

Nene Begin

I heaved my rucksack on to my back, slung my quiver over my shoulder and let out a huge sigh, before embarking on the long walk through the dark meadow.

As I turned and looked back at my swim in the gloomy murk, I expressed a small expletive adjective, directed towards the water.

This carried on through the damp, dark, mist-strewn meadow that was intermittently lit by the autumn moon. By the time I'd covered the half mile or so in the dark and got back to my car at the bottom of the dirt track well after midnight, I'd gone through most of my lengthy repertoire of expletives and

managed to invent some interesting new ones.

The reason for my expressiveness? I'd just racked up Ouse barbel blank number thirty eight and it was only the middle of November. I was stumped. I'd spent the previous week lightly baiting a short section of river, consisting of four swims, every day after work. Now some of you may know that I work way out in deepest Suffolk, whilst residing in the North Bedfordshire countryside. My normal commute is an hour and twenty minutes, providing the dreaded A14

is behaving. To get from Lakenheath over to Radwell on the Gt Ouse takes around an hour and forty minutes. I do put the miles in over the course of a week!

I had booked off three days leave, excited at the continued mild conditions and a nice drop of rain freshening up the water. The river was looking as good as I'd seen it all season. As most of you are aware from keeping up with the news and possibly reading my last article, the Ouse is no easy nut to crack nowadays. The odd big fish does come out still and it only

takes that one bite to turn a season around, but this season was a real struggle. However despite the tough fishing, I was as confident as ever that my campaign would pay off and I'd be in to some fish. I was certain of it. Without boring the reader with a blow by blow account, well, I can't actually do that as there were no blows to account! In three solid days fishing – twelve to fourteen hours each day, I'd had one small rattle on the tip on the second day. I did catch a huge crayfish but one can't really count such an awful beast in a catch

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report. I was feeling utterly dejected. I love the Ouse, it's my spiritual angling home, but enough was enough. I love catching barbel and the Ouse just wasn't producing for me or any of my angling peers who had long given up on the river. I would return, I will never completely turn my back on that enchanting river, I just wanted to get my confidence back and start back fresh at a later date.

So where to now? I had fished the Lea at King's Weir a handful of times, in fact I had already considered a lengthy winter campaign along there after catching

my first Lea barbel in the first bit of high water in October, but with it being an hour and ten minutes from home I needed somewhere closer. The Ivel is more convenient, especially on my way home from Suffolk but having been there and done it the previous season it no longer appealed to me. The obvious choice to me was the Nene. As I was brought up upstream of Thrapston, I pronounce it the 'Nenn' whilst those from downstream pronounce it the 'Neen'. Either way, it was to become my new local river as my desired stretch is

only half an hour from home and can be reached in good traffic from work in just over an hour.

I had dabbled on the river in previous seasons, fishing the popular day ticket stretch at Castor, and caught a small barbel from the weir. I was put off however by the popularity of the stretch, and as a man who cherishes peace and quiet, OK I'll admit it – complete isolation – on the riverbank, I wasn't too keen on going back there for a serious campaign, especially as the majority of my fishing is limited to weekends. After speaking

with my friend and Anglian regional organiser John Newman who is a regular on the river, he suggested I try a nearby stretch, on the same Peterborough and District Angling Association book, which receives much less angling pressure and was a little more geographically convenient for me. He gave me some perfect directions and a brief guide to the stretch and off I went for an exploratory reconnaissance walk. I parked up in the village and followed the footpath down the hill, through the trees and came across the first sluice which

looked spot on for a fish or two. Carrying on upstream, over a boat lock, one is then faced with a footbridge over a delightful looking backwater. It screamed out barbel to me! I quietly walked upstream of the bridge and came to a lovely shallow gravel run. It looked perfect with the fast flow, streamer weed and overhanging bushes. ‘‘That’ll do for me’’ I said to myself and walked back up the hill to the car, ready to return that weekend with my rod.

I had a couple of sessions on the backwater and racked up a couple of blanks. No big deal as I’m no stranger to biteless days, plus John had told me that despite being consistent, it’s far from being easy fishing. I was happy enough observing a shoal of small barbel on the shallows which wet my appetite to keep returning. By the middle of November, the Nene was suffering with low water conditions. The river level is maintained all through the area by a series of sluices which help to protect the towns from flooding and maintain the

levels for the boats. I decided to investigate the sluice as an exploratory cast revealed much deeper water and a lovely stone and gravel bottom. As it is quite a big swim, a good forty yards across where the sluice section joins the main river, I was using two rods. I quite like to do this if the swim is big enough on a new venue as it gives me a chance to learn the swim more quickly and to work out the areas where the fish tend to feed, especially if it’s deep and I’m fishing blind.

About half an hour after swinging the bait out, I had a solid knock on the right hand rod, shortly followed by the centrepin letting out that delightful scream! A short, but spirited fight saw a lovely barbel of around five pounds on the unhooking mat. This was followed by another of similar size an hour or so later. I went home that day quite happy that I’d found some fish on a new venue and looking forward to encountering some of the bigger fish that John had already caught earlier on in the season.

Not too far away, there is an area that neither of us had really fished, but had decided to start bit of a baiting campaign as it looked spot on for a few fish and it seemed to receive very little angling attention. To cut a long story short, John and our mutual friend Ryan, who, it’s fair to say, can tie a good knot when it comes to fishing, caught a stunning number of barbel to over fifteen pounds in a short period of time. Myself, on the other hand, had a good run of regular fish in the low water conditions but nothing much over seven pounds. I was far from disappointed, I was simply enjoying the wonderful fishing that the river offers and enjoyed

having a bait in the water that wasn’t getting snaffled by signal crayfish after a few minutes!

By now we were into the first few days of December and the country was still experiencing temperatures into double figures. Good catches were being made up and down the land and the Nene was to be no exception. It was the first weekend of December, during storm Desmond, and I had discovered a lovely swim on the main river which consisted of a near bank drop-off into about seven feet of water, behind marginal brambles and trees where the fish could feed confidently without seeing myself or passing

Bank high on the main river in January



Superb photography skills by John



dog walkers above them. After baiting up three or four swims, my first cast into the new swim resulted in a screaming run on the 'pin and a fantastic fish of 9lb 10oz gracing my net. Whilst I'm still learning the art of self-take photography, which is evident in some of the accompanying illustrations to this piece, I was lucky enough to be able to flag down a passing jogger, who despite not looking too keen or impressed by my prize, took a couple of rushed photographs and carried on along the path.

When Ryan turned up after lunch, we noted that during the last storm we fished together in I had caught a couple of nice fish further up river, and conditions were ripe for another good day. As I was chatting to him, he offered up one of the swims that he'd caught from before and that I'd coincidentally baited up. Being far too easy-going with my fishing, I said he could drop in there while I would go back to my first swim that I caught from in the morning and sit it out for the rest of the day. I'd fished one of the other baited swims for an hour or so, but with no results. As I sat down in my swim, enjoying the odd tap on the rod tip and the anticipation of a solid bite in the stormy conditions, I had a feeling that something special was about to happen. It turns out I was wrong, sort of. As I was packing up at five o'clock, I'd just folded away my chair and was about to lift my rucksack on to my shoulders when I felt my phone ringing in my pocket, serenading the peaceful Nene valley with my ringtone of choice, from a track by Darkthrone (Google them, they're an acquired taste!). Wrongly cursing the home front as I fumbled around to answer, expecting the 'When will you be home' phone call, I saw it was Ryan. 'I've got one mate, it's a big one.



A Boxing Day gift from the Nene

I gathered up the rest of my kit and quickly worked my way along the bank to find Ryan placing a right lump of a barbel into the weigh-sling. I hadn't seen a fish this wide across the shoulders since my days on Adam's Mill. It was a stonker of a barbel and I immediately recognised it as one he had caught in the autumn at a slightly smaller weight. I got out my camera and did the honours for him, slightly cursing myself for giving up the swim to him but at the same time, and I say this with complete honesty, being genuinely delighted to have witnessed such a magnificent specimen of a barbel. On the way back to the cars, we chatted about the potential of the stretch and wondered just how big the fish could get along there. I was quite happy with my decision to take a break from the Ouse and was relishing the next couple of weeks. My work involves regular training courses and they had me booked in on one for two weeks starting that Monday. I didn't fish the Sunday as it is my day to spend with the family, but I knew that John was fishing the stretch in perfect



Playing my Boxing Day barbel

conditions. He updated me late in the afternoon with the news that he had beaten his PB with a fantastic, chunky fish of 14lb 14oz. Two personal bests for my two angling companions in two days was exciting news! It had to be my turn after work the next day! Turns out, it wasn't. While I had a handful of lovely fish to just over eight pounds during the two weeks, I never had a double from the stretch and I was itching for a change of scenery.

After speaking with Mark Smith, one of the bailiffs on the Castor stretch, I learned that the solar powered anglers had moved off the stretch in the autumn, and

there were some good fish being caught. That was enough for me to head a little further up the A1 on my next Saturday outing. I arrived at dawn (this sounds like one of those bread and butter fishing stories now!) and wandered across the meadow to a section of the main river that Mark had pointed me towards after catching a beautiful twelve pounder a few weeks previously. There was only one other angler on the stretch that day, which I found slightly odd considering how prolific the venue can be, and the quality of barbel lurking in the depths. I'd been fishing about an hour or so with

no bites when I saw Mark heading along the bank, carrying out his rounds as bailiff. One thing I must say about the P&DAA stretches is that they are by far the most well bailiffed and managed river stretches I have ever had the pleasure to fish. Mark is certainly the man in the know when it comes to this venue so I bit his hand off when he invited me for a walk up the backwater on the promise of showing me a few swims. As we walked and talked, I learned that there are a lot of good doubles, a few of which get caught fairly regularly, that are resident throughout the stretch. This had to be the place for me to finally get my Nene double. I dropped my kit off at a swim that I already had in mind, whilst continuing on the guided tour and putting four or five broken boilies into two other swims I fancied.

On returning back to my kit, we bid our farewells,

and I crept down the muddy bank to my first swim. I swung out my bait to a far bank, I say far bank, even though it's only a rod length and a half wide here, and settled down in my chair full of anticipation. After forty minutes or so with no bites, I moved up to the next swim. It was a swim that nobody had fished from this side so I had to wedge myself in among the pale brown reeds, swinging my bait downstream to the baited spot a couple of feet out from the bank. As I sat in my comfy little spot and poured out a cup of tea, the rod tip hammered round and quickly sprang back again. Suspecting a chub bite, I sat back with my brew for a few more minutes before the rod hooped round, the reel screamed and I connected to a solid fish on the other end. It stayed deep and worked its way upstream towards me, following the usual fighting pattern of a good double.

Once it was in the net I could see that despite being a very chunky fish, it would fall short of the magical ten pound barrier but I couldn't complain at all as the Nene, once again, had produced the goods for me.

After returning the fish, I noticed that John had just arrived on the opposite bank. It transpired that I was fishing one of his favourite swims from the usually unfished bank! I moved upstream to a spot that I thought would give me a good fish in the coloured water, but with no bites in an hour I moved back down to my first swim. I settled into the muddy margins and swung out the bait to a small gap in the far bank overhanging branches. Half hour later, I had that bite that we all love. A turbocharged six pounder gave me the run around in the fast flow. I took the obligatory barbel and centrepin photograph

on the mat and returned my prize to fight another day. A quick exchange of text messages with John revealed he'd had a few knocks but no fish, and we agreed to pack up at five as there's no night fishing allowed and it would be getting on well into dusk by then. I had everything packed away, at five minutes to five I turned round to clip up the last few bits in my rucksack when the reel let out an almighty scream that made me jump out of my skin! I picked up the rod and immediately had to follow the run of the fish down. I turned it before it got to the snags and it boldly swam upstream towards me. The longer it refused to give up, the more convinced I was that I had got my first Nene double in the bag. I netted the fish in the flow and could finally relax. It looked really long in the fading light while resting in the net so I sent John a text to say that I thought I'd cracked it. As he



*A lovely 8lb 7oz
from one of my
favourite swims*

John's PB of
14lb 14oz



was packing up he offered to walk around via my swim and do the honours with the camera. It transpired the fish didn't have the girth or bulk to carry it over the ten pound mark but one can't grumble when the fishing is as fantastic as it is on the lower Nene. It'd been a while since I had three barbel in a day and John took a superb photograph with the glowing red sky in the background.

It was now approaching the Christmas break and I was looking forward to getting a few full days in on the bank. I had popped into Fish On in Peterborough, a superb tackle shop where Paul and Rob are always willing to help and have a chat about all things piscatorial, when the invitation was extended my way for bit of a Boxing Day social on the banks of the Nene. I went home and opened negotiations with my darling wife. As we were visiting her parents in Lincolnshire on the day and Castor was on the way, she agreed I could have a couple of hours on the bank as long as I didn't stop too long and made it up to Bourne for lunch. I struggled out of bed and into my car, and with my still bloated belly from Christmas dinner, made my way up the A1 to the fishery. I plodded across the field and plonked myself down

in the swim, cursing myself for having that extra helping of cheese and biscuits late the night before. John and Rob joined me soon after and we fished the same short section of river. My double boilie and stick had been out for around an hour when I heard the reel screaming. I lifted into a decent fish which gave a great account of itself and really made me work for my reward. John and Rob had gathered behind to watch the spectacle and I netted a wonderful deep bodied fish. I thought it might have been close to the ten pound mark but at 9lb 7oz I couldn't have been more pleased, what a wonderful Boxing Day gift from the Nene to me!

We had a couple of day's rain, and I next arrived on a different section on the 28th. The river was a good foot or so up and I was confident with the continued mild temperatures that I'd get a fish or two. I settled down in my first swim and caught up with the news that Lemmy, an absolute icon for all lovers of heavy music had passed away. I was utterly devastated and lost all focus on the fishing. I moved downstream into a comfy swim where I could just settle down and not try too hard, allowing my mind to wander and think about all the Motorhead gigs that



I feel I ought to share my approach that has done the business for me on the Nene this season, and in former times the Gt Ouse. The biggest factor is choosing the right swim, any of the usual holding areas such as drop offs, depressions, overhead cover and streamer beds are what I look for. The vast majority of swims are too deep or too far out to fish visually, so it pays to get to know your river. I prefer to fish close in, it makes hitting the sweet spot in the dark easier but mainly because I'm somewhat hit and miss with my centrepin casting!

I'll usually pick three swims on the stretch, all within a few hundred yards of each other and flick out no more than half a dozen boilies, either broken or whole. If it's cold then I'll only throw out two or three half boilies. I'll start off in the first swim with my favourite stick mix consisting of a decent off the shelf boilie, crushed up into a powder, with equal amounts of crumbed up pellet to match. This is purely to get a decent scent trail going down the river. The only actual feed I want in my swim is the hookbait, aside from the very small amount of free offerings as mentioned above. I'm there to catch them and not feed them! I've recently started getting into glugged baits and this is something else incredibly simple, yet gives that little added attractant to the bait. I've now stopped messing about making my own boilies and being constantly paranoid about ingredients and flavours. Simply because I like the convenience of grabbing a bag of shelf life and just going out and using them! Confidence is a

huge factor and I've learned that if it works then there's no need to change it. Keep it simple and don't overthink it.

I'll leave the bait in place for a good hour to ninety minutes before moving to the next swim. I've found that I usually get indications within forty minutes if there are barbel present. If I've had no indications after a couple of hours I know for sure it's time to move on. I may put two or three more freebies out with the intention of returning later but I find that no more than that is required, you can't catch what isn't there and it's no good for anyone filling a swim up with bait to kill off the fishing for several days! Saying this however, if I feel like having a lazy day or spending four or five hours in one swim, I will. I've stopped getting myself stuck in that mind set of feeling like I have to catch a barbel, it really doesn't matter if I don't as there is always the next time!

I like to keep my rod tip low, line slack and camouflage my rig as best I can. The reason being I've found that I often get small pulls from barbel, especially on pressured stretches, before that classic bite happens. If I'm fishing a slack line there's less resistance offered and I feel that the barbel gain confidence much quicker. I also believe fish can detect the noise of water passing through a tight line in the swim and this really can put fish on edge. The biggest factor though is simplicity, I firmly believe that there is no need to over complicate rigs, bait or methods. If I find any aspect of my fishing a chore, hard work or not enjoyable, I change it. I go out to relax and enjoy myself, catching a barbel is just a bonus!

I'd been to and good times that I'd had in somewhat of a contrasting environment to the relative tranquillity of the Nene on a December morning. My daydreaming was disturbed by the rod slamming round and a scrappy fish making its way to Peterborough. I soon had a small barbel of around five pounds on the mat which cheered me up a bit. This was followed by another fish a bit bigger a couple of hours later, rounded off with a lovely 8lb 7oz fish in the afternoon. I was really happy with the way my season was turning around, compared to the thirty eight Ouse blanks that I'd endured up to that point, I was now well into mid doubles on the count of fish in just a month of fishing. While I was still waiting for that double, I was consistently catching barbel, so I knew that my method and bait was doing the business. I wasn't overthinking my rigs or worrying about boilie recipes or tactics, I was keeping everything simple, using a new off-the-shelf bait on the market that had boosted my confidence no end and I felt

no pressure with having to catch. I had the odd blank, but it was rare that I'd go more than three sessions before I caught again.

With my January barbel in the bag too, a perfect 8lb 9oz fish from a swim I'd not caught from before, I'd also caught several nice chub

way across Cambridgeshire to the Nene valley. I parked up and embarked on the long walk across the fields towards the river. I'd never even walked or seen the stretch in question and was quite impressed when I arrived at the water. I dumped my kit down in the

pack up and start the long walk through the mud back to the car. Not long after telling myself I had fifteen minutes, the upstream rod nodded a couple of times and steadily pulled round. I picked up the rod before the 'pin had chance to make any noise and found

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from a couple of swims, and was starting to get the urge to explore somewhere different. There is a section that John had dabbled on with the chub fishing where we suspected there might be some barbel and had heard rumours of some good fish coming out in the past, but it involves a really long walk and a further drive for me. Not being too put off, on the first Friday in February I left work early and made my

first likely looking swim that I fancied, flicked out four or five broken boilies and wandered off downstream to have a look at other potential swims. Suitably impressed with several spots, I returned to my kit and swung out one rod to a large slack behind a fallen tree, with the second rod downstream in mid river. As the sun dipped below the trees I gave myself another half an hour before it would be time to

myself attached to a dogged fighting fish. Assuming a good chub, I slipped the net in the margins, flicked on my head torch and was met with a response of chaos! The barbel charged off downstream, all the way to the far bank and decided it would give a good account of itself. At 9lb 8oz I was chuffed to bits with my first fish from a new stretch that brought my tally to eighteen fish in just over two months. I took some rubbish photographs with the whistle camera app on my phone which always seems to have a thin coating of oily jet fuel on the lens, and returned the fish to the murky water. I plodded all the way back to the car, delighted with the result but knowing that in twelve hours I'd be returning back in the opposite direction to fish again the next day!

It was just getting light when I settled down into a swim upstream of where I caught the fish the day before. It was a real muddy, boggy swim and I was plastered in mud before I'd even started. I cast my downstream rod towards a big raft that looked to be a perfect holding area and flicked my second rod about two thirds of the way across



out in front of me into an area of water that didn't look attractive at all, but I had to try somewhere! I put up my brolly in the drizzle, poured a cup of tea and cursed as the otter came swimming downstream, hissing as he passed me and carried on down river. One thing that has struck me about the Nene is that there is quite a high population of otters but I've not yet seen a single dead fish on the bank. I did wonder if he might have scared away all the fish but an hour later the upstream rod started nodding away. I picked up the rod and found the ugliest looking bream I have ever seen had hooked itself. It had a double kink in its back and looked really washed out in the coloured water. I unhooked it in the net and wished the poor fellow well as I released it. I recast, poured another brew and relaxed back in the chair. I gave it a good hour and a half before starting to think about rebaiting the rods when the upstream rod pulled round and the centrepin let out a steady run of line, not the typical scream from a barbel but slow and steady. I lifted the rod and immediately knew I was connected to a serious fish indeed. It powered upstream, taking thirty yards of line without giving me a chance to regain any, before heading back downstream towards me on the near bank, while I wound furiously on the reel to keep a tight line. It made several of those irresistible lunges that only the big barbel give, and I was certain I'd hooked my first Nene double. I got the fish up to the surface and I could see that it was incredibly deep. Keeping my composure I netted her without too much fuss and let out a huge cheer that I'm sure could be heard over in the Ouse valley! It looked a good twelve pounds as it was resting in the margins, and I zeroed the scales carefully

after sending John a text to say I thought I'd cracked it. I lifted the fish out of the margins and went a little unnecessary, this was one big barbel! I unhooked the fish, an immaculate fish with not a mark on her and carefully placed her in the weigh-sling. I was shaking as the Reuben Heaton's took up the strain and with the needle dancing between 15lb 2oz and 15lb 10z I took the lower reading and burst out laughing! What a way to get my first double off the river, I'd have been more than happy with the 10lb 10z fish, but this was beyond my dreams. I took the best self-takes that I could with the phone, cursing myself that I'd left my DSLR at home again, but I wasn't too bothered; I had fished long and hard for two months and more than achieved my goal.

I held her in the margins and felt the strength come back to her. She was probably ready to swim back for a while, but it's always nice to hold on to such a fish for a few more minutes.

I admired every scale of that fish and smiled as she glided back into the murky water, laying on my belly in the mud for a few minutes staring into the gloom where she swam. I pondered the rest of the day just how much potential there is on the Nene. I had got to know a couple of stretches really well in the short time that I had been fishing it, and felt I was starting to get my head around the several miles of river I had available. With such an expanse of water, a lot of it very under fished, one wonders just how big the next one could be. While one of the syndicate stretches has produced fish over eighteen pounds, there are stretches all along the river between Wellingborough and Peterborough that really could produce something special in the next few seasons. While the Gt. Ouse will always be my main love,



9lb 8oz from the new section, a terrible self take



8lb 9oz January barbel

with some very big barbel still residing in my local stretch, it's nice to know I have the Nene not too far away for when I want to get a bend in my rod and when the Ouse is being particularly moody. The thing that impresses me the

most about the Nene is that there is a very healthy stock of smaller barbel, from a couple of pounds right up to mid doubles, which should ensure that it will remain one of the top barbel rivers in the country for years to come.

For more information on the stretches of the Lower Nene around Peterborough, check out www.peterboroughfishing.co.uk There's some wonderful accommodation available situated on the banks of the river Nene in the riverside village of Waternewton. These self-catering cottages are just across the meadow from Castor backwater which is just a 5 minute walk while the Alwalton section of the Nene is just a 5 minute drive away and Ferry Meadows – famous for its superb Bream fishing – is just a 10 minute drive. Check out www.rivnenecottages.co.uk