

# STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

By KEITH SPENCE



1—THE RIVER TEST, ON THE BROADLANDS ESTATE, SOUTH OF ROMSEY IN HAMPSHIRE. "To most people, whether fishermen or not, the Test is simply the best-known chalkstream in England"

**D**URING the 10th century the valley of the Hampshire Test was an uncomfortable place in which to live. A cockatrice, grown from a duck's egg hatched by a toad, terrorised the village of Wherwell, while at Chilbolton, just across the river, a giant laid waste the countryside. Both the Wherwell cockatrice and the Chilbolton giant were dealt with by local heroes, and the valley regained its peace; yet it is still the scene of conflict, nowadays not in such a simple form but in terms of land use as viewed by farmers, conservationists, naturalists, fly-fishermen, and the general public in search of beautiful open spaces.

Among the 14 areas in England and Wales that the Countryside Commission has recommended for the proposed new status of "Environmentally Sensitive Area", the Test Valley is unique in the interlocking complexity of the interests concerned in its upkeep and future. To most people, whether fishermen or not, it is simply the best-known chalkstream in England, whose angling traditions have been cherished down the years by bodies such as the Houghton Club of Stockbridge (described by Tom Fort in his article in *COUNTRY LIFE* of April 17).

To lovers of landscape, it is the placid river valley rather than the water itself that is the chief concern. Few lowland views in the country are more satisfying than the Test Valley seen from the



2—"HUDDLED THATCHED COTTAGES" BY THE TEST IN THE VILLAGE OF WHERWELL

Romsey-Stockbridge road, where the river, divided and subdivided into main stream and parallel rivulets, glitters among the ancient watermeadows; while above Stockbridge the roads on either side of the Test give gently changing vistas of weirs, fishing huts, willows and placid waters. For those prepared to leave their cars, Hampshire County Council has recently opened up the Test Way long-distance footpath, which for much of its course follows the line of the disused Andover-Romsey railway, running within a quarter of a mile of one of the finest stretches of the river.

All the same, it is not the fishermen or the seeker after natural beauty who has the final say in the fate of rivers such as the Test, but the farmers who make a living from the land along their banks. As far as the Test is concerned, the farmer is often a fisherman, and vice versa, and so the farming techniques have tended to reflect both interests. But with regard to the variety of plants and wildlife in general, the situation is not so happy. The Countryside Commission lists three main farming threats to the environmental interest of the area: intensification of traditional summer fattening of cattle by the increased use of fertilisers and higher rate of stocking; grassland improvement by ploughing and reseeded; and conversion of grassland to arable.

In Victorian times and until comparatively recently, the valley



3—AN OPEN STRETCH OF THE TEST AT BROADLANDS. The 6,000-acre estate has over six miles of river bank

watermeadows were "floated" (allowed to flood) during the winter, to encourage a lush growth of grazing the following spring. The practice of floating discouraged the growth of the broad-leaved plants that give botanical variety; in addition, with the availability of cheap labour, the meadows were hand-weeded to get rid of plants that were less desirable from the farmer's point of view. A Nature Conservancy report on the vegetation of the Test Valley points out that old-style floating, and the modern techniques of ploughing and applying herbicides and artificial fertilisers, produce a similar reduction in the plant species and hence in the insects and other forms of wildlife associated with them.

The ideal situation occurred in the interim period between old and modern methods, when floating had been abandoned and modern techniques had not yet become popular. The NCC's recommended type of farming for this land is moderate grazing or cutting for hay, which leads to a flora similar to that found in a

few parts of the valley that have never been "improved", either by ancient or modern methods.

Nowhere are these problems coped with on a larger scale than at Broadlands, the Mountbatten family estate that runs from Romsey south to the M27 and a short way beyond. The problems are compounded by the nearness of Southampton, whose outer suburbs are only a mile or two down the road, producing pressures both from vandals and from people just wanting to enjoy the countryside. The 6,000-acre estate is a good three miles from north to south, and has over six miles of riverbank.

A tour along the river with Bernard Aldrich, the Broadlands fisheries manager, gives the best possible introduction to the difficulties and delights of running a large and profitable stretch of river. During the 30 years he has been there, he has seen the Broadlands stretch of the Test decline from being "mile for mile among the best salmon fishing in

the country" to its present condition of being almost exclusively a trout stream. In statistical terms, the number of salmon caught in 1985 was only 67, whereas in a good season 20 years ago as many as 350 might be taken.

The situation has now reached the stage when the Test at Broadlands, still described on the estate's fishing map as "salmon fishing", is being stocked with rainbow and brown trout. Mr Aldrich points out that anglers who complain about the high cost of fishing on the Test (at Broadlands for the 1986 season it is £640 for one day a week, or £25-£50 for a single day, depending on the month) have little idea how much it costs to stock it with fish, let alone the expense of maintenance, such as building bridges and access roads, and preventing bank erosion.

The footbridges across the Test look like something out of the South American jungle, consisting of a single enormous baulk of timber stretching from bank to bank, with wide side posts and handrails attached for support. Ten



4—HORSEBRIDGE MILL, AN OLD WATERMILL, SOUTH OF STOCKBRIDGE. (Right) 5—WHITCHURCH SILK MILL. Built about 1805, it is being extensively restored





or 15 years ago the baulks were of Oregon pine and cost £120 each. Bernard Aldrich tells the story of how Lord Louis Mountbatten used to take his grandchildren down to the river, point to one of the bridges and say: "That is the most expensive piece of timber in the world—it cost £120." When the price of Oregon pine shot up, they turned to greenheart, which is now £1,350 per baulk, more than 10 times the price of Lord Mountbatten's record timber.

Another major expense, even more essential to the maintenance of the river, is placing piling at strategic points along the bank. The Test flows past Broadlands at the rate of 120 million gallons a day; and as the rivulets higher up the valley have here joined into a single stream, the power behind the water would soon straighten out the banks, turning the Test into a straight piece of water almost useless for fishing. Two types of piling are used—wooden (larch) piles, which cost about £10 each and are driven into the river bed for 2-3ft, and interlocking steel piles, driven 4-5ft into the bed and more expensive than the larch piles, but a good deal longer-lasting.

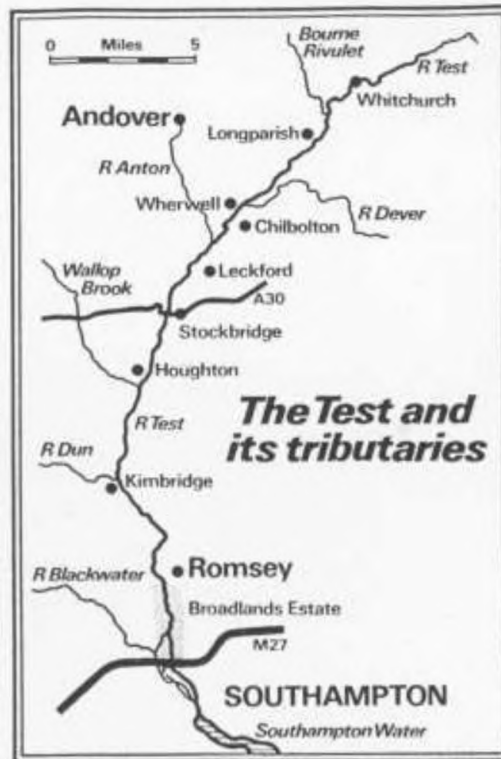
An important recent addition to the Broadlands water is the coarse-fishing lake just south of the M27, reached from the A36 Southampton-Salisbury road. The M27 cut off about 100 acres of the estate, and gravel extracted from the cut-off section was used in the construction of the road; as a *quid pro quo* the contractors reinstated the gravel pit as a fishing lake, planting trees all round it and creating an environment ideal for water birds, such as great crested grebes and tufted ducks.

Unlike the trout waters, whose expense puts them out of court for most fishermen, the Broadlands lake is democratically priced at £3 a day ticket or £35 for the season. Part of it has been set aside as a fishing area for the disabled, with a special car-park giving access to platforms for wheelchairs at the edge of the lake.

On their arrival at Broadlands, the schoolchildren sit on straw bales on a tractor trailer to be taken alongside the river. When they get to the first bridge, Mr Aldrich asks them if they can remember anything they have seen. "By the time we get up to the next bridge, those children are looking out. They tell me: 'We saw a black bird with a white diamond on his head, and the same sort of bird with a red diamond on his head.' Until that time those kids, did not know coots and moorhens existed." After one such trip, Mr Aldrich got more than 100 letters from a single local school—100 children who with luck will grow into nature-loving teenagers instead of the vandals who now smash his huts and fences.

Similar views on the value of countryside education are held by Ian Veal, fishery manager

6—A PLACID STRETCH OF THE TEST SOUTH OF STOCKBRIDGE



of the Kimbridge Fisheries a couple of miles upstream from Romsey. A commercial trout hatchery and farm of about 450 acres, Kimbridge has five miles of bank on the Test and its tributary the Dun—not much less than Broadlands, since by this point about Romsey the Test is a multiple stream rather than a single river.

Within its far smaller compass, this enterprise has just as much variety as Broadlands. Though the main emphasis is on the trout hatchery and the fishing, the farm also grows sweet corn and wheat on the alkaline peat soils reclaimed from the watermeadows. As an antidote to such modern methods, the owner, Arthur Humber, has left wild tracts of land between the cultivated plots where no cultivation or spraying of any kind is carried out. One large field has been earmarked as a future wildlife sanctuary: the water will be let in, the field will return to marsh, and will be colonised by marsh plants, waterbirds and water-loving insects.

More typical of the valley as a whole is the Bossington Estate, another three miles upstream, which takes in much of the old village

of Houghton, and varies in terrain from the high chalk downland above the Wallop Brook to some 2½ miles of riverbank fishing. At about the same distance above Stockbridge, the 4,000-acre Leckford Estate (owned by the John Lewis Partnership for more than 50 years) includes the most extensive apple orchards in the Test Valley, a golfcourse, and the water gardens of Longstock House, across the river from Leckford village, said to have the finest collection of waterlilies in the world.

Heading farther up the valley, you come to Fullerton, where the Anton, flowing down from Andover, joins the Test, and where you can sit on the terrace of the Mayfly pub watching the trout snatching crumbs thrown towards them; the huddled thatched cottages of Wherwell (pronounced "Herrell") where the cockatrice came from; and the straggling village of Longparish, suitably named, the home of the 19th-century sporting writer Col. Peter Hawker.

Compared with such villages, the small town of Whitchurch, a few miles below the source of the Test, is something of a metropolis. Here an entirely new venture has just been taken in hand, unconnected with fishing, farming or wildlife. On an island in the river stands a splendid red-brick, early-19th-century mill, at present undergoing major restoration. Built about 1805 as a mill for weaving silk imported from China, it has been known as Whitchurch Silk Mill ever since.

Until 1985 it was owned by a firm that specialised in making gowns for judges and academics, and coronation robes; but they found the cost of upkeep too great, and it was falling into disrepair. In the nick of time it was bought by the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust for £250,000; a feasibility study was done on its future; and on this basis it was decided to go ahead with the renovation, which will keep the mill as a commercial concern allied to tourism.

The waterwheel has already been restored, declared open in 1982 by Lord Denning, the former Master of the Rolls, who lives at Whitchurch—a suitable choice for a mill that weaves the black Ottoman silk worn by QCs. Eventually the waterwheel will generate power for two looms; and visitors to the mill will be able to see the whole silk-making process, before buying silk goods in an attached shop. "I've got the nicest outlook in the country", says the mill's manager, Bill Carr, looking from his office window at the Test glinting and chattering below. And the nicest outlook it will remain, despite modern pressures, if the affection felt for the Test by those who live and work beside it is anything to go by.

Illustrations: A. F. Kersting.