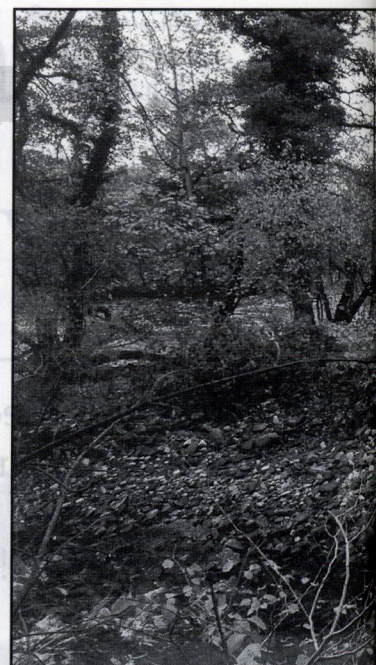


# Barbel

## by the Abbey

by David McDiarmid



The early morning sun scattered rainbows in the dew spraying from my feet as I crossed the first meadow. Rabbits, busy with whatever rabbits do at five in the morning, seemed to hardly notice me. Maybe the scents of wild woodbine and buttercup had drugged them, rabbits high on the joy of a perfect summer morning.

The walk from the car part in Richmond to the swim I had in mind was almost a mile; there have been days when, loaded with tackle I have run that mile. Today though was not a day for hurrying; I had managed to drag myself out of bed in the warm dark, had eaten, but barely tasted breakfast and, grateful for the preparations of the previous evening, had driven through the ashes of the night into a summer dawn. To hurry now would have been out of place, like a pimple on the face of the Mona Lisa, or Pavarotti singing "Blue Suede Shoes".

High summer had spread a thick mantle of green over the Swale valley, from the sharp green of the grass in the meadows, through the maturing and slightly dusty green of the hedges, up into the topmost leaves, always in motion, that seemed to filter and colour the very daylight.

It was as if I walked in green tinted air.

It was cool in spite of the growing sunlight, even in the open fields. When I climbed the stile into woods the cold dampness of them wrapped itself around me so that my breath steamed and I started to jog in an attempt to throw off the clammy embrace. Down from the main path, slowing now because the trees grew close and were cloaked with underbrush, following the barely seen track round and down, over a small stream and onto a six inch wide strip of course grass beside the river. In front of me, the Swale pushed along between ledges of golden rock, dark in the depths where the rock fell away, bubbling and sparkling in the sunshine where the ledges broke the surface. About five yards downstream the whole river turned through 45 degrees to the right,

seethed between some huge rocks and fanned out into a dark and swift pool.

This was a pool to dream of. A farm on the far bank ensured that no-one fished from there and the water level was just right for me

to be able to fish into that far bank where the main push of water built a swirling eddy.

After scattering some hemp and very small pieces of luncheon meat along the line of the current and into the eddy I set up the rod, climbed very carefully and as quietly as I could into position on the ledge of rocks and sat on a dry patch to drink my first cup of tea.

The colours of the riverbank were cut glass clear in the slanted light of morning

**"The whole effect was almost too much to take in. I sat and watched as it fell rather than dived into the shallow water beside the rock"**

and when a kingfisher flashed upstream onto a rock directly across from me, the whole effect was almost too much to take in. I sat and watched as it fell rather than dived into the shallow water beside the rock, then it was on the rock again and I could see that it had a small fish, which it battered on the side of the rock. After a mighty swallow and a ruffle of feathers it was gone, taking a little sunlight with it.

With the departure of the kingfisher a much more

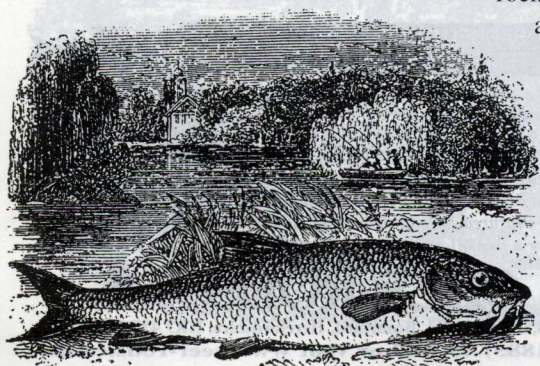
business like mood settled on me; the tea was finished quickly, a piece of meat was cast into the swing of the current, gradually eased into the eddy and allowed to bump slowly around it. It was almost as if a fish was guaranteed, I would have felt badly let down had that smart 'tap tap' of the line not come.

Ten minutes later, with a seven pound Swale barbel safely returned, the world reformed itself around me; the shapes and colours refocused

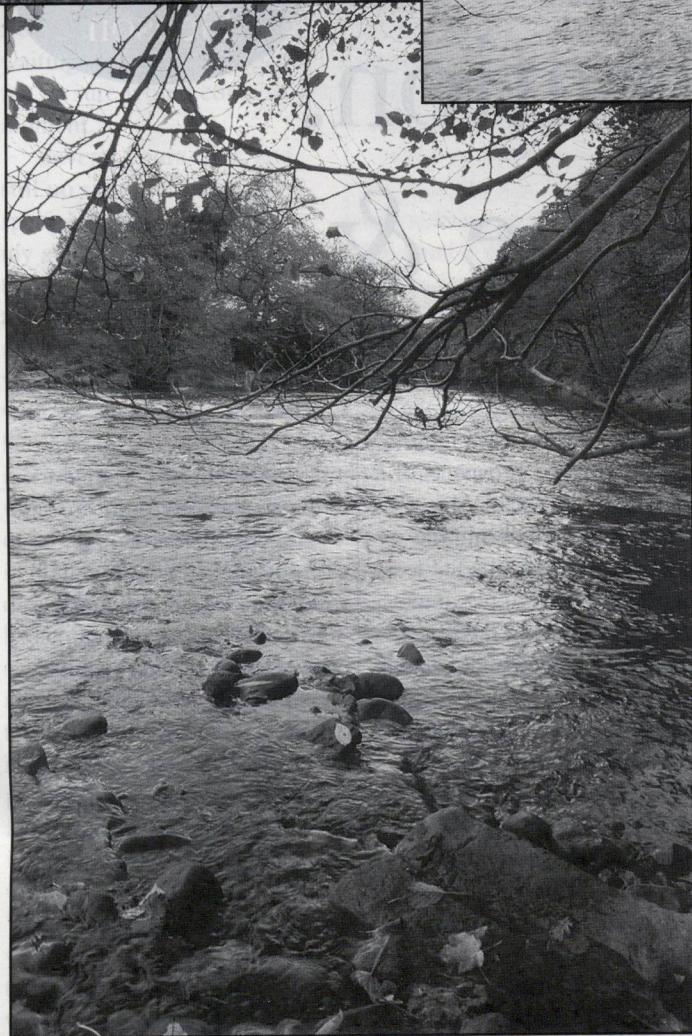
and once again I heard the sound of the river. It's strange isn't it, how we seem to move into another dimension, as soon as a fish takes. While we play that fish and land or lose it we are completely out of the world's time, it no longer exists for us; its sounds, scents, sights are lost. Then, after the fish has gone back, the world starts to come back.

I had another cup of tea.

The next hour passed without a bite, I started to feel restless and told myself I







would give it another ten minutes, then move upstream. The ten minutes came and went, then five more, a last five and I decided it really was time for a move. Upstream there was a huge

eddy on the far bank, almost a small pool, formed by the river turning a corner and digging itself a deep hole. There were trees overhanging it and a bank of gravel ran out, gradually shelving, from

our bank; in the peat stain of the river the gravel was a deep gold.

On the far bank overlooking the swim were the ruins of Easby Abbey; they had been just visible from my first swim, here they were a tangible, almost brooding presence, even in the full sunlight of a July morning.

I fished the pool for a while but nothing moved, so I moved on and frittered away most of the day; to be honest, the early start caught up with me and I slept in the warm grass for almost two hours.

After tea the corner pool looked even more inviting, the Abbey ruins glowed warmly in the evening sunlight and I was sure the barbel would soon be moving out onto the gravel. So I put in some hemp and ran the bait down the edge of the deeper water, it bumped and rattled over the stones, once or twice sticking momentarily, causing me to strike like a maniac as the rod tip hauled over. This was getting me nowhere so I put on a heavier weight and fished a static bait; this seemed to work, after a few

minutes the rod tip dithered a bit, then pulled round about an inch and stayed there. I tightened into the knowledge that something under the water had reached out and grabbed me; the next two hours were magical as the light faded and the sky darkened behind the Abbey. The fish were not huge; some of them were chub. I cannot really say in truth that I remember the details. Like a benign smile, the aura surrounding the Abbey seemed to fill the whole evening with joy and a profound sense of peace.

