

Our English Heritage



FISHING SOFT HACKLES IN YORKSHIRE

by Syl Nemes

Last May I fished the River Wharfe in Yorkshire, one of the rivers in that part of England where the soft-hackled fly was first used. I had to get permission from the river keeper, or river watcher as he used to be known, in a pub along the river. It was called the Tenant Arms and had been the official meeting place of the Kilnsey Club since 1840 when the club began.

I arrived there at around 10 a.m. and had to wait on the keeper, F. E. Tattersall, which gave me time to look around the pub. In one of the private rooms facing the roadway, I found the meeting place of the club. Framed photos of Honorable Secretary Treasurers and River Watchers past, hung on the wall and in a glass case stuck in the corner were old fly fishing items: an old hickory rod with a butt like a baseball bat, torn and tattered fly wallets with bits of silk-worm gut sticking out at all angles, old Hardy reels and a wicker pannier big enough to carry twenty pounds of trout.

Through the windows along the wall, I could see the Wharfe across the road and through the trees which were just beginning to show their bright green leaves. The river was full. Beyond it were the hills and moors of Yorkshire all neatly squared off by miles and miles of black, piled stone fences. Each square or rectangle was dotted with hundreds of sheep and shaky new lambs.

It still is standard practice for the several fishing clubs on the Wharfe to have their headquarters in the pubs and hotels along the river. Even before automobiles, anglers would come up from the larger cities in Yorkshire or England by train, be met by horse drawn mail carts

Sylvester Nemes is the authority on the soft-hackled fly. He is the author of *The Soft-Hackled Fly* and *The Soft-Hackled Fly Addict*.

and carried to their respective pub or hotel. In them, fishermen rented rooms, ate meals and drank ales and whiskies after a hard day on the river, which they could walk to in a matter of minutes. In turn, the pub or hotel gave the club the space in one of the private rooms in which it could hold its meetings. There were obvious advantages to this agreement. The pubs and hotels are a lot easier to find than the keepers' cottages. And having the headquarters in the pubs and hotels guaranteed the arrival of the keeper every day, who by 10 or 10:30 a.m. was almost always in need of his first pint.

If you want to fish the Wharfe, the Swale, the Ribble, the Nidd or any other trout river in Yorkshire today, just take the road along the river, stop at the first pub or hotel you come to and inquire about the fishing.

Tattersall was no exception. He came into the pub, ordered his pint and came over to me after the pub manager told him I was looking for him. He was roly-poly, wearing "wellies", a long, green oil skin "keeper's" jacket and one of those plaid Sherlock Holmes hats which looked like part of his head from wearing it so long. He was warm and friendly and was happy to hear I liked soft hackles, had fished them for years and had written a couple of books about them.

He assured me that soft-hackles were still the most popular type of fly on the rivers of Yorkshire. And that in nearly two hundred years, the manner of fishing the flies had not changed much, except that they now used graphite rods and modern, plastic lines and monofilament leaders. And that certain members of the club fished dry flies upstream when the hatches started.

To prove what he was saying, he reached into a pocket of the keepers jacket and pulled out a small Wheatly fly box filled with various soft-hackled flies. They were constructed of small bird hackles and tying silk. Some patterns were dubbed with a little fur, but not enough to hide the color of the silk. The flies were small and so sparse in the bodies and hackles that I was reminded that even after 25 years of tying and

fishing these flies, mine were still horribly over dressed.

He insisted I take the whole box. I did but only after I insisted he accept copies of my two books. Then he produced a small printed folder called the LIST OF FLIES AND THE MONTHS FOR USING THEM ON THE RIVER WHARFE. On the back side of the folder was written "Received this list June 23, 1892 from Messrs. Walker and Sons" who were the printers of the piece. On the inside were the recipes for 32 soft-hackled fly patterns in size 13 and 14, many of which were identical to those I use today. At the bottom of the list was the warning, "Single hair, or finest drawn gut should be used, as the upper waters are remarkably clear, and will not yield their excellent trout and grayling to a bungler."

The folder was right. Even with the Wharfe a little high, it was remarkably clear when the Keeper and myself approached it in the afternoon for a little fishing with the soft-hackled fly. I was not rigged up, explaining to the keeper that I preferred to watch him. The river at this point was no more than 30 feet wide so there was no need to wade it. It ran fairly deep and straight and all of it looked good even though there were no flies on the water. The keeper made short casts quartering upstream and didn't let the line go down much below him. After a few casts, he had a nice brown, 12 or 13 inches long and in excellent physical condition for so early in the year. He flicked the trout back into the river and started over again.

He was casting much higher in the river than I normally do. My average cast with soft hackles is straight across or even slightly below the 90 degree angle to the bank. I follow the line down with the rod tip held low until the line is almost below me. Then I take a step and cast again, this time covering new water. If the fly begins to drag (coming over to my side) I mend the belly of the line upstream to take pressure off the fly and let it move naturally down stream. I normally fish the entire length of a riffle in this manner. That is the traditional soft-hackled fly method and represents the

Continued from preceding page

first level of fishing the soft-hackled fly. It is the easy level and even beginners can fish quite successfully in that way.

Tattersall was fishing the soft-hackled fly at the second or advanced level. That is, mostly upstream in a free, dead drift without drag, retrieving line ahead of the fly at a speed just slightly slower than the current. The angler must do this in order to stay in touch with the fly. He knows when a fish takes in either one of three ways. The line hesitates. It stops completely. Or it actually starts upstream which means the trout has already taken the fly firmly and is on his way to safety. It pays to use a light colored line for the second level of fishing the soft-hackled fly. Or you can tie a piece of bright colored poly or yarn on to your leader where it joins the line as an indicator or bobber if you like.

The keeper was very adept at catching brown trout from his river and in a short time had taken three or four before he handed the rod to me.

I was anxious to feel my first Yorkshire trout. I had already caught a two pounder on the Test a week before and was not too impressed with the quality of the fight. The Wharfe browns, however, felt like dynamite, and fought all the way to the net. They were handsome, beautifully colored fish with smallish heads and firm, fat bodies. Later, I saw hundreds of them in the raising ponds of the Kilnsey club. The eggs came from wild browns and were fertilized by hand, Tattersall's, from the milt of wild males. The river was stocked with two year olds way before the fishing started so they could get on to the fly.

At the side of the ponds, Tattersall said he could call various browns to the surface just by saying their names even from 50 feet away from the ponds. I doubted it. He moved off and said "You stay there and watch the water." I did. The sly keeper started. "Up George, Peter, Thomas." All at once the pond came alive with boiling, slashing brown trout. I joined the laughing keeper where he stood and saw how he did it. I laughed too. There at his knees was a chute leading to a pipe which took the trout pellets directly into the pond. 