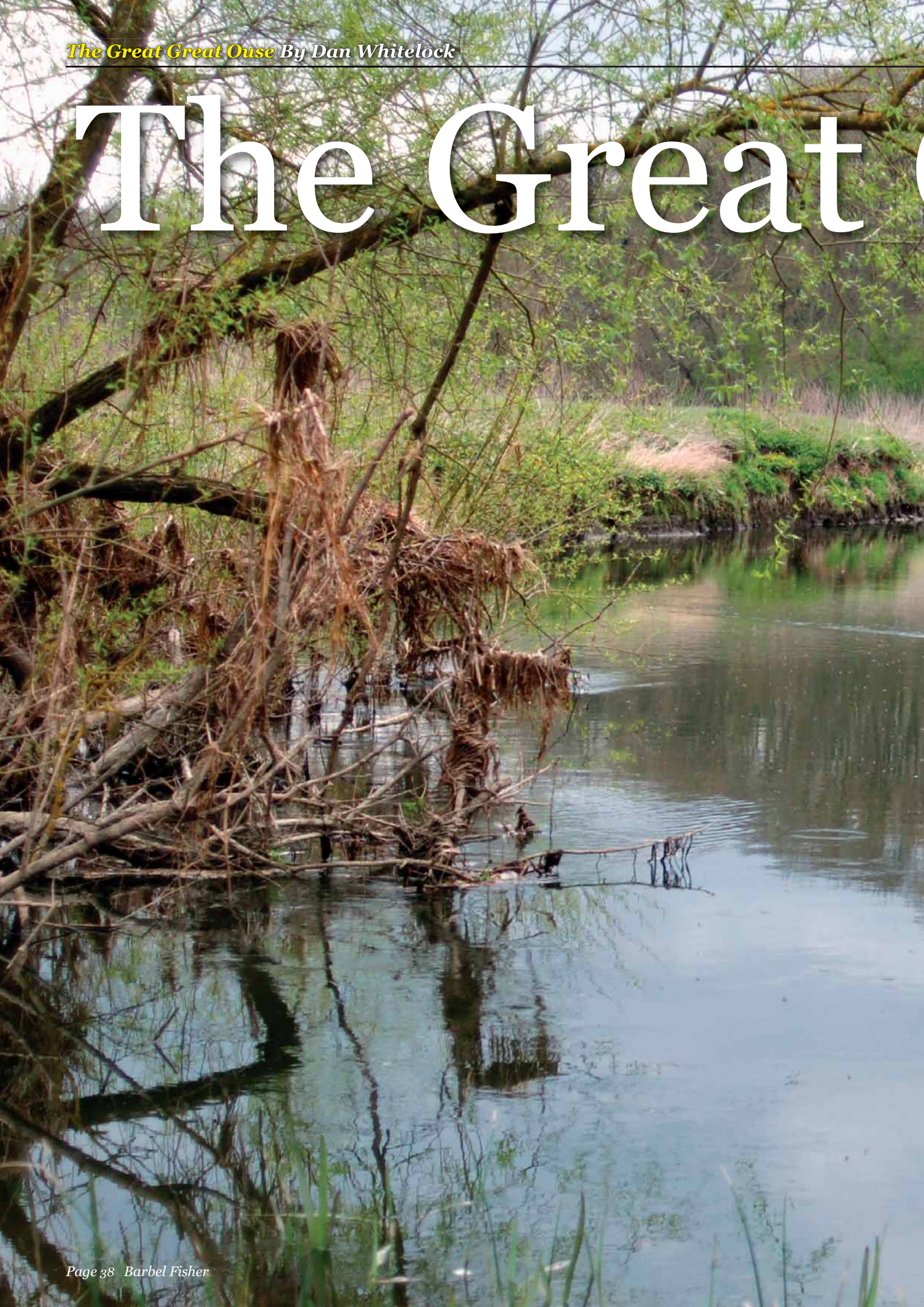
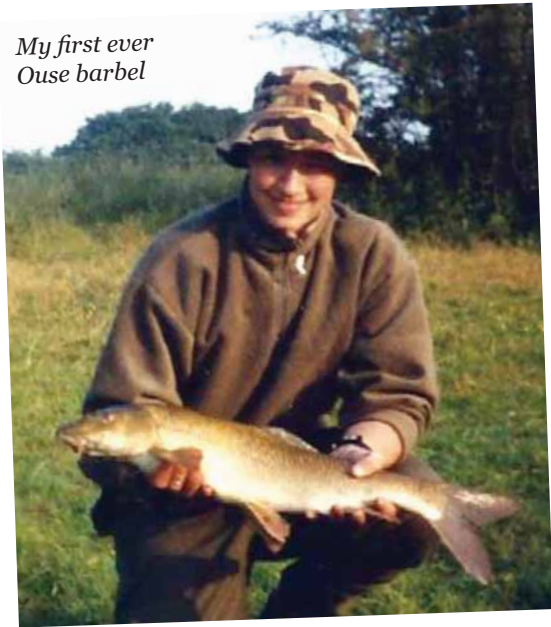


The Great



Great Ouse

*My first ever
Ouse barbel*



*Dad back in the
80s. The most
inspirational
angler in my life*

PART 1: THE PAST

I've been considering putting some words down for a while now to give bit of a narrative on my local, beloved river, the Great Ouse. It is also a great opportunity for you, the membership, to learn a little about your new editor and who I am. It's a river that needs no introduction: for the last twenty years now it's been at the forefront of monumental catches; whether it be the consistent numbers of doubles caught to local anglers or visitors traveling the country to try and beat their personal best on the more popular stretches, or the magnificent, legendary fish from the Adam's Mill era. From a barbel fishing perspective it is up there among the very best.

In recent years though, there has been a decline in the quality of the fishing. If you ask most anglers on

the riverbank the first thing they will tell you is that it's the otters that have killed all the barbel! Ok, there is no denying the evidence to suggest that otters have eaten barbel. However, anglers being anglers, I believe this doom-mongering has somewhat snowballed and led to a lot of negativity surrounding the stretches - more on that later though.

My first introduction to the barbel was from my dad. When I was a toddler we lived in the north Bedfordshire village of Harrold - one of the many villages that the river runs through. During the late 80's he used to spend many hours sat amongst the reeds, puffing on his pipe catching some wonderful bags of chub and bream. I always remember though him telling me about the 11lb barbel he caught below the mill. It sounded fantastic to a

young me and I really hoped that one day I would be able to catch one.

I read all the old books and magazines and was in awe of these magnificent creatures and the guys who could catch them. By the time I was attending middle school, I had served my river apprenticeship on outings with dad, catching plenty of perch, roach, dace, bleak, more bleak, many more bleak and the odd small chub. I was ready to catch my first barbel. The first one I ever saw on the bank was at the famous Radwell stretch, sometime around 1998. My mum, or more often my Nan, who lives at Milton Ernest, used to run me down to the river for a few hours at a time while I rather ungracefully threw around lumps of luncheon meat or lobworms in the hope that something would pick it up. One day it did. I

would like to describe how I skilfully set up a rolling rig with a small bomb just light enough to bounce along the gravel in a pool by the bridge, tempting any fish laying in the streamer weed to nip out and pick it up. What really happened is that the only weight I had was a half ounce bomb, stopped on the line by a split shot that no matter what I did would just roll through the pool and not sit where I wanted it to among a group of fish I had spotted while stood on the bridge. However one wishes to interpret the tale, on the third cast through the meat became snagged. I pulled up to free it and all of a sudden the rod was being savagely pulled from my hands. There was a huge splash on the surface as the barbel tried to free itself in the shallow water. My trusty old Shakespeare 11ft match rod was bent

The Great Great Ouse By Dan Whitelock

over double and alas my Maxima line gave up. I was stunned. I couldn't believe something could pull back so hard! After composing myself and getting a few words of wisdom from my non-angling nan, I tackled up again and re-cast. A short while later the rod hooped over and I soon landed a 3lb chub - my first 'proper' fish. I was chuffed to bits and especially proud that a watching angler stood on the bridge and told my nan how patient I was. After keeping the fish in the landing net while my dear nan drove back to Milton Ernest to get her camera, my prize was recorded and returned to the

magical river. I was thrilled!

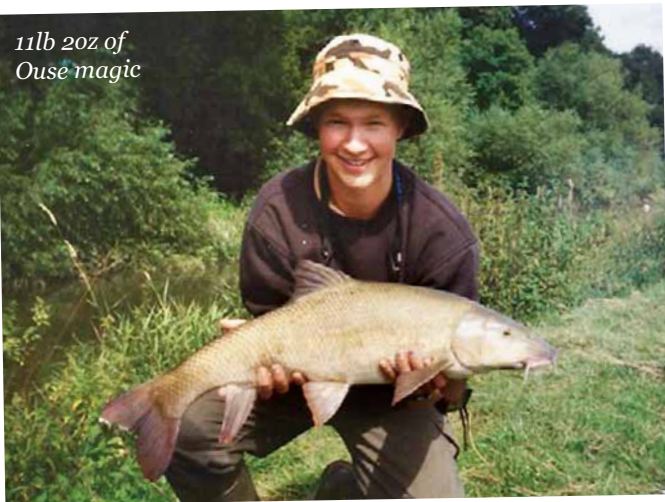
We packed up and got in the car. As we were going along the road by the river, I could see an angler stood up with his rod bent over double. "Stop nan that man has a barbel!" She pulled over bless her and I ran out, over the fence and across the field to see the chap slipping his net under the biggest fish I had ever seen. He was sweating in the hot sunshine and couldn't stop his hands from shaking. It was a p.b. for him at just over 12lbs and I can remember it like it was yesterday. After giving him the obligatory interrogation from a twelve year old as to what bait, hook, line, rod,

reel etc. he was using, I proudly took the photograph for him and watched him nurse the fish back to where it lived. That was the day that changed it all for me. I knew I just had to catch one, I'd never seen anything so magnificent.

The season passed along and I'd yet to catch a barbel. Ok so I'd maybe only fished a few more times here and there depending on when I could get a lift and be supervised by the river. I started upper school at Sharnbrook in September 1999. I soon made friends with a lad called Paul who lived in Turvey, another beautiful village with

the river running by it. He was also keen on his fishing and had spent years with his grandad fishing around Turvey and Newton Blossomville. It wouldn't be long before we would go fishing together in the following winter. While we mainly fished for pike, come the summer of 2000 we were ready for some barbel. As he lived in Turvey, he was very close to prime barbel water - including being allowed to fish the private Turvey estate sections, opposite a busy club water. It was the narrow, shallow stretch downstream of the weirpool though that I was most interested in. It must have

*11lb 2oz of
Ouse magic*



*Another Ouse
13. Blimey I was
youthful!!*



been the July of that year when we decided that I'd stay over his in the evening and get up super early to go fishing the next day. My mum dropped me off at the stone house he lived in and made me promise that we would not go night fishing as it was dangerous. Of course we wouldn't do such a thing so after we'd had dinner we went for a walk down the river and stood on the bridge. Looking down there were several huge barbel on the gravel plus plenty of chub. I'd never seen such a sight and we both agreed there was no way we could ignore them. We ran back through the village, grabbed the gear, confirmed with Paul's mum that it was indeed ok by my parents for me to go night fishing (I'm very sorry mum!) and returned to the river. Being somewhat incompetent we didn't catch any of the fish in the swim that evening. We had read in the magazines about baiting up and fishing at night so we did just that. As the sun set in the valley we felt ever so grown up being out night fishing for barbel, whilst enjoying the sound of Bon Jovi playing at the MK bowl across the fields.

Soon before midnight, Paul's rod slammed over and he was into a fish. He couldn't do much to stop it and in my head torch I could see there was a small barbel fighting against him in the flow. Sadly though the hook pulled and he was a bit gutted. Not long after it was my turn to get a bite and I soon had a nice bream of about 4lbs making a slimy mess of my net. We wound in and fell asleep on our chairs in the early hours, excited for the next day we decided to fish the weirpool.

I'd never fished a weir before, however I'd read lots in magazines about how to catch barbel from them and confidently cast right the way across the run into the

white water. I placed my old Shimano heavy feeder rod high in the rest and was happy that the hair rigged pepperami bait was settled on the bottom. After a few knocks and twenty minutes or so, my rod bounced right over and I was hooked into a fish. I initially thought it was another bream as it came down the flow back towards me rather easily, however once it was out of the flow and into the eddy we were sat by - or the beach as the locals called it - the unknown fish started to peel line from the spool. Once it was up on the surface and with Paul waiting with the net, I could see that I was about to land my very first barbel. I somehow kept my composure and soon drew it over the cord. I let out a huge cheer and slapped Paul on the back for being a first class ghillie. I had read all about the importance of letting fish rest before unhooking them so Paul dutifully did so while I wetted my unhooking mat and zeroed the scales. After unhooking she went to a modest 6lb8oz. I was over the moon! Paul took what is still one of my favourite fishing photos in the golden Bedfordshire dawn sunshine and my prize was carefully returned. I cherished every second of holding the fish in the flow while it got its strength back and felt immensely content when she slipped back to the weedbed across the flow.

That was it, I'd cracked it. I was a barbel angler! Not content with one and after a biteless few hours in the now scorching sunshine we decided to move up and fish right next to the weir itself. Now anyone that has fished Turvey weir will know that it's not exactly straightforward to fish given the high concrete structure and large boulder that one can sit on at the bottom. We sat up above the boulder and fished directly into the white



One of the reasons that Adam's Mill was the place to make dreams come true!

water. After finally finding a slack that held the bait, the rod once more bounced and I was in. This time the fight was much more spectacular, the fish didn't seem to want to budge from the bottom and it took what seemed like an age to get the fish out of the flow and into a slack for netting. This one was huge! I was amazed I landed such a fish. The scales settled on 10lb2oz and I had recorded my first Ouse double! Two barbel in a day was something I had dreamed of for several years and to get my first double was the most incredible feeling!

The heat got to us so we soon packed up and returned home. The bug had bitten and I couldn't wait to get back out and fishing.

A few weeks later in the summer holidays, I was back at Radwell on a beautiful stretch controlled by Vauxhall Angling Club and soon to catch a very special fish. I had at the time discovered the Internet and Barbel Fishing World. I had been amazed at the help so many anglers had given me in regards to advice on tackle, bait, location, watercraft and such. I followed some advice and after getting dropped off by mum, walked a long way from the busy sections and into a quiet meadow. It was, and still is, a beautiful, tranquil place, with an

abundance of wildlife, tree lined banks and a deep wooded backdrop. Aside from the odd train on the nearby main line it could be miles from anywhere. I had chosen a swim that previously gave me a perfect fish of 3lbs. It was a real tight snag swim, with a hole in between the streamer weed with a gravel run going underneath an old sunken willow. I confidently swung out my bait into the hole and sat back in my chair. After twenty minutes or so the rod took on a life of its own and I was hanging on to a leviathan. That poor old heavy feeder rod was creaking at the handle and I did all I could to hold the fish back from the snag. I eventually slipped the net under the fish and let out a sigh of relief. After letting her rest I knew it was by far the biggest I'd caught yet and this was confirmed as the needle went round to 11lb2oz. What a cracking fish it was too, a classic short and stocky Ouse fish in perfect condition. I held her in the water for a good fifteen minutes before she sulked off back to the dark overhang. I knew then that I was getting the hang of it. I also knew I needed a proper barbel rod!

I managed a few other fish that summer, including another 10lb fish with a few smaller ones in the 5-7lb

range. I enjoyed taking advantage of being invited to fish in the garden of a family friend in Odell, utilising my club ticket for Sharnbrook and Radwell, plus the private stretch at Turvey with Paul. It was this summer that I decided to join the Barbel Society. I loved the appeal of what it had to offer; especially being a youngster and I soon enjoyed being in contact with various chaps via the forums and took in as much information as I could.

A few days before my 16th birthday in December, I once again had mum drop me off at Radwell. The river was right up on the banks and the colour of tea. She insisted that I'd never catch a thing and that she can take me back home but I said that I had read all about floodwater barbel fishing and it was indeed possible to catch. However I was very much put off by the conditions and after a quick look around a decided to walk the very long way through the village, along the track and fish one of the gravel pits that the club run. I was exhausted when I got to the pits and rather unhappily hair rigged a lump

of meat and cast it into the lake. There was nobody else fishing the lakes that I could see however I could see a van parked up and a broly by the river across the field. Curiosity and lack of interest in stillwaters soon got the better of me so I humped all my gear over the field to the river and was amazed to see a guy slipping his net under a nice double. He was fishing a slack between two trees and I was soon full of information from him on how and where to fish. I chose a spot a couple of hundred yards upstream and after an hour or so fishing looked over to see him into another. After finishing my blank session and getting a lift back home I asked mum if she could drop me back the next day.

Despite her protests and unhappiness at having to take her car along the rutted, pot-holed track, I gratefully skipped out the car and across the sodden fields. I was happy to see that the swim was vacant and I quietly got myself into position and swung out my favourite bait into the slack between the trees. After several biteless hours

I recast with a fresh bait and enjoyed the fading light as sunset cast its way across the fields. A small knock on the rod tip caught my attention followed by a confident pull around. I lifted into the fish and knew straight away it was big. I'd been told that bigger fish tend to thump away on the bottom and this was certainly unwilling to come up in the water. After a steady fight I was over the moon to read the scales go round to 13lb8oz! After calling down to a nearby angler who had not long arrived I was soon able to record my biggest fish to date. I now felt as though I had all the tools and knowledge to progress further on the river and continued to catch consistently the following season.

It was that season that I was privileged to share company with Steve Pope, Keith Truscott, the chaps in the local region and many more of the top guys in the barbel fraternity. I feel very indebted to these guys who drove me all over the country to fish-ins, meetings, the Barbel Show and the regional guys who

used to come and pick me up from home and take me to the meetings before I was able to drive. I gained so much knowledge and skills from them and the memories of the time spent in their company will last me forever. I'm delighted now to be a part of the Barbel Society where I can start to give something back. I had spent some fantastic days on the river the following season, with plenty of fish to 12lb - two or three doubles in a day wasn't a rarity for me back then. I was just in the right place at the right time and learned so much about the swims and the inhabitants.

Fast forward a couple of seasons and I feel that one can't write about the Gt Ouse without mentioning the famous stretch "Above Bedford". For years from my school days through until 2004 I was fascinated with the fish being presented in the angling press and online. Now I was far too young and naive to be interested in any of the controversy, jealousy and bad eggs surrounding the venue, I was, and still am, simply passionate about all things barbel. All I had hoped for was to one day maybe get the chance to fish there. I was very lucky to be invited onto the Potters Bar side of the stretch for the 2004-2005 season. Despite living in North Bedfordshire I had never even seen the stretch. Once I had passed my driving test in April 2003 and started working my way through the Land Rover range, the doors opened up to me, although I still stuck with my favourite bits on the Vauxhall waters.

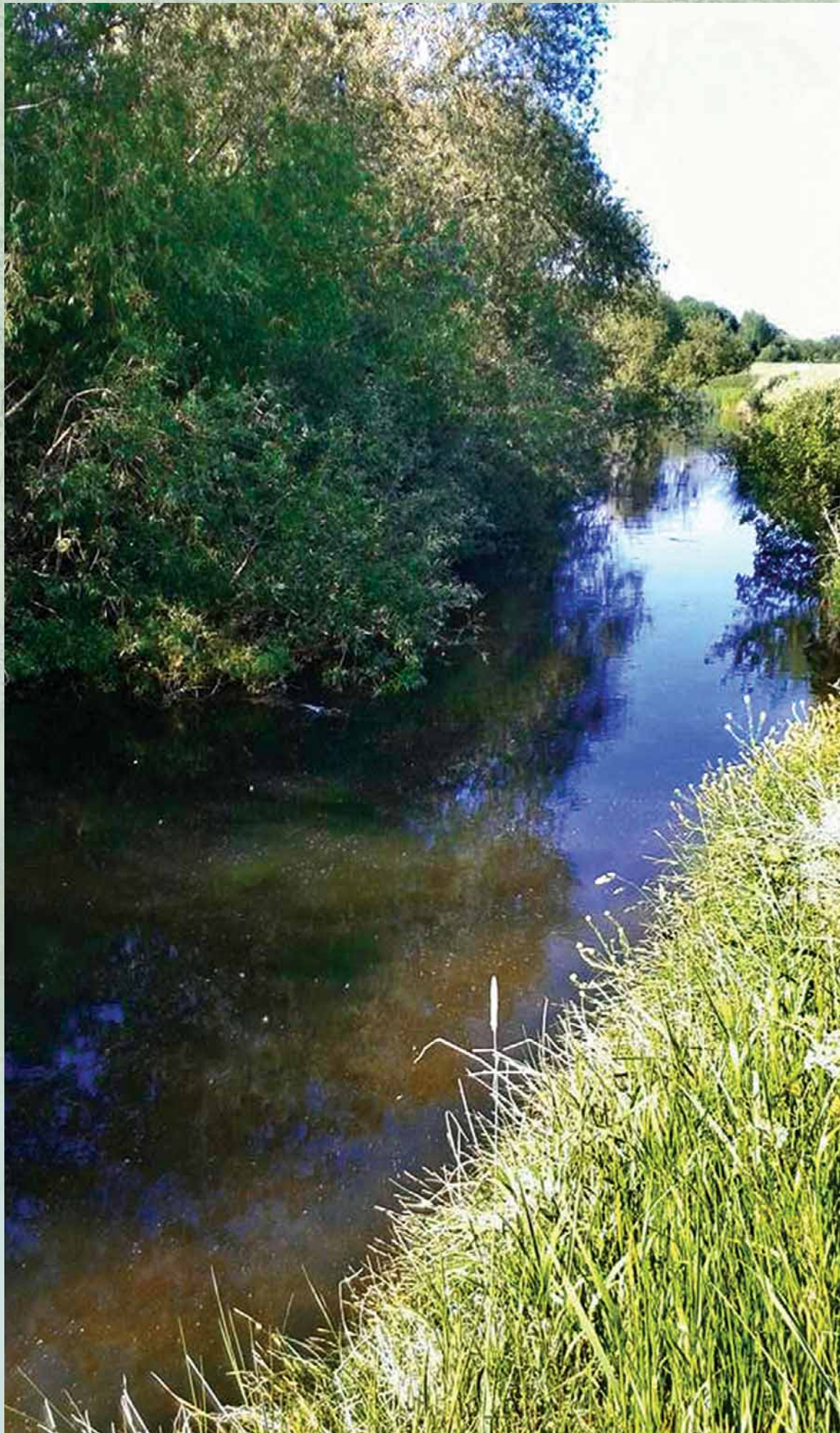
Anyway, once I had my ticket I made the short drive from the farm I worked on (which also had a mile and a half of private river!) to recce the stretch and see what all the fuss was about. Upon following the directions in the book I arrived in the car park by the bridge and gave

A deep, wide 15. Grinning like the idiot I still am! (Grumpy carp anglers take note – you are allowed to smile!)



Keith a call for directions to the river. I'll never forget relaying to him on the phone that I was stood "on a bridge over a backwater". It turned out that it was indeed the main river. I had heard it was small but this was something else! What was also something else were the three huge fish in the pool by the bridge. I'd never seen anything like it and I relished the thought of one day catching one.

Now despite what people still (even today) say about the place, I was the only one there that Friday afternoon. When I arrived at the car park the next morning there was only one other angler there. I was expecting a queue right up to the road and people racing to the best swims but it was far from the case. Apart from the drone of the M1 in the distance that one soon become used to, it was a beautiful, peaceful bit of river. The fish were also far from easy to catch. I had an inkling that it wouldn't be easy - the stretches downstream that I had caught a lot of fish from up to that date were far from easy so I knew that this would be no different, especially with such a small head of fish. The angling press and internet forum experts often portrayed the huge, lazy, easy to catch, greedy barbel waiting for anglers to arrive and oblige accordingly. Well, I'm aware I'm not the greatest of anglers though I like to think I have a rough idea what I'm doing, given my Ouse catches to date I knew I was reasonably consistent. I caught two barbel in about twelve sessions at Adam's Mill, one in the summer and one in the autumn floods. Both were stunning fish and the summer p.b. I caught still stands today. The memories and photographs of which I will treasure forever. It was far from easy, I did see one of the big fish caught on the opposite bank



one day - the same day in October in fact that I had a 15:10 out of the flooded river, but it was never busy on the occasions that I fished, the most anglers I saw on the bank was about four. Half of the nonsense that was spouted all over the internet was, and still is, from people who weren't there. I do miss the place dearly, if nothing else I have never had the level of anticipation that one got while fishing there. Just to see those huge fish swimming in the water below your feet is priceless and I consider myself very lucky and grateful to have been able to be there.

Fast forward a couple more years and something happened that I had been certain it never would: One day while in the company of Steve Pope, he said to me that in my early twenties or late teens I would take a break from fishing, discover pubs, females and such like, but he hoped that I would return to the fold. Well, it is true what they say about your seniors being right and he certainly was. I guess around 2005 I discovered a superb local pub, off road driving competitions, Abbot Ale in copious amounts and the UK underground heavy metal scene. Fishing took a back seat and although

I had the odd trip to the Trent, Nene and occasional day on the Ouse, I only went out a handful of times each season.

One of these rare days though came in the summer of 2007. I had chosen to fish a different bit on the Ouse that involved a fair walk but had a stunning swim that I was sure would contain barbel. In short, it did. My best day there amounted to seven barbel with five being over the magical 10lb mark, including another 13! I'm aware this portrays the river as being easy but it took a lot of ground work to find the fish, feed them correctly and use everything I had learned to have such an unforgettable day. I also discovered a superb swim that looked very much a nothing type run but was a very reliable little swim that gave up many fish to just under 14lb.

That about sums up what I now look back on as my best years so far in my angling career. Since then I have grown up, grown outwards (I spent five years driving mobile cranes which involves a lot of sitting, eating and reading books!) got married to the most wonderful young lady ever, became a proud father to a son who is, as I write this,

approaching two years old and freaking me out a little bit as it's like looking at all my baby photo's come to life in 3D and finally, somehow, ended up in the career I dreamed of working on frontline fighter jets - without having to join the military and wear a uniform! Now I've got all the grown up, if not important stuff sorted, I'm now knocking on thirty, picked up my Harrison again, fell head over heels in love with centrepins, fell out of love with centrepins, fell back in love with them and started to reacquaint myself with that mysterious, challenging, beautiful river that is the Great Ouse.

PART 2: THE PRESENT

I guess I can rewind and overlap a little to bring you up to the present day. I decided early last season that I'd like to seriously get back into my barbel fishing. I have some wonderful memories of which I wrote about and loved the thought of adding to that memory bank some more. I'm the kind of chap that despite my happy and content life, relish and treasure my own alone time to gather thoughts, ponder over the purpose of nipple hair and figure out how I'm going to explain in a grown

up way to my son one day the tattoo I have on my lower abdomen. Despite only fishing the Ouse a handful of times in recent years, I was aware that the fishing had declined by keeping up with the online forums and seeing very few cars parked up by the river in what were once very popular areas. I must admit it did knock my confidence a bit so I sought to try somewhere different that had rumoured to produce the odd barbel in the past. As we had moved out to the Huntingdon area and being a young family on a tight budget, I decided to try and fish the more middle reaches around St Neots and Huntingdon. I found a small club stretch with a cracking weirpool and backwater that receives very little pressure.

On walking the stretch I spotted several nice chub on the gravel areas by an overhanging willow and my confidence was boosted by a pleasure angler saying he saw a small barbel in the swim earlier on in the day. The following evening after work, I made the short drive to the stretch and wandered along the meadow. I crept down carefully into the swim, which had a perfect line of reeds to hide behind and poke a rod through. I lowered in a small boilie with a golf ball sized pva bag of broken offerings and sat back. It didn't take long for the rod to thump round and a perfect summer chub of around 4lb was netted. I was pleased with the fish as it was my first finned creature out the Ouse for a couple of years and although wasn't a barbel, I enjoyed putting a bend in the old rod again. Two more chub of similar size followed and I returned home at dusk quite happy with the reigniting of my Ouse campaign.

I returned to the stretch half a dozen more times and each trip resulted in a handful of nice chub to 5lb4oz. I was a little





First day on the Ivel – a 14lb reward. Apparently they can't be caught during the day!

disappointed that I'd yet to catch a barbel but I was still to see any on the gravel. I was further put off by being informed by the bailiff that the last barbel he knew of being caught was the previous summer at around 7lb. I decided that maybe I ought to re-join Vauxhall Angling Club again and return to my old haunts.

The only issue with this is that I was now living a forty minute drive from the Radwell area and to travel there every week would make a huge dent in the travel budget. Looking at the map I realised that the River Ivel, an Ouse tributary, was only twenty five minutes away down the A1 and I had heard of a few barbel being caught. I'd driven over it many times in my crane driving days but knew nothing at all about the place. One Saturday morning I threw the gear in my trusty campervan and headed down the road. I parked up and walked the downstream section first. I was impressed with how small and intimate the river looked, with gravel runs and plenty of streamer weed. I was a little put off by the lack of fishable swims so I wandered upstream. There were certainly more swims to go at and I got chatting to a Polish chap who was kitted out with a light lure outfit and had just landed a cracking chub on a small plug. I took the obligatory snap shots for him, tried to overcome the language barrier a bit and learned that a: he was by far the most impressive and skilful

lure angler I've met so far and b: a 20lb+ barbel was caught last year! I took the information with a pinch of salt, wished him all the best and continued my walk. I saw one nice fish of around 10lb on the gravel and after throwing six or seven free offerings on my boilies into several swims I returned and grabbed the rods.

While fishing my first swim I got chatting to a local walking his dog who regularly fishes. Once the conversation got flowing, we learned we had mutual angling acquaintances from the past and he was happy to show me further up the river some of the productive swims. It really does help having local knowledge on a new bit of water and I was incredibly grateful to be shown around. One swim at the very top of the section grabbed my attention. A shallow stretch of only a couple of feet deep dropped off to about four feet under an overhanging tree. I could make out a couple of barbel and some chub under the far bank foliage so I decided to give it a go. Now the first negative with this bit of river is the proximity to the footpath which is full of locals out dog walking, running, pushing the kids along and such like. I do like to get away from it all but the thought of some very big barbel outweighed the lack of tranquillity and I'd only seen one other angler on the stretch that Saturday afternoon.

Anyway back in my swim I realised that it was next to

impossible to cast over to the deep hole that ran under the tree so as it was a warm day I waded out to mid river and gently back wound my rig into the swim. I didn't have to wait very long before the rod was snatched from the rest as a barbel took off with it. A very spirited fight ensued which involved me getting wet vegetables again to land a beautiful fish of 8lb12oz. I returned my first barbel I'd caught in eighteen months and enjoyed drying out in the sunshine in another swim downstream. After a biteless hour I moved back up and once again waded out to lower my faithful paste into the hole. Ten minutes later the rod again slammed round in that not so subtle twitch only a barbel can give and I was into a much heavier fish. This time the barbel just sat tight in the deeper water and slowly swam upstream. After easing the fish across the flow and into my waiting net I could see I'd landed my first Ivel double on my first trip. I prepared the mat and sling and lifting it out the water I was surprised on the weight and depth of the fish. The needle settled on 14lb exactly and I was made up! Despite how busy the place is with natives there was nobody around to get a trophy shot so it was a quick snap on the mat before letting the fish recover and slip back into the streamer weed.

I decided I'd call it a day and wandered back down to my van in the early evening sunshine. What surprised

me was the amount of anglers that had turned up to fish into the evening which seemed a bit odd as there's a sign clearly informing people that no night fishing is allowed.

I returned to the river most weeks after work on a Friday, soon gaining some good knowledge of the stretch, fishing until 9pm or so then retiring to the van for a curry and cuppa, before resuming fishing again at dawn. I had a few more average sized fish out, saw a couple of the very, very big fish that regularly get their pictures in the angling press and got gradually more annoyed at the lack of peace, glory hunting fish-at-all-cost 'anglers', constant breaking of the rules and dodging all the dog mess.

I decided at around Christmas time that I simply wasn't enjoying the Ivel anymore. Despite the huge fish it's just not for me and I missed the peace and quiet and mystery that the Ouse offered. One weekend I took a walk along the stretch where I had my red letter day in 2007 to see if anyone was fishing. I was somewhat disappointed to see that the overhanging tree had long been removed, my 'banker' swim was completely swallowed up by the undergrowth and only three or four swims looked like they had been regularly fished all season. I didn't see a single angler on the river which for a December Saturday with the river in perfect condition surprised me somewhat.

I kept an eye on the weather and although conditions weren't perfect the following weekend, I decided that there was enough colour and it was mild enough for barbel to feed. I lightly baited with just three or four freebies in several swims and rotated my way around. There really is no need whatsoever for the amount of bait a lot of anglers throw into the river. All it does is ruin the fishing for themselves and everyone else on the stretch as the fish just fill up and switch off; only to briefly feed again several days later before repeating the cycle. If this is multiplied dozens of times along a mile stretch of river that gets a lot of attention then it's no wonder they're rarely caught!

The afternoon turned to evening and I clocked up a blank. Not too disheartened as I'd blanked plenty of times before when the river was in its prime, I vowed to return the following weekend. Conditions were much better the following trip and I followed the same routine of working my way around the swims. In one swim that I opened up and fished I had a lovely chub of around

5lbs not long after swinging my bait to a near bank overhang which boosted my confidence greatly. I carried on fishing but no barbel came in the end. The remainder of the season was somewhat disappointing for me. I only fished a couple more times and March 14th soon came around.

It had been an up and down season in the end. I'd had a few nice fish out but had renewed my love for the Ouse and barbel fishing in general. I also decided to re-join the Barbel Society as the years previous that I was a member led to my most cherished angling memories so far, and I hoped to be able to give something back now I wasn't so young.

PART 3: THE FUTURE

As I write this the new season is only a couple of weeks old (Edit – we're actually approaching November!). Following on from reigniting my love for the species last season, I've decided to up my game a bit and return to my old haunts where I spent many happy times at ten years ago. I have decided to focus on just one shorter stretch of around half a mile long. The

reason being that there is just so much water to go at, I've been out almost every week in the closed season walking the banks, looking for potential swims and formulating bit of a plan.

We all know though that the greatest plans of mice and men and all that..... This season is no different! I've tried my favourite baiting up five swims and rotating my way around them several times for up to an hour each with nothing but chub - cracking chub, but not what I'm seeking this time of year. I've tried the proven Trefor West method of fishing every likely looking spot in twenty minute cycles and reducing the odds, this has yet to work. Myself and a handful of other regulars have figured out that the most productive method to tackle the river now is to stick to three or four swims that are fairly close together, lightly bait them and keep working around them for several hours at a time. This has produced the odd good fish but I can literally count the amount of fish caught from the section this year on the fingers of one hand. The bigger fish in the river now are very nomadic and by constantly leapfrogging swims and moving about you're just as likely to miss, pass or overtake the travelling fish. By focussing on their patrol routes and known holding areas it gives the best chance of picking up the odd fish. It is a tactic that has worked for a couple of guys over the last few seasons, with fish to over 17lb being caught.

As to the future of the river, well, it's hard to say. There is no doubt that less barbel get caught than they did ten years ago. There is evidence of otter predation however I've yet to see hundreds of barbel corpses on the banks. There are many theories involving chemicals, crayfish, endocrines, sterile fish that

have been stocked and fed on pellets and many more I'm sure. There are certainly less fish out on the gravel in the spring too, well ok, less fish *seen* out on the gravel in the spring.

For me, well, while I tend to agree that all of the various theories and often arguments have their standing, I believe that there's been somewhat of a perfect storm on the Ouse. Lots of factors that have a negative impact could have, or probably have, happened at the same time. Whilst a lot of the big fish on my local stretch have likely reached the end of their natural lifespan and became easy prey for the predators. I believe in nature having cycles, in all species. Growing up in the countryside I notice different numbers of different creatures. For instance wood pigeons - we just don't have the huge flocks that we used to on the farm twenty years ago. The same with buzzards, they seem to have been replaced by red kites. Hares too - I don't see so many of those about either. The tiny stream at the back of my parent's place that was once full of sticklebacks, minnows and giant stone loach are now devoid of all fish. Another issue I have noted is that not only is the river a lot lower in level throughout the year, there is a small ditch out the front of our house which, as a kid, used to have water in it all year round. Nowadays it is always bone dry except after very heavy rainfall. This cannot be good for the main rivers. There even used to be sticklebacks in this ditch and it's only a foot wide and six inches deep!

One thing that I really do believe is a huge factor in the reduction of barbel being caught, and please note dear reader that I say *being caught*, is that there's a huge drop in the number of anglers regularly fishing



Yes I know – hairier and more rotund than the earlier photos!

the stretch. To put it simply, if there are less baited hooks in the water then there's no doubt that less fish will get caught! The section of river that I favour is part of a stretch that runs about seven miles between two weirpools. This stretch is shared by about four clubs, with a few short parts being private or syndicated, with other areas being totally out of bounds for anglers. Now say for arguments sake that there are two hundred barbel on the stretch, that's about twenty nine barbel per mile. The trouble that I have is that the stretch I fish really is one giant barbel swim. They could be anywhere among the weedbeds, under the trees, in the deep holes, in the slow flowing cabbage filled runs etc etc. Now if there's only a couple of dozen anglers fishing the seven miles of river there's a lot of river not being fished that could hold quite a few

fish that are unlikely to get caught. If there's only a hundred or fifty barbel on the stretch then the odds are worse. That may or may not be complete rubbish but it's just my thought process and makes as much sense to me as any of the other theories!

So far this season I have only seen a few different anglers on the bank, one bailiff who I regularly chat to says it's the same half a dozen faces he sees too. Even on opening weekend I had almost three miles of river all to myself, this on a stretch that once used to have twenty plus anglers every Friday evening often running to get a swim!

I do believe though that this cycle will end and that the river will one day return to its former glory. It would surprise me not one bit if a fish to shake the current record is caught from one of the quieter, lightly fished stretches this

coming season or the next. While the Trent has been grabbing the headlines, there have been some very large specimens caught last season and not scattered all over the press. There's been a steady re-stocking program carried out over quite a few years now and if only a fraction of these fish make it through then there will be a healthy stock of bigger fish in ten years or so. It is also promising to see that the Barbel Society are helping to fund some more studies on the river, working closely with local angling clubs, Bournemouth University and the Environment Agency.

The Great Ouse for me is my angling equivalent of a spiritual home. Every time I go over the hill and down into the valley, I see that water for the first time and always get that same little feeling of excitement, content and anticipation that I used to get twenty

years ago. The quietness of the lower meadows, away from the traffic and people is really special to me. The woods that provide my backdrop are full of wildlife, the tranquillity only ever broken by a passing aircraft at altitude or a train on the line in the distance. I love the smell of the water and the meadow, especially early July when the farmer comes and cuts the grass for hay. Even when I'm sat there in the cold January mud, notching up blank number 22 (Edit – I've just knocked up 30 at the time of editing and still as determined!), I'm still happy, still excited and still wondering just how big that barbel will be when the rod dips towards the water. These are the reasons that, despite how hard it is nowadays and if I take the odd trip to different pastures, I will never stop returning to the great, Great Ouse.

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