

# CASTING SHADOWS

Don Stazicker dips into faster, darker water on a River Swale that's showing its bones







**DON STAZICKER**

is a highly experienced trout fisherman, fly-tyer and instructor. He co-authored the groundbreaking e-book on trout behaviour *Trout and Flies – Getting Closer*, and is the river conservancy officer for Cressbrook and Litton Flyfishers in Derbyshire.



Stuart leads his nymphs through a promising seam.



## GRAFFITI AND GREAT ART

Richmond is easily accessible from the M1 and combines great fishing with plenty to attract non-fishing companions. Founded by the Normans in 1071, Richmond’s impressive castle and keep overlook the town with its museums, historic Georgian Theatre Royal, guided walks, restaurants and shopping opportunities. The castle held conscientious objectors in both world wars, 16 of whom were taken to France in 1916 where they were condemned to death, reprieved and then sentenced to imprisonment. There are thousands of pieces of graffiti on the walls of the cell block that held them.

Downstream, the ruins of Easby Abbey date from 1152. Its walls were damaged and its roofs removed during the dissolution of the monasteries, but enough remained to attract the artist JMW Turner who painted the Abbey in 1816. It’s a haunting ruin in a spectacular setting that’s well worth a visit.

**USEFUL WEBSITES**

- [richmond.org/guide/](http://richmond.org/guide/)
- [english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/richmond-castle/](http://english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/richmond-castle/)
- [english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/easby-abbey/](http://english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/easby-abbey/)

**A**MERICA HAS THE Continental Divide, a roughly north-south line dividing rivers that empty into the Pacific from rivers emptying into the Atlantic. I’ve always wondered if Britain had something similar. It turns out that it does, and the “British watershed” lies barely ten miles to the west of my home near Buxton in the Peak District.

Further north it follows the backbone of the Pennines. Kirkby Stephen in Cumbria lies in the watershed of the Eden, which flows west towards the Irish Sea. Travel just a few miles east and you cross the divide to find the source of the Swale where Birkdale Beck and Great Sleddale Beck meet. Falling over 400ft in its first 12 miles, it flows east, joining the Ure to become the Ouse before passing through York via the Humber to the North Sea.

You’d expect a river born high in the Pennines to be swift flowing and the Swale doesn’t disappoint. It’s one of the fastest flowing rivers in Britain,



Cased caddis are abundant on the Swale.

*“Its name comes from the Anglo-Saxon ‘sualuae’ which means rapid and liable to deluge”*

capable of sudden and dramatic change and able to rise 10ft in 20 minutes. As I write, the Riverlevels website shows that the river at Richmond just rose 3ft in an hour.

Its name comes from the Anglo-Saxon *Sualuae*, which means rapid and liable to deluge. Any river capable of such rapid change demands the utmost respect. Check the weather forecast and while fishing be aware of any level change caused

by rainfall far from your location. In high flows, a wading staff and a life jacket are advisable. If in doubt, don’t wade.

Upper Swaledale is wild, open and rocky with thin, fast water running through a landscape of drystone walls and small barns that is similar to the Peak District. The small wary wild trout require a stealthy approach.

Below Richmond the river has a riffle-and-pool structure modified by underlying geology. Boulders and gradients agitate the flow to produce beautiful, productive pocket water. Where the Swale flows over slabs of limestone pavement, it runs smoother with enticing deep channels and holes.

Reading the above, you might expect a tale of battling heavy currents and chucking big flies. Sorry to disappoint you. In early July, Stuart Wardle and I fished the Richmond and District Angling Society water on the Swale at Easby Abbey, just below Richmond in the Yorkshire Dales.

A bright sunny, cloudless day with little rainfall in the preceding two weeks meant the river was on its bones, at the lowest level of the year. ▶



The four-inch furl indicator, between leader and tippet, detected subtle takes well.





This fine brownie took a nymph fished deep in well-oxygenated water.



Prospecting with the dry-fly along the sunlit bank was less successful.



Shoals of fry in the shallows: worth trying a streamer pattern.

Left (from top): CDC and hare jig; CDC extended body caddis; Red Tag black jig.



The beats are a mixture of single and double bank, which meant a short walk along an easy track to access the fishing below the Abbey.

Richmond is 28 miles from the source and the landscape here is softer with tree-lined banks that provide a source of terrestrial insects as well as shading the river in bright conditions. These same trees mean that wading is required to access much of the river. In the low water conditions, we had to cross the dry riverbed where cannonball-sized rocks made me thankful for my wading staff.

The river at Easby is 50ft-100ft wide, lovely for wading mid-stream and placing your flies near to bankside trees without worrying about your backcast. Wading the cool, fast water, dropping flies into likely spots, was a delightful relief from the hot sun.

Stuart caught fish from pools and pocket water using a 10ft three-weight rod, two small weighted nymphs on a long leader and a 4in furred fluorescent braid indicator. The beautifully marked wild brown trout ranged from 8in to 14 in. >

We parked in the Abbey car park, walked upstream past the ruins to a grassy meadow, ate our picnic lunch and admired Richmond Castle dominating the skyline half a mile upstream. Back at the car park, guests were arriving for a wedding. Chest waders and fishing vests contrasted unfavourably with the expensive cars and beautiful clothes of the wedding party.

I noticed the wedding photographer angling his camera to exclude us from his pictures. I would have dressed for the occasion if I had known.

The club was founded in 1912 when eight anglers met to offer landowners a deal that they couldn't refuse: they would control poaching, tackle pollution and restock the river. Unsurprisingly, their offer was accepted with alacrity and the RDAS was born. A well-run club, it provides great-value fly-fishing in a beautiful setting. It has 14 miles of the Swale, beats on Skeeby Beck and a coarse-fishing lake that is only available to season-ticket holders. Brown trout are prolific on all the beats, but grayling only occur below Richmond falls where they are present in large numbers. Large chub and barbel also inhabit the lower beats.

Access is easy, numerous parking places on the roads that parallel the river are marked on the beat maps.

*“We had to cross the dry riverbed where cannonball-sized rocks made me thankful for my wading staff”*





I prospected with a 9ft four-weight rod and a long fine leader with small dry-flies and terrestrials and caught some nice fish. I only spotted surface activity later in the day when, fishing a deep channel running through an area of limestone slabs, I located four good trout rising regularly in bankside shadows. On the first cast, a trout took my CDC dry caddis. I struck and the fly shot back towards me. I rose and missed the next two fish in exactly the same way.

I checked my fly. The leader was looped around the hook bend and the fly had been fishing backwards, catch and release at its finest.

Untangling the leader, I cast to the last of the rising fish.

A big head emerged from the water and my fly disappeared into the jaws of a trout that looked to be over 2lb. I set the hook hard, too hard for my 2½lb tippet. The fish gave a great splash and the leader went slack.

Some days you're the hammer and some days you're the nail.

We moved upstream, crossing the river via an old disused railway bridge to fish some deep holes where Stu took a lovely 15in brown with a jig nymph fished deep.

The Swale at Richmond has recently produced a 7lb brown trout and a 3lb grayling – the trout is pictured on the club's website. There are plenty of grayling of 1lb-1½lb and good numbers of trout to 2lb. They respond well to a variety of methods.

Early in the season or when levels are high, traditional wet-flies such as Waterhen Bloa and Snipe and Purple are effective. Streamer patterns come into their own in heavy water.

There is no mayfly hatch, but large dark olives, brook duns, olive uprights, caddis and stoneflies are present. Cased caddis occur in large numbers.

In summer, terrestrial patterns, such as beetles

*“The fly had been fishing backwards, catch and release at its finest”*

The best fish of the day came from deep, shaded water above the railway bridge.



Drifting the dry-fly in a shaded food lane.

and small dark CDC dry-flies, work well under the bankside trees. The faster water responds to high floating caddis dry-flies and Kinkhamers, often with small nymphs suspended New Zealand style.

Stuart proved that Euro-style nymphing is effective; small, heavy beadhead nymphs and jig patterns work throughout the year for trout and grayling. The abundance of caddis means that Czech nymphs are a good bet for targeting the grayling. Shrimp and bug patterns in pink or orange or with red hotspots are also very effective.

This was my first visit to the Swale, but it definitely won't be my last. A delightfully varied river with a

great head of fish. Challenging but enjoyable wading in a river that's just the right size, not so large that you don't know where to start and not so small that the slightest error spooks everything in the river. “Just right” as Goldilocks said. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD FAULKS



### Factfile

#### TICKETS

An excellent website details the RDAS waters and the options for day and season tickets including OAP, disabled, student and junior discounts. A full season membership is only £43 and a day ticket only £7. Season membership can be purchased online, but day tickets must be obtained from outlets in Richmond, Darlington and Bedale.

We bought our tickets from the Harvest Filling Station opposite the cricket ground in Richmond. This has a convenience store open 7am-10pm, seven days a week. S G Petch Harvest Service Station, 21-23 Victoria Road, Richmond, North Yorkshire DL10 4DW. Tel: 01748 821 383. The other two outlets have shorter hours and close on Sundays.

#### SEASON

Trout: March 25-September 30. Grayling: June 16-March 14. It is essential to check river levels when planning a visit: riverlevels.uk

#### CONTACT

Web: richmondangling.org.uk  
Stuart Wardle guides on the Swale and many other rivers in the north east and the Lake District. Web: durhamflyfishing.co.uk



Times past: anglers fishing the Swale in 1912.