



FROM FLUFF TO FLY

Cressida Tomlinson, one of the first lady members at one of England's most prestigious fishing clubs, explains how the sport has changed her life

WITH MY YOUNGEST daughter off to university, three children had flown the nest, I had lost a sense of purpose and couldn't imagine how I was going to fill the vacuum they had left behind.

My husband had worked away for ten years, commuting an astronomical 1,000 miles a week, but had finally been able to relocate to a job only 30 miles from home. For the first time in years he would be through the front door by 6pm. So, what to do with our new-found time together, and would we cope without the children?

Jonathan had enjoyed fly-fishing since he was a child, but due to long working hours, he'd not had

the opportunity to partake in the sport he loved. Wanting to get him back on the water, I wondered if fly-fishing could be a hobby we could do together. A quick internet search revealed that, by coincidence, there was a fly-fishing instructor in our little village ten miles north of York. I sent him a quick email, enquiring whether he could provide instruction to a lady just into her 50s looking for a new challenge. The reply was a resounding "Yes". Furthermore, he was instructing the next day and I needed to get down to the local lake and give it a go.

With trepidation, off I went, accompanied by my husband. In no time, the instructor made me feel relaxed, his gentle manner got me up and running quickly and I was soon roll-casting with a piece of fluff attached to my line, my arm fastened to the rod with a hanky to stop me breaking my wrist action. ➤



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The two-hour session was over all too quickly and I loved every minute; a second lesson was booked for the following week. Meantime, I absorbed all I could: back copies of *Trout & Salmon*, internet research, YouTube videos. Gosh, there is more to this than meets the eye!

Within a few sessions, I was desperate to get a hook on my line. A trip was arranged to Kilnsey Park Fly Fishery, near Skipton. My instructor was determined to be there when I caught my first fish, and he was — for not one, but two trout; thereafter, I was hooked.

I badgered my husband for my own rod and was rewarded with a trip to the local Orvis shop, where, to my great surprise, the store manager was a lady fly-fisher, and off we popped with various rods to cast a line on Harrogate's gorgeous Stray, much to the bemusement of passers-by. For those not in the know, the Stray comprises 200 acres of grassed parkland and is an historic landmark.

Keen to practise casting, but with no space to do so, a friend with farm land offered me use of a field, and I was away. Before I knew it, I was asking for waders and boots for my birthday and not a designer handbag and perfume (much to the amusement of my children). For the first time in years, my husband and I were spending more time together. In the evenings, we watched fishing DVDs and googled tackle and flies.

Jonathan faced his own dilemma; he was seriously out of practice after years away from the sport. Keen to renew his confidence, I booked him a lesson with

a spey-casting instructor, which saw us travelling to the mighty River Tees with picnics packed and full of enthusiasm. Getting great instruction has proved hugely beneficial.

Starting on local lakes was fabulous, albeit the end of the trout season was fast approaching. At Tanfield Lodge, near Masham, there was plenty of space to tentatively cast those first challenging flies on my own. My husband acted as gillie — changing flies, netting fish and capturing the moments on camera. Seemingly, he was enjoying watching me casting and even targeting and successfully hooking some stunning rainbow trout.

Nearer home, we visited Low Osgoodby Grange, near Thirsk, whenever we could. It's a fantastic spot. Evenings would fly by and our daughters would often check upon our location and likely return time (talk about roles reversed).

Having many hours of stillwater experience under my belt, I was hankering for something else. I wanted to be on a river. My first attempt ended in disaster as the beat I'd booked on the Ure was in spate. Water levels had looked great all week but a deluge forced the river up overnight and rendered it unfishable. I was hugely disappointed.

We searched for fly-fishing clubs and combed the Yorkshire Fly Fishing Facebook page, where we were rewarded by some enthusiastic clubs keen to help. One stood out: ABBAC, the Appletreewick, Barden and Burnsall Angling Club. Its chairman encouraged us to take a day-ticket and search for grayling (trout were now out of season) and we took up the offer. Again, the weather and water levels thwarted us, but we didn't have to travel for an hour to find this out. I awoke that morning to an email from the chairman, informing us to stay in bed as the Wharfe was in spate. I was beginning to feel jinxed; each attempt to get on a river was ending in disappointment. Oh, the joys of this new sport.

Finally, in December 2019, my day came. The weather was cold and crisp and with day-tickets purchased, off we went. After parking at the Red Lion Pub in Burnsall, we fished all day and the hours flew by. I failed to land any fish, but that didn't dampen my spirits. I was on a river and not any river: I was on the magnificent Wharfe. We fished at various locations and met a number of enthusiastic club anglers, keen to welcome potential new members. I felt I had discovered my spiritual home.

ABBAC, established in 1873, is one of the oldest clubs in Wharfedale. It has six miles of prime brown



Guide Fred Bainbridge captures the moment as Cressida plays a lively grayling on the Ure.



A lovely brownie from ABBAC's stretch of the River Wharfe.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN TOMLINSON/FRED BAINBRIDGE

"Our love of fishing together ... has reinvigorated our marriage"

trout and grayling fishing on the Wharfe, and also leases rights on the 57-acre Lower Barden reservoir. The club has a rich history: many North Country flies and techniques were developed by its past masters such as Pritt, Walbran, Edmonds and Lee.

Following an exchange of calls and emails, we were accepted into the club, me becoming one of the first lady members. Coincidentally, I joined on the same day as the only other lady member. I guess, like buses, there is never one when you need one and then two come along at once.

Sadly, as the 2020 season was to start, Covid hit. The club breakfast organised for new members was cancelled and the fishing suspended. I waited eagerly for the rivers and clubs to open; after all, it's a sport where social distancing plays a huge part. Then, finally, lockdown rules were relaxed.

Last season, I lost count of our trips to the glorious Wharfe, but on May 25 I landed my first wild brown trout. Not the largest specimen, but as Oliver Edwards would say, a Dales brown trout equates to two fish to the pound. Since then, I've gone on to land great examples of Yorkshire grayling and my

largest wild brownie, nearly 3lb — my husband was only mildly jealous. There have been many times when I have blanked or failed to move fast enough and missed subtle takes, but our days together have been incredible.

Our children have returned from university due to Covid and my nest has been full again, but our love of fishing together and a common interest has reinvigorated our marriage.

I thoroughly encourage ladies to have a go at this sport. I have been greeted with nothing but kindness and good advice from every gentleman I have been fortunate to meet at each location I have fished. I eagerly digest every ounce of wisdom I can assimilate, and I am now fishing not only a dry-fly with vigour and a powerful overhead cast but also a team of magical North Country Spiders.

I know I've more to learn, but since that very first lesson, I've found a passion not only in a new sport but also in the renewed relationship with my husband. Gentlemen, don't be afraid to take your wife along, and ladies, don't be put off from giving this sport a go, no matter what your age. ■



Cressida and Jonathan at the Bolton Estate on the River Ure.