

# The Expedition

It was back in the depths of last winter, while roach fishing, that Henry Stephenson and I began to ponder the idea of a fishing trip further afield.





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**H**aving recently passed my driving test we now had the ability to go to all the fisheries we had read so much about and watched on countless TV programs.

Choosing the venue was simple. For us there was only one choice. Probably the most prolific venue in the whole of Britain- the River Wye. Of course when we thought of the Wye, the first thing that came to our minds was barbel! Neither Henry nor I had caught a barbel before and so had no real idea what the best way to catch one was. We read as much info on rigs, bait, barbel care and all the rest of it as best we could, yet we still didn't feel properly prepared. It was then that I decided to put a post on the

Barbel Society's Facebook page asking for some advice. It seemed logical to ask the barbel fishing community about barbel fishing! The response was quite incredible! And thanks to a couple of individuals going above and beyond, we had one of the best weeks of our lives.

Steve Pope and Rob Swindells both very kindly asked if we would like to join them on the River Wye and the River Teme respectively. How could we refuse?! We decided to add a few extra days fishing on the Wye to make a week long break and our adventure was ready for the off!

We woke up at 4am on the first Sunday of August, to make the four and half hour journey to the Wye from home in Suffolk. Our first

fishery of the trip was How Caple Court (on the Wye and Usk foundation stretch). We then proceeded to walk the length of the fishery. With a few swims sussed out, we yomped back up to the car to get the gear and headed to the first swim.

Henry sat to my left fishing tight to a large over hanging tree along the inside margin. I cast to centre where we could see some shallow runs in between the weed. It didn't take long! As Henry cast in and placed the rod on the rest he complained the lead wasn't holding bottom properly. Wham! His rod arched over and he was in! After a good scrappy fight, a chub of four pounds graced his landing net. A good start! A couple of recasts later with a few handfuls of bait the tip of

my counterpart's rod was bouncing! "More chub?" I questioned. All of a sudden Henry's rod was arched over again. I quickly reeled in to give him extra playing room. "Good fish?" I asked. "Put it this way, if it's a chub we're weighing it!" he replied. Ten minutes later we had yet to see this fish. It was digging for the inside bank but was keeping deep. It must have been a barbel. Then a glimpse! Henry looked at me and cried "It's a barbel!" A dogged fight followed but the reward was there to be had. Our first bar of gold was banked, and as you can tell from Henry's face he was over the moon!

A change of swim was in order, so we moved a hundred yards downstream. We sat ourselves in a swim with a fallen tree lying



## *The Expedition* By Alifie Fawkner & Henry Stephenson

in front of us. This time I fished the near margin and Henry fished a large back eddy a couple of metres out. After a small wait my tip began to bounce. I decided to leave it but the bouncing persisted so I struck into what turned out to be the smallest fish of the entire trip, weighing no more than a smattering of ounces.

But a fish it was and I was happy! Henry was in a short while after, landing a fish of a few pounds. A lull in the action was put down to the increasing heat so we decided to find another swim with some shade.

We wandered to the top end of the fishery, cast in and relaxed for a spot of lunch. Without warning my rod was doubled over. As soon as I lifted into the fish I knew it wasn't a few ounces! The battle that proceeded was unbelievable. It was proper hit and hold action. By the time Henry had slipped the net under the fish, my arm was aching like hell. My defeated adversary was a 7lb 15oz beauty. I couldn't have

been more chuffed!

Now having both landed proper barbel, baiting a few swims for later that evening seemed sensible. In the second swim we sat ourselves in we cast down each margin. Double hook up! This presented us with a problem. We only had one net between us, having left the other one back at the car. While playing my fish in one direction and holding the net into the water in the other direction, between us we managed to land Henry's barbel. He dropped his rod and began to sprint up the bank to the car to grab the other net. He was back in a jiffy and was able to assemble the other net, take hold of his net containing his fish and then land mine for me. It was a Chuckle Brother moment.

The next morning we woke up bright and early ready to meet Steve Pope at the Llanthomas fishery. We met and introduced ourselves at the gate. Once we had got down the track and over a few fields into the

fishery itself we were blown away. It was stunning. Simply stunning. We stood there with an old fly fisherman's hut behind us and looked onto the river. It looked incredible, the view wasn't bad either!

We wanted to start fishing quickly so we got the gear and bait out of the car and presented it to Steve. We were surprised that he approved our terminal tackle set ups but he did help us prepare the bait. This time we were going to fish feeders and bait heavily. Steve sat us in one of the better known swims of the fishery. He then got us settled on the spot. We were then able to sit back and just have a chat and a laugh. A little while after Steve went off to bait some more spots for us. Unfortunately we had no action during the daylight hours. We all convened for a BBQ and some beers that evening and had a great laugh swapping fishing stories.

After some good grub we headed back down to the

river. We sat back in the swim we had fished for the majority of the day. A few more feeders full of bait were chucked on the spot. A mix of high oil, crushed hemp ground bait and various sizes of halibut pellets was the feed of choice. After a few hours fishing the light was fading. Only a little while later we began to get some indications on the rod tip and soon enough I was in. A long winded fight resulted in a barbel weighing in at 7lb, on the nose. Chuffed! With our confidence back up I recast my rod. But the indications had stopped. After a little while later, more bait had been put on the spot, we had yet to get an indication. I reeled in and decided to cast further down river, by about twenty yards. After five minutes I was beginning to wonder if that had been the right thing to do. So I decided to reel in. As I lifted the rod, the tip bent over and pulled back. I was in! I could instantly tell this fish was much bigger. It went for several powerful





runs upstream and then just sat there. It was staying tight to the bottom and wasn't budging. Eventually, with some constant pressure, it decided to comply with my persuasion. Henry was able to net the fish in one fell swoop. When he lifted the net to present me with my prize I knew it was a double. With the sling zeroed we got her on the scales. Eleven pounds dead. As you could imagine I was chuffed! Photos quickly snapped I replaced her into the net and lowered her into the water. Steve had told us not to worry about the fish taking a couple of minutes to right themselves. This fish had fought its heart out and so she needed a little while to hold herself up in the water. Once she was kicking from the net, I was happy to let my new p.b. go. Fantastic! It was getting late. It was well past two in the morning, so we decided to call it a night and go and get some kip!

The next morning we were up and raring to go early. Steve told us to get our waders on because we were going in! So on they went and in we went. We waded to the top end of the fishery where there was a long, shallow, fast run along the far bank. There was a large fallen tree in the water. This is where we were going to cast to. A 2oz lead running on the mainline and huge lumps on spam on the hook. Casting as tightly as we could to the fallen tree, we allowed the bait to roll along the bottom. We persisted for a couple of hours but to no avail. However it was a good insight to a different method of barbel fishing. We got back on dry land and set up for the rest of the day.

We fished the rest of the morning in the same swim as the previous day to no avail. Steve had been baiting a swim at the bottom end of the fishery with hemp and



pellets. It was here we fished for the afternoon and very quickly after settling in I got a bite. The fish hugged the bottom in the deep swirling pool. Working the fish around the swim, tiring it out, it eventually broke the surface. I slipped the net under. "Double?" Henry questioned. 10lb2oz. I was

over the moon.

I decided to leave Henry to the barbel fishing. He did have another chub that morning, around the 4lb mark. I went off to catch chub on the float. I managed one, in between the canoe traffic. On my return Henry was yet for a nibble. It was getting late in the day and

Steve had to be off. We said our farewells and thanked him for his help. We had that night ahead of us.

We sat back in the previous night's swim to waste away the evening light. Fishing on the Wye, with your mate, the sun setting over the Black Mountains- it was bliss. Once again we



fished till the early hours of the morning. As we decided to call it a night Henry's rod wrapped round. You could see the relief on his face. Two days of solid fishing had payed off which resulted in a really well-earned fish.

The next morning we packed up quickly so that we could meet Rob Swindells on the river Teme. Now I'll hand the narrative over to Henry for the second part of the article.

After a fantastic and highly successful three days on the Wye, it was time for a change of location. On our original post to the Barbel Society's Facebook page asking for advice on our ambitious idea to fish the Wye for a week, an idea that led to the kind offer of Steve to guide us there for two days, Alfie and I were delighted when Rob Swindells offered to guide us on a different river altogether. The River in question was the Teme. The Teme, we thought, would be

more like the river we fish at home, narrow and full of snags. This would be a stark contrast the Wye and we couldn't wait to get fishing.

After getting lost and struggling to make it up some of the hills on the journey we eventually met Rob at the fishery. After setting up camp it was time to get a first look at the river and hopefully spot some barbel in the water. The river was stunning, sheer banks and an abundance of potential swims. Rob took us to a favoured swim and one where barbel can normally be seen. A few pellets went in and out came the barbel; they were joined by numerous chub. Seeing the fish feeding and watching how they approached the baited area was a massive eye opener to Alfie and me. We watched as the fish grew more and more confident until they came within a few feet of the bank. The chub were bolder than the barbel and as expected far more

prolific. We soon picked out the pattern of where they were coming from and then disappearing to, after a feed. The barbel were a different challenge altogether. They moved effortlessly around the swim and appeared and then disappeared in a flash. I seriously doubt that without Rob we wouldn't have seen half as many fish as we continued to search them out for the full length of the fishery. Often it was only their orange fins that gave them away. After baiting a few spots we gathered the tackle and Rob told us the tactics that work on the river. They were much the same as we were used to back home, small amounts of bait in a few swims and then simply drop in over the top.

I settled into the first swim where we had seen the fish in the morning and Alfie went and fished a little upstream, a deeper hole where we hoped a few barbel would be resting up before nightfall. I had a bite

within minutes of casting in, a small chub of around 2lb. Without me knowing, this fish would set the tone of what I was to expect over the next two days. I decided to carry on fishing the swim until darkness as we knew there were barbel present, all I managed to catch however were more chub, again around 2lb. I met up with Alfie and Rob as we walked back to camp, small chub had been all that graced Alfie's net too.

Rob had warned us that the river was very low and clear, not great conditions, and that nightfall would, like on the Wye, give us the best chance of catching a fish. We went back to camp and cooked a BBQ for tea. Rob told us a story about wallabies living on a popular climbing area of the Peak District, despite him producing photographic evidence I'm still not sure if I believe it!

As darkness fell we headed out to fish. Hours went without a bite and it seemed even the chub had lost what I thought was a never ending hunger! Around 11pm however, this all changed; I was fishing tight against a fallen tree when the rod looped over, I struck into solid resistance and played a fish for around fifteen seconds, to my despair it came off. I reeled in a few metres of line and suddenly I was playing a fish again! Having heard the noise Alfie came over and went along the bank a little to net it. The fish was fighting, I thought, incredibly hard even for a barbel. Due to the fact that I had caught few barbel before however I didn't think anything was up. The fish began to tire and Alfie stood ready to net it. It was at this stage we realised the fish was foul hooked in its pectoral fin. I presume I must have reeled the hook straight into it. Alfie tried to net it but the fish had





one last run in it, the hook, almost inevitably, came free. To say I was gutted, was an understatement. Having ruined the swim I moved into one that Alfie had just left. To my luck, I hooked another fish after just ten minutes. This time after a hard scrap I managed to land my first Teme barbel. I rested the fish in the net and found Alfie a little way upstream. The photos were duly taken and the fish, weighing around 4.5lb was put back after another rest. Unfortunately that was the last action of the night.

The next morning we informed Rob of the capture and he kindly provided us with bacon sandwiches to fuel the days fishing. We also got Rob's advice about our capture photos. It's fair to say that few of the photos you will have seen up to this point in the article are of a reasonable quality. We hope however, that after Rob's guidance we improved considerably!

The second day saw Alfie catch his first Teme barbel, a smaller fish of around 3.5lb. He was fishing the swim I had spent the previous day in. Alfie had adapted his methods slightly, fishing a different area of the swim under the assumption of where he thought the barbel were coming from. The idea clearly worked as he caught the barbel and a number of chub all from one swim.

After those captures and me picking up a few chub on a more mobile approach. It was then time for Alfie and I to bid Rob farewell. Rob is a great storyteller, a brilliant angler and above all a fantastic guy. We had learnt an awful lot in the short time we'd been with him and I sincerely hope we fish together in the future.

We fished on and again no more barbel came our way during the daylight hours. After yet another BBQ for tea (we really were fed up with them by now!)



we began the night fishing. I had been baiting a swim throughout the day and had resisted the urge to fish it despite seeing some barbel and huge chub each time some fresh bait went in. I headed straight to it and hooked a fish in minutes. What resulted was the smallest barbel I had seen in the swim and for that matter the river. I was nevertheless elated with the capture of my second Teme barbel.

That proved to be the only barbel action for that night; we both caught a few

chub, including a fish near 4lb for Alfie. At around 1am with me having just released a small chub, we decided to call an end to the days fishing and to our two days on the Teme. Not due to the fact we wanted to stop but the fact that we both started to fall asleep on the bank!

The following morning we walked the fishery to ensure it was left as stunning as we found it, packed away the gear and left the Teme. I know we will be back.

We travelled back to the Wye and to Perryhill

fishery on the Wye and Usk foundation ticket. We chose this location due to the fact it was recommended for adventurous anglers, a title that appealed greatly to Alfie and I! When we arrived at the fishery we broke out the cutting tools and started to chop through the cover. After about forty five minutes of cutting we had made around fifty metres of progress. We came to the realisation that by the time we'd cut out some swims it would be dark, time for a change of plan. We put on



our chest warders, grabbed some trotting gear and followed a brook out into the main river. Here we fed blitzed bread and hooked bread flake. Alfie took the lion's share of the fish, all chub to around 3lb. I had the biggest catch of the day, only 3lb 12oz but it had a

what you're happy with than simply sticking with one the entire time. Very often a small change made has helped us to catch fish that we think, we wouldn't have caught otherwise. Without doubt, this move turned out to be one of the best decisions I'd made all

but was strangely boosted when the camera died "we always catch better when we don't have a camera" was his comment. True to form, my ninth cast on the day produced what was to be my biggest barbel of the trip. At 9lb 4oz it may not be a monster, but I was none the

seen on the Wye and Teme. Once again the fishery was an absolute stunner. We did the ceremonial lap of the fishery and settled in a couple of swims. After a fishless few hours John showed us his catching prowess. We got a text saying he had nabbed one. We were soon taking photos of a Nene nine pounder. A lovely fish that boosted our confidence. We persevered for the rest of the day but with little success. Henry was being pestered by small chub nipping at his bait. A tactical change was installed—scaling down his tackle to a finer set up. This brought the goods. He plucked a couple of small chub from his swim. One of which was savaged by a waiting pike. Henry skilfully was able to lose to vicious predator and save the chub's life. He was able to slip the fish back with only minor scratches. Once retackled for barbel, Henry was no longer being frustrated by the chub and could now fish effectively for the target species.

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much bigger frame, I would love to have caught it in winter! On light lines and soft 13ft trotting rods they fought well, one of my fish even swimming straight through Alfie's legs in one last attempt to break free.

That chub was caught in a brace with a 2lb fish for Alfie, sadly this fish had other ideas about being photographed and despite Alfie's best efforts it made it back to the main river. Those fish marked the end of that days sport, although we hadn't caught any barbel this day was one of our favourite from the entire trip. The enjoyment of the centrepins and the satisfaction of using peacock quill floats was never ending.

The last water of our fantastic week was to be on another Wye and Usk stretch, Upper Cannon Bridge. We dropped into two nice looking swims and began to make repeated casts onto the spots. An hour went by with no bites for either of us. I wasn't confident with the swim I'd picked and decided a move was needed. Not being afraid to admit you've made a poor choice, either in swim selection, bait choice or rig is something that Alfie and I have always prided ourselves on. We think you learn more from changing methods until you find

week. Out went an empty feeder and a single small hookbait that I'd wrapped in paste (why I didn't fill the feeder up, I don't know) it couldn't have been on the bottom for more than thirty seconds and the rod went over, one cast, one barbel. Again I sent the feeder in and again without filling it up. I didn't even change the hookbait, just added fresh paste. Second cast, second fish, a chub, again the frame showing what a good fish it would be in winter. I put out the feeder again and true to form, another barbel graced the net. Three casts, two barbel, one chub. All the casts had been on the money, two feet from a fallen tree. The first fish was covered in lice, a sign that they weren't on the move. The fourth cast, another chub and Alfie kindly came to photograph this one, too. The fifth cast and I had another barbel on the bank. I couldn't believe it. None had been monsters, all around the 6–7lb pound mark, but I didn't care. I had put in no bait, used two hookbaits and had caught three barbel and two chub. All this excitement proved too much for my Cannon EOS 400D, which had faithfully recorded all the fish up to this point. Its battery finally died. Alfie sadly hadn't caught a thing yet

less over the moon. Sadly, due to the camera dying the only photos we could get of this capture were taken on my phone.

A move saw Alfie finally get in on the action, a small chub came his way. The chub however I felt wasn't a fitting reward for one of the best casts I've seen. I'd moved to rest my swim and was greeted by a "watch this" on my arrival. Out the feeder went into a gap in the far bank bushes that couldn't have been more than 1.5 feet. Nine times out of ten he would have lost the feeder, but this time, it was perfect. A few minutes later and he had his first barbel, a lovely fish that fought bravely in the tree roots at our feet. Shortly after a second barbel came his way of about the same stamp, around the 5lb mark. Back in my prolific swim I had another chub out before it was time to depart from the Wye, sadly, for the last time.

**Alfie:** Once we had returned from our week long trip we were not too disheartened as we knew our summer fishing adventures were not at an end. We had arranged to meet John Newman on the river Nene. He had invited us for a day trip to fish one of the backwaters. He promised this would be very different kind of fishing to that we had

**Henry:** Alfie's only action was a lost fish right at the last knockings. Unfortunately this fish was too powerful for his fluorocarbon hook link and sheared it after half a minute's battle. He was understandably disheartened. Yet he cast again to even the score. It was not to be.

**Alfie:** The end of this trip marked the end of our summer barbel adventures. The few lows were massively outweighed by the highs. The places we'd been, the fish we'd caught and the people we had met gave us a summer we will never forget. Our thanks go out once again to Steve, Rob and John for showing us how to find, feed and catch barbel. But this trip was more than simply catching fish, it was pleasure and privilege to fish alongside three absolute gents. Cheers guys!