

Direct line insurance

Is your river nymphing getting a little flabby? Tighten up that leader, says **Fred Bainbridge** – the shortest distance between man and fish is a straight line... »



TACTICS RIVERS

YOU could say the same of any skill. Unless focus and self-discipline are your strong suits, it can be one thing to master it and another thing altogether to maintain that mastery.

Bad habits creep in, corners are lazily cut and before you know it, something you once had off pat seems a little tired and ineffective.

Mesmeric

Why should river nymphing be any different? There's a mesmeric quality to the incessant chatter of water tumbling over rocks and if the surroundings are pleasant, it can be easy to get into a counter-productive tempo as a fly angler.

Chuck 'em out, wait for the river to bring 'em back: repeat. Until the sight of your bone-dry landing net reminds you that this idyllic tableau is missing something.

On some waters, fishing some methods, you might get away with it; getting lucky while getting sloppy and then driving home believing you've still got it.

Not river nymphing. Possibly fly-fishing's most exacting discipline, the task of matching your flies' descent rate with the river's speed means that there's no such thing as 'there or thereabouts'. Show up with less than your A-game, and it will expose you.

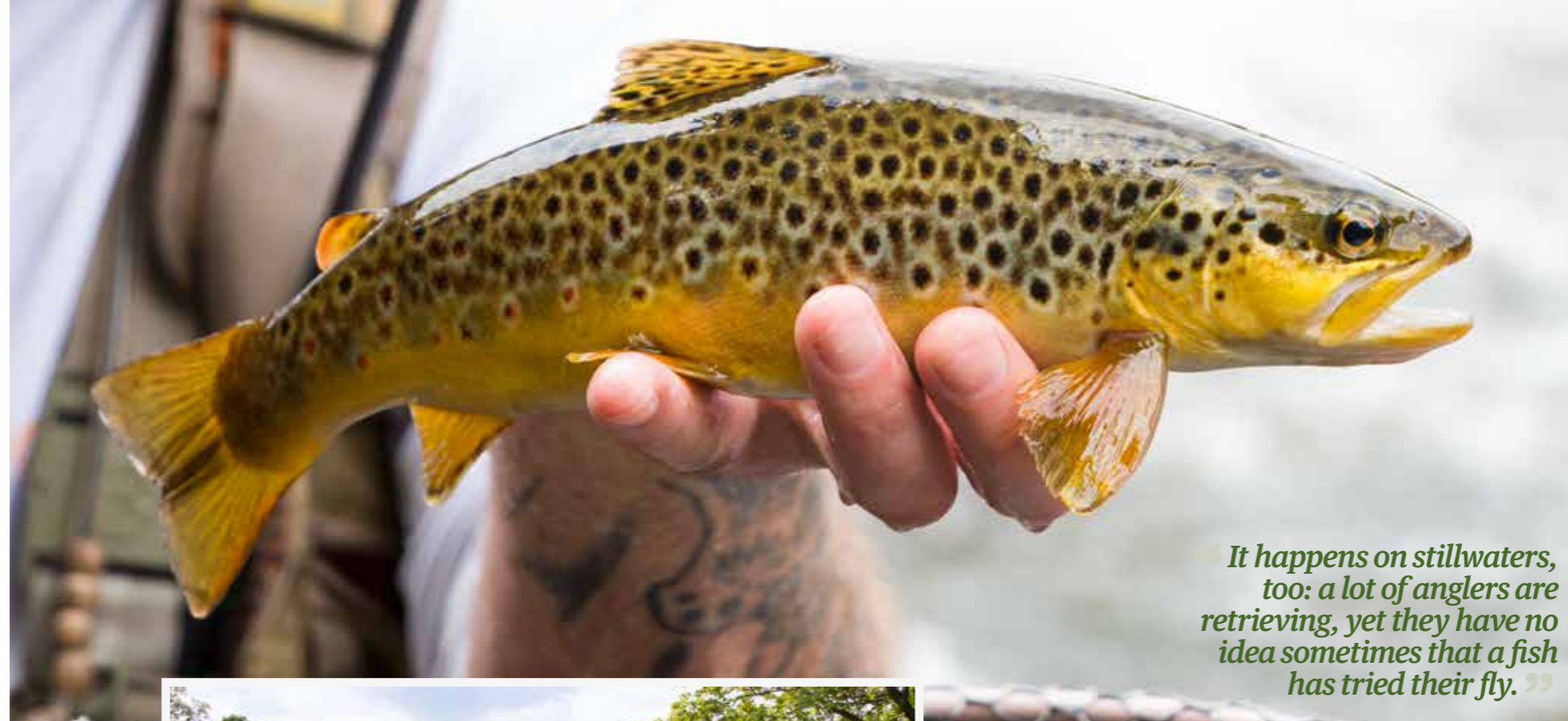
Fred Bainbridge says he's seen this happen, even at the loftier heights of match fishing, and with the River Swale being low today, leaving pockets of deep water as his best hope, he is perfectly placed to demonstrate how you sharpen up your act.

The Swale winds along the southern edge of Richmond, in North Yorkshire. We start at the west end of town, just south-west of the ruins of Easby Abbey, where pleasant riverside walks and fine river views from a bridge are juxtaposed with the bouquet from a nearby sewage plant. Swale veterans fishing here probably check wind direction before they check river levels.

Lively

It's an awkward descent to the western bank but the terrain that awaits makes it worthwhile. Some rivers can look a bit sorry for themselves in times of low water but the Swale retains a lively flow and still shows promising patches between the outcrops of pale rocks, their calm water amid the froth and ripples pointing to deeper holes hiding fish.

"Pocket water," Fred calls them. "I'll get one here."



It happens on stillwaters, too: a lot of anglers are retrieving, yet they have no idea sometimes that a fish has tried their fly.



Fred Bainbridge

England international and 15 times Northern champion across bank, river and loch-style disciplines. Available for guiding via Facebook ('Freddy Bainbridge')

Heaviest fish
21lb 8oz rainbow

Favourite reservoir
Stocks

Favourite small water
Tanfield Lodge

TOP The day's first brownie.

ABOVE The low but lovely Swale.



It's one of the few times I've known him sell himself short. He actually has several brownies as we head north-east of the bridge, all of them succumbing to noticeably close-quarters combat.

"Tight line nymphing", Fred calls it, and I'm glad that he uses its American label, for at least that tells you what's involved. The European preference for sticking the name of a country in front of the word 'nymphing' is all very well but if you're like me, you may be losing track of what's what...

"I'm fishing under the rod tip," Fred continues. "We want nymphs and French leader to be vertical; straight under the tip. We are Czech nymphing but with a French leader system [see *Jargon Buster* panel]."

He had noticed in competitions, he explains later, where many people were going wrong. The fixation with distance to which

anglers can fall prey, consciously or subconsciously, had struck again.

"They were all looking to cast big distances upstream but their flies were then out of control," he says. "They might get a few fish but I saw the loophole in what they did, and after a season, I worked it out."

"Working it out" resulted in a nymphing system more stripped down than a racing car. Anything that created slack had to go.

It's no accident that the word 'cast' was replaced by 'pitch' as Fred talked me through it. Whereas a cast puts the flies briefly at the mercy of the river, a short pitch keeps them within your zone of influence.

"As soon as I pitch flies upstream, I then extend my casting arm forward, in line with where the flies have just dropped and I remove all slack with other hand, leaving the nymphs perpendicular beneath the

JARGON BUSTER

"Czech nymphing" The 'Euro' label for tight-line nymphing

"French leader" Typically 12 to 30ft (3.5-9m) long, a French leader comprises a long mono section (your fly-line doesn't get beyond the tip ring with this type of fishing) a short, hi-viz sighter section to assist you with bite detection and a tapered fluorocarbon leader and tippet section, to which flies are attached. When fishing at longer range than on this occasion, this set-up allows the presentation of very small nymphs to nervous fish.

rod tip," says Bainbridge. "I do that all in one action, in a split-second."

"I'm instantly tracking the nymphs downstream, with the rod tip at chest height and directly over them and a couple of inches of French leader and my sighter beyond the rod tip."

No leading your nymphs here. Fred lets Nature and the current take its course while keeping everything beneath his rod tip plumb-bob straight. Think of the sighter as similar to the bubble in a spirit-level: if it's tilted, you've lost that all-important perpendicular.

"I want to feel the point fly just scraping the bottom, putting the brakes on a little, but I don't want my tippet too long for the water, because I want to fish vertically and sag-free, so it's essential that tippet length is right for the depth of water you're fishing," Fred adds.

And the reason for all this

precision? Missed takes that many anglers don't know they've missed.

"Even when I'm fishing this way, I still see the occasional fish take a fly and yet it hasn't registered, either through my line or my rod," says Fred. "I'm striking purely on sight. It happens a lot in stillwaters too: a lot of anglers are retrieving, yet they have no idea sometimes that a fish has tried their fly. Masses of subtle takes are missed by the average angler, who only spots the hard takes that you get in areas where there are a lot of fish and a lot of competition for food."

"The little subtle takes you get in under-populated areas, or heavily-fished areas, on the other hand, where fish have become more cautious about taking flies; many anglers don't even notice those."

The stripped-down, simplistic approach he employs to counter this unawareness extends to tackle as much as execution. He goes no longer than three inches with droppers ("A four-inch dropper will introduce slack because of its length and the river's turbulence") and makes sure both they and the tippet are made of stiff fluorocarbon with no stretch. An ancillary benefit of this is that stiffer line is less prone to tangles and consequent line kinks when a hooked trout leaps. You untangle it quickly and can usually use same leader all day.

Telephones

You'll understand his commitment to eliminating slack if you ever made a telephone from two cans and a piece of string when you >>

RECOMMENDED PATTERNS



Copperhead PTN

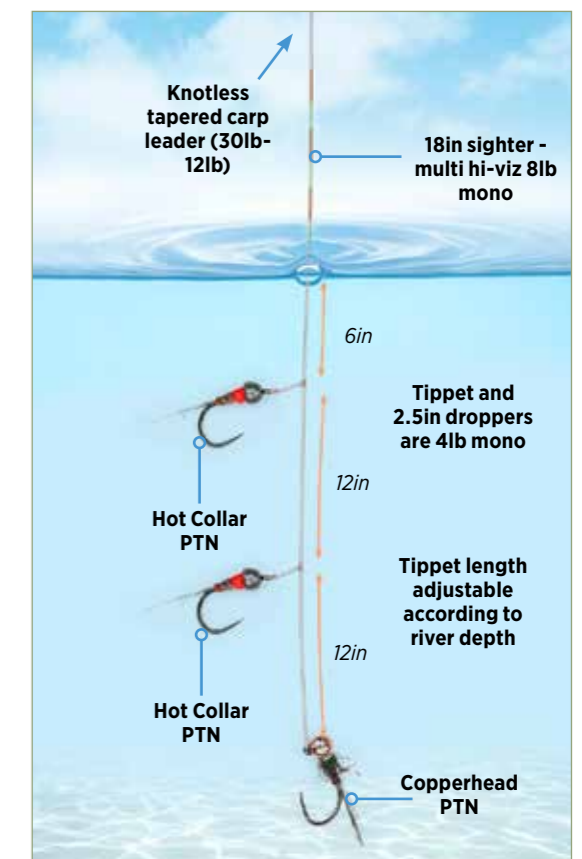
HOOK Size 16 Hends BL 144 competition jig
THREAD Uni 8/0, Black
TAIL Coq de Leon
RIB Red wire
BODY Black pheasant tail
THORAX UV tinsel medium
COLLAR Peacock Shimmer dubbing
BEAD 3.3mm copper tungsten



Hot-Collar PTN

HOOK Size 18 short-shank barbless
THREAD Uni 8/0, tan
TAIL Coq de Leon **RIB** Silver wire/small
BODY Natural PTN
COLLAR Glo-Brite floss No.5
BEAD 2mm plain tungsten

Leader set-up



TACTICS RIVERS

were young. Radio contact, you'll remember, only occurred when the string was taut.

"The aim is to remove every bit of slack possible, even down to tippet rings," Fred continues. "Imagine one on each end of your sighter. That's bad, because it makes the sighter hinge. It allows sag into your set-up, as well as reducing transmission of the 'take' up your line and into your fingers.

"Think of the take as a pulse from the fish, going up a line: that pulse is going to be diffused at the tippet ring. Your best join instead is a double blood knot or a very small perfection loop, they transmit that 'pulse' better." (Examples of both can be found on the 'Knots' board at the TF Pinterest page - www.pinterest.co.uk/troutfisherman).

The overall effect of tightening up the connection between angler and fish is not only to give you a ringside seat for some close-range combat but also to put you in prime position for getting the best of it. While a fish caught at longer range could already be reaching top speed by the time you set the hook, tight-lining done well sees your rod tip already in perfect position to perform an immediate strike.

For tight-lining to work, you need rippled water or any water with some cover. Stand at knee height and look for patches of water around you that are darker or drop away to the point where you can't see the bottom, that's when this



“Think of the take as a pulse going up a line: that pulse is going to be diffused at the tippet ring.”

method is deadly; you can sneak into position and get right over the top of such a lie.

"Grayling are even more suited to this type of method because they'll let you get right on top of them.

Trout are more skittish," says Fred.

For more vulnerable areas - where the water is too shallow or clear, or fish are too spooky - you will need to have alternative plans, be it fishing streamers or deploying that French leader in a more conventional fashion, to fish less splashy nymphs at longer range.

Today though, tight-lining came into its own, and there was a certain ruthless efficiency in the way Fred successfully worked his way along the river.

Tighten your line; tighten up your game. ←

ABOVE The day's last fish was the best.

BELOW Grade II listed Lownethwaite Bridge: an imposing landmark to the west of Richmond.

Factfile

River Swale

The beats fished by Fred are administered by Richmond & District Angling Society.

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OPEN March 25-September 30 inclusive (trout); June 16-March 14 inclusive (grayling)

PRICE Day membership £7 - see 'Membership' page on website for details of where tickets can be purchased.

