to various famous chalk streams, as well as two stillwater trout fisheries. This provides a huge variety of fishing in an area where very little river trout fishing is available on a day ticket. The club's chalk stream beats on the Kennet and Test are highly popular, and members are likely to rub shoulders with the great and good from government, television and the stage.

Membership costs are kept low because the club is run entirely by volunteers, who play a key role in maintaining the fisheries. Weekly work parties take place throughout the winter months with a focus on habitat improvement and encouraging natural regeneration. The region has an ecologically rich landscape in the heart of England, and the club's mission is to preserve and enhance the health of its rivers and wildlife while providing recreation for members. As the club states, "We believe that enhancing the aquatic environment for wild trout and grayling fishing contributes to a richer and healthier landscape for the benefit of all."

The club has more than 30 miles of banks across 20 river fisheries and two small stillwater fisheries. These include six beats on the River Coln, from Bibury down to the confluence with the Thames



Andrew Fullerton discusses habitat restoration with John Pratt (left) and Dave Whittles (right)

at Dudgrove; four beats on the River Windrush (Sherborne, Asthall, Worsham, and Widford); three beats on the River Kennet (Barton Court, Axford, and Denford); two beats on the River Churn (North Cerney and Siddington); two beats on the River Leach (Southrop and Lechlade); and beats on the River Dikler (Lower Swell and Bourton-on-the-Water), along with fishing on the River Glyme and Sherborne Brook. The club also has access to trout and salmon fishing on the River Test at Broadlands, and in winter there are limited opportunities for grayling and coarse fishing.

Most of these fisheries boast good stocks of wild brown trout and offer excellent dry-fly fishing. Rivers in the Cotswolds are particularly noted for their prolific mayfly hatches, and each year specimen trout are caught. In addition to large rainbows from the stillwaters, sizable brown trout are often recorded. In recent years, browns of over 8lb have been caught from the River Glyme, which is full of crayfish, while trout over 7lb have been caught from the River ►



Proof of membership is clipped to waistcoats when fishing



Sedges, Gnats and Adams for sometimes choosy and spooky wild trout

BANKSIDE VIEW



"I am lucky enough to live central to all the CFF waters. The members are friendly and happy to share, and the fishing has a special charm as the countryside is so lovely"

Joanna Knight



"The new members I met on the riverwalk we conducted last weekend were brimming with enthusiasm and delighted to have joined the club"

Jono Pearce



"As a wild trout addict, it isn't just the vast choice of Cotswold streams on offer, it's the amazing work the Cotswolds Fly Fishers do to maintain and improve the habitat for trout that makes me love being a member"

Simon Fowler

Cotswold Fly Fishers assistant club fisheries officer Andrew Fullerton shows how it's done on the beautiful River Coln at Bibury Court





ST CRISPIN MAYFLY (GEORGE BUSTIN)

Hook Size 14 standard dry-fly **Thread** Black 6.0

Tail Three strands of cock pheasant splayed

Body Pearsall's marabou, green

Body hackle Yellow cock palmered

Rib Gold twisted rope **Shoulder hackle** Yellow cock

Front hackle Natural guinea fowl

The locally famous St Crispin Mayfly, which is more than 100 years old, serves many CFF members as a general mayfly pattern. Its creator, George Bustin, was a shoemaker and originally owned a tannery before moving into fishing tackle. This may explain where the name came from: St Crispin is the patron saint of shoemakers.

Windrush. Several double-figure brownies have been recorded in past seasons. Early May sees good falls of hawthorn flies and medium olives, while summer evenings can bring sublime sport with hatches of blue-winged olives and caddis.

The club's rivers vary in size and character, ranging from small streams to larger rivers. Fed from springs in the limestone Cotswold hills, the smaller streams offer gin-clear water and good weed growth. With strong fly hatches, the fish are keen to rise but still pose a challenge, requiring precise short casts and a stealthy approach. Some fisheries are best fished

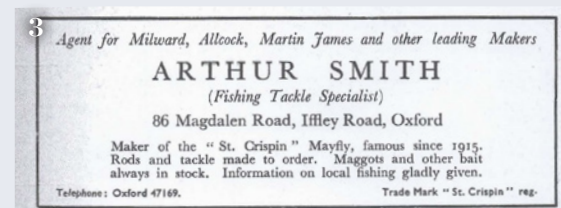
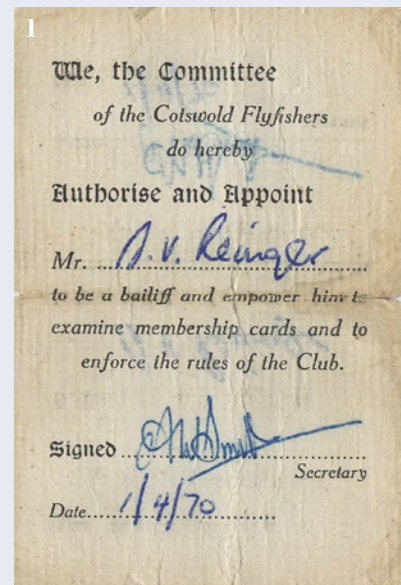
by wading, which is generally easy, while others, such as the Kennet fisheries, are better suited to bank fishing.

The two stillwater fisheries, near Chipping Norton and Charlbury, comprise five lakes and are stocked regularly with rainbow trout up to 5lb. Some river beats on the Windrush and Coln receive a light supplemental stocking of Coln Valley brown trout before the mayfly season, while the chalk stream beats are stocked regularly. Most members practise catch-and-release fishing, and it is mandatory to return all fish under 11in.

While the most popular beats are on the Coln, the stillwater fishery at Cornbury Park and the chalk streams, there is still a wide range of fly-fishing available at a reasonable cost, given the variety. Although members must be over 18 to join the club, youngsters can fish for free if accompanied by a member. To encourage young anglers, the club offers two levels of cadet membership for those aged 18-25 and 26-29. The oldest club member, Wing Commander John Marks OBE, who joined in 1955, celebrated his 90th birthday last year and remains the club president.

The club's conservation strategy is maintained throughout the close season by a dedicated fishery team, led by rivers officer Andy Killingbeck and rivers secretary Mark Purvis. Work parties are held every Thursday during the winter, with up to a dozen trained volunteers working on habitat enhancements and bank maintenance to increase wild trout populations and improve access for anglers. Their efforts include reducing erosion, installing flow deflectors, tree work, channel narrowing, reed ➤

A wild Coln trout, the result of a club dedicated to conservation



1. Club bailiff David Reinger's warrant card, April 1970; 2. The result of electro-fishing at Worsham, circa 1960 (Arthur Smith on the left); 3. Arthur Smith's advert in *Where to Fish*, 1949-50 edition; 4. A 6lb Windrush brown trout; 5. Lancelot Peart, second-generation fish farmer and owner of Berkshire Trout Farm, stocking in 1960; 6. Harry Ferguson (tractor maker) clearing reeds on the River Dikler in the 1950s; 7. Cotswolds Fly Fishers' St Crispin Mayflies and 1955 club pin badge

A POTTED HISTORY

After the Second World War, Oxford was a mecca for coarse fishing, but there was little game-fishing for the man in the street. Tackle dealer Arthur Smith, maker of the famous St Crispin Mayfly since 1915, sensed an opportunity and compiled a list of customers interested in trout fishing. Sixteen attended an inaugural meeting at the Shotover Arms on April 17, 1950. They proposed the new club be called the Cotswold Fly Fishers (CFF), agreed to pay a £5 subscription (a week's wages) and were urged to seek suitable water.

The following year, the club leased water on the River Windrush, famous for its mayfly hatch and enormous trout. Due to the efforts of Arthur Smith, who had begun a 30-year tenure as CFF secretary, and farmer Dick Abraham, the club acquired seven more miles of the Windrush above Witney. Famous Wiltshire riverkeeper Frank Sawyer visited the club's fishery at Widford and suggested it would make "a good duck shoot". This was reported in the *Fishing Gazette* and can hardly have been music to the ears of club officers, who had sought his advice. Despite Sawyer's reservations, the beat still offers excellent mayfly fishing. In these early years, many rents were paid in liquid form.

In the early 1970s, Arthur Smith was instrumental in adding another three miles of the Windrush belonging to

Lord Harcourt. Here, the club decided to utilise an old pond for trout-rearing and stocked as many trout as subscriptions would allow. Smith was a talented electrical engineer and developed an electro-fishing apparatus to systematically remove all coarse fish, which were relocated to the Thames and its tributaries.

In the 1980s, the club widened its remit, adding new waters on the Gloucestershire Coln, Leach, Glyme and Dikler, many of these having significant wild brown trout populations. With the formation of the Wild Trout Trust in 1995, the CFF adopted a step-change in its management practices, abandoning support stocking on a number of these smaller tributaries. The emphasis changed towards habitat enhancement and improving spawning opportunities. The club won awards for such improvements on the Dikler (2008) and the Sherborne Brook (2014). Today, stocking only takes place on a few fisheries, where absolutely necessary.

With the more recent addition of two stillwater fisheries, as well as salmon and chalkstream opportunities, a widespread membership has burgeoned to 250, a far cry from the humble aspirations of its founders. An active policy of seeking new and better fishing opportunities will hopefully see continued success as the club approaches its 75th anniversary.



Committee member and regional Riverfly Partnership coordinator Tony Bostock inspecting a kick sample with club members on the Coln



A BWO nymph from the Coln, where wary trout grub among the ranunculus



Members Joanna Knight (left) and Deborah Guy discuss patterns



Chairman Richard Knowles (left) and vice president David Reinger can enjoy many miles of fishing off the beaten track

removal, gravel cleaning, and easing fish passage. The club's work has not gone unnoticed, receiving Wild Trout Trust awards for conservation efforts on the River Dikler in 2008 and the Sherborne Brook in 2014.

Grayling populations in the Windrush have declined dramatically since the 1980s when large numbers were electro-fished annually at Newbridge, Rissington. In 2019, the Sherborne Brook, a Windrush tributary with excellent water quality, was identified as a potential grayling nursery area. In cooperation with the Environment Agency, the club undertook a trial stocking programme. Early results showed an increase in grayling numbers, and the Windrush Grayling Project will continue for at least three more years.

The Cotswold Fly Fishers work closely with numerous organisations, including the Cotswolds Rivers Trust, Angling Trust, Wild Trout Trust, and Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP). The club also engages with Thames Water and local members of Parliament to lobby on water quality and abstraction issues. Partnerships with Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, Action for the River Kennet (ARK), and the National Trust help the club

further its goals. The CFF is also a member of the Windrush Catchment Partnership.

The club's forward-thinking approach has led it to adopt more sustainable fishery management practices. After many years of rearing and stocking large numbers of fish, surveys showed a clear preference among members for wild trout and grayling fisheries. While some beats on the Windrush and Coln are still lightly stocked to allow members to take fish, other river beats operate on a mandatory catch-and-release, barbless-hook basis. These conservation efforts, combined with fishery enhancements, have led to a significant increase in wild fish numbers and annual catches.

Prospective members can arrange guided outings with one of the club's three qualified instructors. With such a large portfolio of waters, it can be tricky for new members to know where and how to fish. To help, guided river walks are organised and led by committee members, identifying beat boundaries, car parks and access arrangements. Tactics, tackle and popular fly patterns for each beat are also discussed. A budding system is available to help new members familiarise themselves with the waters and learn effective techniques. Starting next year, the club will offer away days for members, with the first taking place in late March on the River Usk.

Over the years, the club and its rivers have attracted many well-known anglers. These include Cheltenham tackle dealer James Ogden, who fished at Swinbrook with a floating mayfly nearly a century before the Cotswold Fly Fishers was formed. ►

MEMBERS' FLIES



St Crispin Mayfly variant by CFF vice president David Reinger. David's variant of the original George Bustin pattern has a white body, a silver oval tinsel rib, and a head and body hackle of natural badger cock.



This exquisite Olive Hare's Ear Parachute Emerger from fly-tyer and club member Peter Smith is a delicate emerger pattern, covering a multitude of olive species



Another of Peter Smith's fine patterns, this FB Caddis is tied as a general caddis imitation. Its effective foam-bodied design scores well when used as the dry-fly in a duo set-up



Tony Bostock's Parachute Adams variant, with its grey wool body, is a specific imitation of absolutely nothing. As a general pattern, it excels and will pass as a fair representation of most olives, and in its parachute form, an emerger



The Blackthorn by Tony Bostock. Small black patterns have always been popular on CFF waters. It looks like a black gnat, but if knotted trailing legs are added it becomes a great hawthorn. It does well throughout the season

“Surveys showed a clear preference among members for wild trout and grayling fisheries”

“Geoffrey Palmer, the actor, was a competent angler who enjoyed the CFF waters”

Ogden, who tied the GRHE using flat gold tinsel and double starling split wings, was an early advocate of the split-wing dry-fly. His nephew, also James Ogden, invented the famous Invicta wet-fly, which was used by club members in the Windrush during the club’s early years.

Well-known Oxford angler and author Peter Stone, who was also a club member, described the method and the controversy between wet- and dry-fly fishers working opposite directions in his book *Come Fishing with Me*. The journalist and author of *Swallows and Amazons and Rod & Line*, Arthur Ransome CBE, fished the Windrush, as did William Senior (pen name Red Spinner), angling editor of *The Field*. Senior’s experiences are noted in his book *Waterside Sketches*.

Geoffrey Palmer, the actor, was a competent angler who enjoyed the CFF waters. Other famous visitors include Alec Adamson, expert fly-tyer and tournament caster, and Harry Ferguson of tractor

fame, who occasionally fished at his Abbotswood estate on the River Dikler.

Lastly, the CFF’s Tony Bostock MBE, former CEO of the Severn Rivers Trust, is a highly active member of the club’s committee. Tony coordinates the Riverfly Partnership Cotswolds & Upper Thames Riverfly Hub and has led workshops for more than 900 individuals. His work has resulted in monitoring invertebrate populations on 28 rivers and streams across the Cotswolds. Tony is renowned for his dry-fly fishing prowess, although he insists that the rumour of him fishing every day is untrue – yet with such opportunities on his doorstep, who could blame him? ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE

The Coln at Bibury Court: patchwork gravel is kept clean by hardwood upstream croys and brushwood berms that narrow channels and fill with watercress



Following a morning of teaching on club water, coach Mark Purvis of Blue Zulu Fly Fishing casts a fly into a likely run



Delicate choices for when the mayfly are over



Club socials and work parties bring members together. Left to right: secretary Paul Madden, Richard Knowles and Andrew Fullerton watch the kick-sampling

Factfile



JOINING THE CLUB

The annual Cotswold Fly Fishers subscription is £660, or £440 for senior (over 75) membership. There is a non-returnable registration fee of £187. Cadet membership 1, for ages 18-25, is £330; no registration fee. Cadet membership 2, for ages 26-29, is £495; no registration fee. Upon reaching 30, cadet members can move to full membership by paying the full sub.

Members are entitled to six guest tickets per season for use on some club waters and at other fisheries, on various fishing-related products and services, or social events. Members receive an annual handbook, membership badge, car-parking sticker and quarterly newsletters. On joining, new members receive a welcome pack with beat maps and the previous year’s catch returns.

The club has a comprehensive website cotswoldsflyfishers.com maintained by committee member Dave Whittles. This includes detailed maps and descriptions of the fisheries as well as the rules and a gallery. The club also has a Facebook page

Access to beats is very good and where allowed, wading is easy. There is at least one car park for every beat, located bankside or a short walk from the river.

COTSWOLDS FLY FISHERS APPROVED GUIDES

Mark Purvis of Blue Zulu Fly Fishing. Tuition and guided fishing in the Cotswolds and beyond with more than 40 years of experience in fly-fishing. DBS-checked Angling Trust Level 1 angling coach.

Web: bluezulu-flyfishing.co.uk
Email: mark@bluezulu-flyfishing.co.uk

Andy Grey Fly Fishing. Lessons, guiding and casting instruction in the heart of the Cotswolds and southern England. Game Anglers Instructors Certificate, L1 CCA Coach, Patagonia Pro-Guide.

Web: andygreyflyfishing.com Email: andygrey@me.com

Mark Tickner Fly Fishing. Based in Oxfordshire, Mark provides coaching and guiding for adults and children on lakes and rivers within the Cotswolds. Level 2 Game Angling Coach and an Associate Member of the Game Angling Instructors’ Association (GAIA).

Email: markticknerflyfishing.com
Email: markticknerflyfishing@yahoo.com

POPULAR FISHING HOTELS, PUBS AND FOOD

Bull Hotel, Fairford. Famous fishing hotel near the River Coln and CFF beats. Many well-known anglers fished the hotel’s water. The club has access to the hotel’s fishing and undertakes annual habitat restoration works on the hotel beat. Web: thebullhotelfairford.co.uk

Bathurst Arms. Web: bathurstarms.co.uk (on the banks of the Churn).

The Fox at Barrington. Web: thefoxatbarrington.com (on the banks of the Windrush).

The Golden Ball Inn. Web: thegoldenball.co.uk (near the Dikler beat on the Abbotswood estate).

The Bear Hotel. Web: greenekinginns.co.uk/hotels/berkshire/bear-hotel (near beats on the Kennet at Denford, Barton Court).

The New Inn Hotel. Web: newinnhotel.co.uk (near CFF beats on the Leach)

The King’s Arms. Web: kingshotelwoodstock.co.uk (near CFF beat on the Glyme).