

Fishless no longer

After a break of 20 years, when the upper Irton in Powys was devoid of trout thanks to acid rain, **Jon Beer** returns to find rejuvenation is in the air – and in the water

Splendid autumn
colours on the upper
Irton, including a
startling clump of
CERAMUS, JON BEER

Trout in mid Wales



Jon Beer is a vice-president of the Wye Trout Trust. He fishes all over the world and is author of three books, *Gone Fishing*, *The Trout and I*, and the recently published *Not All Beer and Bezenenet*.

I WAKE UP around 7.30 each morning, go downstairs and make tea. I open the curtains and put a cup on my wife's bedside table. She wakes up. She has a first sip of tea and then proceeds to tell me about the dream she's just had. Listen: dreams are of riveting interest to the dreamer - and to no one else. When the Egyptian pharaoh dreamt about seven thin cows eating seven fat cows you can bet your boots he had bored everyone else spiteful about this dream before Joseph, son of Jacob, was hauled in to listen. He was a slave and in prison: he didn't have any choice in the matter.

I mention this because my story involves, uncannily, feast and famine and a dream. But not necessarily in that order.

It begins perhaps 20 years ago on a day in early spring. It was the end of March, the beginning of April. Cabin fever stalked the land. Dad and I were taking a trip



David Jones - "Dai Shop" - at his home in Abergwesyn photographed on the first visit 20 years ago. He once sold fishing tickets in the post office/shop (it closed in the 1980s). And he sold a couple to Jon Beer.

to the Welsh Marches, prospecting for likely looking streams to be fished in warmer, longer, troutier days. In the days before rivers trusts and passports you could spend half a day on these waters finding the right farm door to knock at and the other half waiting for the bloke to come back for his tea. And then he wanted his tea. So each year we would take a day or so in the early season just to look for waters, find out whether we could fish them and where we could get

permission or a ticket. It saved a lot of fishing time later on.

The borderlands of Wales abound in small trout streams. You'll find them on the OS map wherever a pale-blue river shrinks to a thin blue line. We were wandering south-west along the B4358 from Newbridge-on-Wye, crossing the little waters that drain a bleak upland of peat and bog to the north. The Chwerfri burrowed through a tunnel of trees that would be even denser in summer leaf. The Dulas at Glandulas was bigger but no one could tell us who had the fishing. We thought we'd struck pay-dirt in the next valley. The Trout Inn ought to have some fishing - the River Cammarch ran round the pub. Sometimes it ran through the pub. To prevent this there were plans to shift the river to new premises a field away. The fishing might take a while to recover. And so we moved on, up a lane and over the hill to the next valley and the hamlet of Abergwesyn.

Here the little Gwesyn joins the not-much-bigger Irfon. Both were fine, bouncing streams and we set about finding a door to knock. The hamlet, we learned, had once boasted a shop-and-post office, now closed - but the gentleman who had run it for 50 years still lived hereabouts. He would know about the fishing. He did. "Dai Shop", Mr David Jones, came to his door. The fishing was not what it was, he said. Yes, he used to sell fishing tickets at the shop - £3 for the year - but no one had bought one for years. He might still have some of the old tickets. He did. We bought one each. And with these in our pockets we set off to explore our domain.

The lane climbed through a mossy oak wood, bare-branched in the early spring. It emerged into perhaps the loveliest valley in Wales. It was a classic U-shaped valley: you could have stuck a geography teacher in front and labelled the thing "Glaciation". Last year's brown bracken swept down from steep, craggy sides to a ribbon of silver winding along the broad valley bottom. There was white among the silver where little waterfalls broke the river into attractive runs and pools. It was late in a short spring day but we donned wellies and slid down

through the bracken for the last hour of light. Down by the river the thing was positively sumptuous. Through crystal water we could see a gravel bottom and blue-grey rock sculpted into fantastic shapes by the current. Everything about the place yelled "trout". We caught nothing in that last hour but, as we drove back home, we marvelled at the find: a perfect little river in a stunning location and we had the only two tickets issued in years. It was all but ours. We would keep very, very quiet about this place. This was the dream.

It remained a dream for several years, a lovely bit of fishing tucked behind the ear for later. Until, on a warm September day towards the back end of the millennium, I returned to this little valley at the top of the Irfon. Philip was with me. He'd been sworn to secrecy with oath and threat. We arrived full of hope and expectation - a couple of fishermen at the peak of their powers. Six hours later we left, broken and baffled. The river

looked every bit as lovely as it had on the first visit. It was still yelling "trout" - but it was lying through its teeth. We hadn't touched a fish: we hadn't seen a fish. We had found one dead frog, belly up in the shallows.

The upper Irfon in late September. Still the loveliest valley in Wales.

once again to Abergwesyn and the upper Irfon. The memory of that beautiful valley, the tragedy of its fishless waters, had haunted me for a dozen years. But it wasn't the only stream to have suffered this fate. Several others in this part of Wales, headwaters of the River Wye, had become too acid to support fish life. In the years since I had first found the upper Irfon, the Wye had become an SAC, a Special Area of Conservation under an EU directive. The Wye and Usk Foundation had formed in 1996 and had set about habitat improvement on the river and its tributaries. By 2008 their "pHish" project had brought salmon and trout back to the acidified waters of the upper Wye but the valuable spawning gravels of the upper Irfon had remained stubbornly acid and fishless. This recalcitrant bit of water has been the object of the Foundation's latest project - ISAC (these boys just can't resist a fishy acronym), the Irfon Special Area of Conservation.

It was another warm morning

and we parked beyond the oak wood and looked up the valley and down at the river. We weren't sure what to expect as we slid down through the bracken. An improvement in water quality had been monitored, in part, by the number of salmon parr found in electro-fishing surveys above Abergwesyn - from a baseline of none in 2010. But catching salmon parr with an electrode is one thing; catching trout, if trout there be, on a fly is something else. We'd be happy if we found something-or-other to rise to a fly.

The Irfon was as lovely as ever. Lovelier if anything, because an exotic clump of gaudy monbretia had somehow set up shop on a rocky island in the stream. Above the island the river stretched upstream in a long pool. We waited a long time for any movement in the channel under the far bank. We waited in vain. But we were here to fish, so Philip greased a small pale Half-hog and cast it upstream. It rode serenely down the channel. And disappeared. ▶

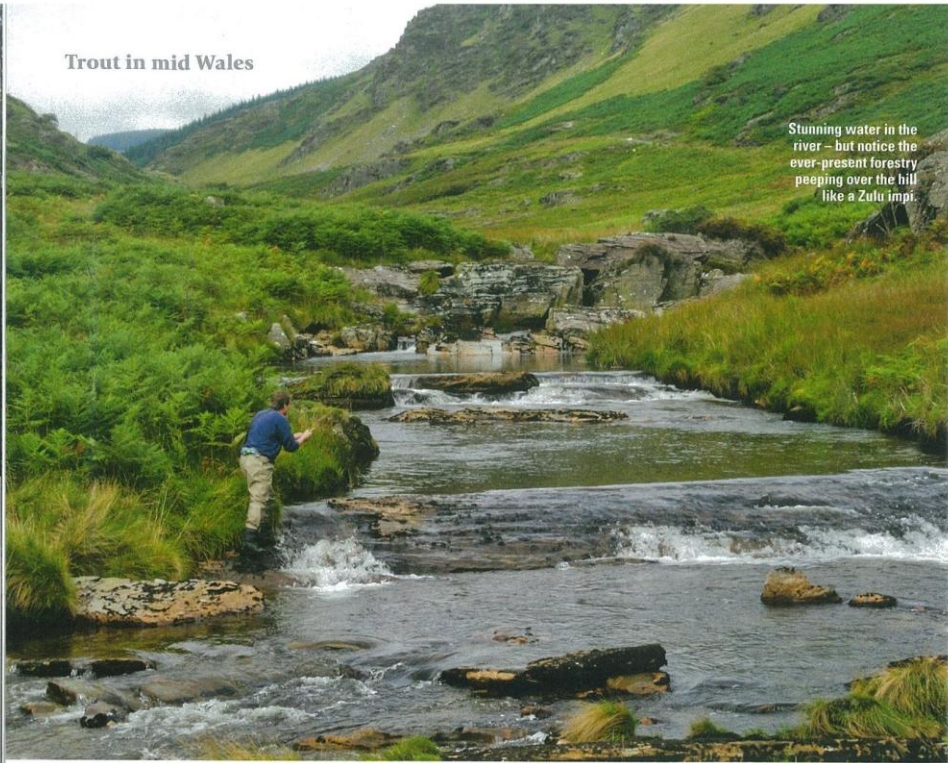


"We arrived full of hope and expectation - two fishermen at the peak of their powers"

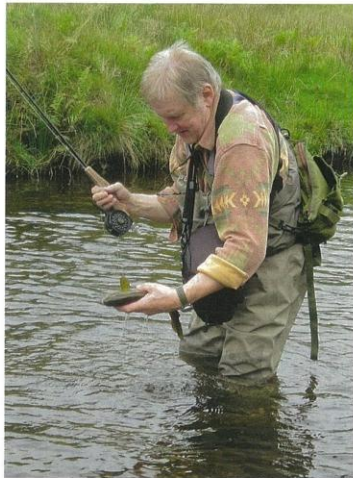
I am no stranger to not catching a fish: it happens all the time. But the upper Irfon was sending the troutometer off the scale and we'd seen no sign of fish. So when I got back home I phoned the Environment Agency and asked them what the hell? They told me what the hell. The Irfon above Abergwesyn, they said, had been devoid of fish for 20 years, a victim of acid rain. This, you'll have gathered, was the famine.

And then, last September, I went

Trout in mid Wales



Stunning water in the river – but notice the ever-present forestry peeping over the hill like a Zulu impi.



Out of the blue: Jon's first fish on his return to the Irfon – a 14-incher that fell to an Elk-hair Sedge.

It was back a second later, leaping from the water in the jaw of something rather chunkier than any salmon parr. It was a trout of 14 inches. We were stunned. Five minutes later, I had a second fish from the top of the pool. This one was marginally larger. We were stunned all over again. It wasn't exactly a feast – but it would serve very nicely as a starter.

An hour later we were puzzled. We hadn't seen another fish. We felt in need of a cup of tea and a ponder. We drove back to Abergwesyn, to the pool where the two streams join, and cobbled a lunch beside the river.

It's time for a little science over lunch. All rain is slightly acid as atmospheric carbon dioxide dissolves to form the weak carbonic acid (which is why, incidentally, flat Coca-cola tastes sweeter than the fizzy stuff – it has lost some of this weak acidity).

Industrial pollution, among other evils, dumps oxides of sulphur

and nitrogen into the atmosphere and it's these that dissolve to form corrosive sulphuric and nitric acids.

Now here's something odd: tighter pollution controls and a decline in heavy industry led to cleaner air through the last quarter of the 20th century. But the acidity of the poor old Irfon got steadily worse. Something else had happened hereabouts in those years. Forestry had happened. The Ordnance Survey of 1964 shows a vast tract of open moorland and peat bog between the headwaters of the Irfon and Tywi. By 1980 this had disappeared under the vast conifer swathe of the Tywi Forest. And even then it was becoming apparent that conifers had the alarming effect of increasing acidification.

Here's how. Conifers, with their millions of tiny needles, have a vast surface area. Water droplets from mist or rain soon evaporate, leaving any pollutants, including acids, behind on the needles. The

acid accumulates until a deluge washes it off and into the streams. A flush of acid like this, at the vulnerable stage of egg or fry, can wipe out a generation of trout or salmon – even in a stream now sweet enough for adult fish to survive quite happily – more than happily, as there are no annoying youngsters to share any food. Which might, of course, explain the presence of a couple of big old trout.

flush rather than the acid itself. Before the forestry arrived, the boggy moorland surrounding the river absorbed deluges, releasing the water slowly into the river, giving good flows long into a dry spell. Trees won't thrive in a bog: the moorland had been drastically drained during the planting of the Tywi Forest. The effect of this was to dump any deluge straight into the river within hours rather than weeks, alternating flash floods

“A flush of acid at the vulnerable stage of egg or fry can wipe out a generation of trout”

We had another cup of tea and, while the kettle cooled, we walked along the river. Philip went all hunter-gatherer with a find of boletus fungi beside the river and then, as the sun lit the bottom of a deep pool, we saw another big trout slinking into the depths. But I'd have been happier to see small trout.

The ISAC project had two approaches to the persistent problem of acid flushes on the Irfon. Acid water is neutralised when it runs over limestone rock. This natural buffering can be replicated by dumping limestone sand into the forest streams that feed the river. This was effective wherever lorries could get to these forest streams but it's not a long-term solution: the limestone sand dissolves and disperses – that's how it works.

The second plan tackled the

with bare bones in a dry spell. The solution was simple: to block the forest drains and restore some boginess to the headwaters.

The most persistently acid tributary was Nant Hir, which joins the Irfon just upstream of the pool where we had caught the two large trout. We might have more luck finding new generations of trout upstream. After lunch we made our way back upstream, past the oak wood and once again into the valley of the upper Irfon. It's hard to believe this loveliest of rivers has been ravaged by forestry: there isn't a conifer in sight. Until, that is, you look carefully above the crags. Tree-tops rim the horizon like the spears of an impi in the last scene of *Zulu* – and every bit as threatening. The road descends to the river at the top of the valley and here we fished in the



A haul of chunky boletus fungi from the shade by the river.

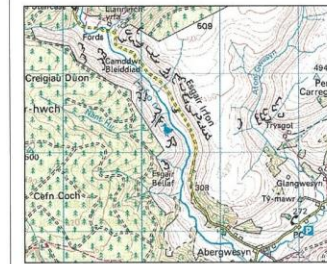
sunshine of the late afternoon. And here we began to catch the first trout born and bred in the upper Irfon for a quarter of a century.

These precious trout were every bit as beautiful as their valley. And from six inches to more than double – this was the feast.



Factfile

■ The Wye and Usk Foundation's ISAC project was in partnership with the Environment Agency Wales, the National Museum of Wales and the Rivers Trust. Europe's LIFE+Nature programme provided half the funding.



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At last, the signs of new life on the upper river. A pristine little trout from the top of the valley below the Devil's Staircase.