

# GETTING AWAY

The Test may be in crisis, but it is still the jewel in Hampshire's crown, as Robin Young reports



BEST OF BRITAIN

## RIVER TEST

For flyfishermen the supreme test is spelt with a capital T. The River Test, which runs through Hampshire from springs beneath the chalk hillsides of the North Downs and on to Southampton Water, is the epitome of the picturesque English chalkstream, bordered by water meadows, willows, alders and poplars, and by villages of thatched, brick-and-iron cottages, ancient beams and chalk-cob walls.

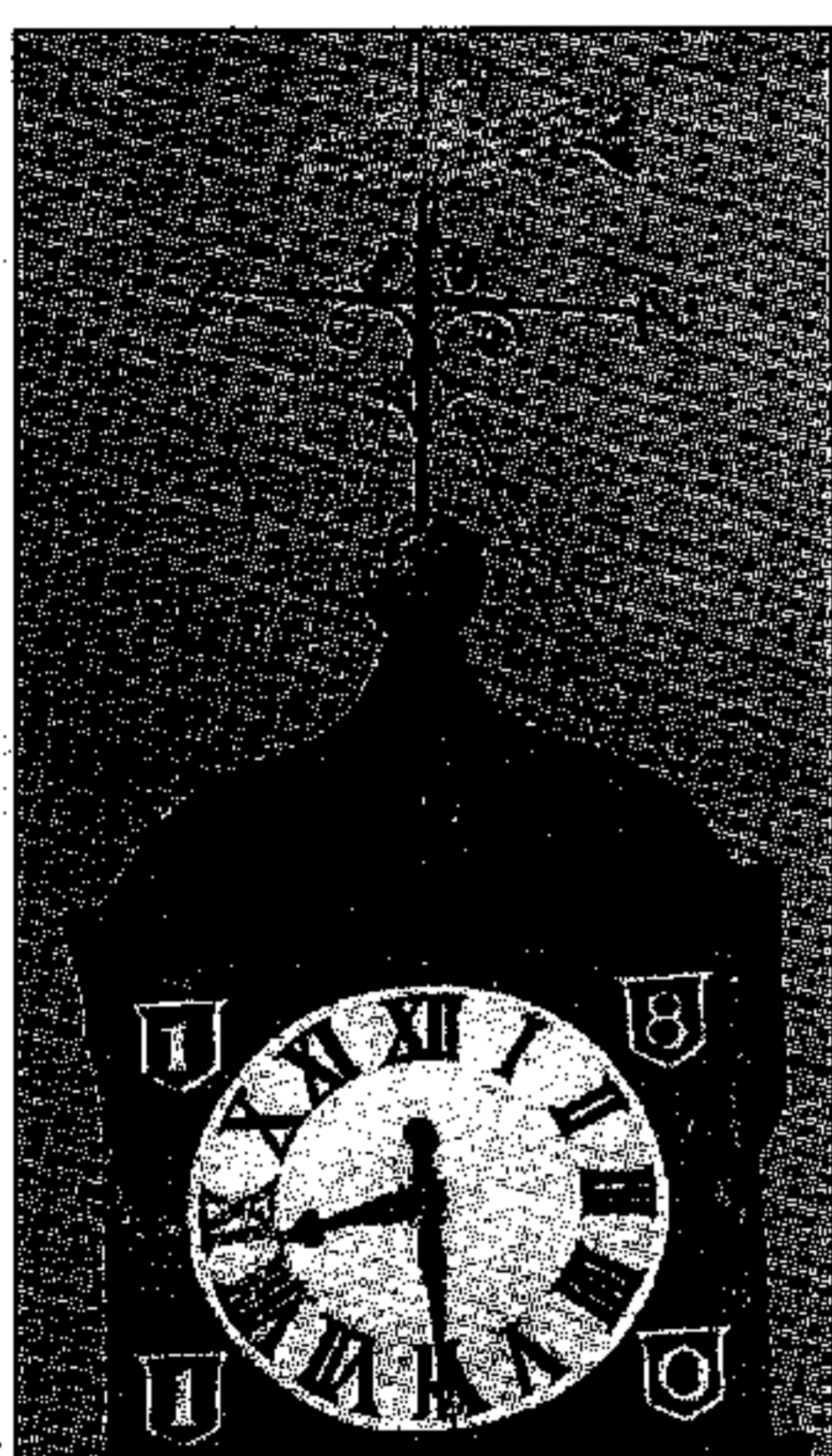
The cliché is to say that the Test runs as clear as gin and twice as expensive. People who liken it to gin, though, must see the world through drink-bleary eyes. Gin is oily, lubricious stuff compared to the light vitality of this chalk-filtered water as it sparkles its way over the gravelly bed, through the millraces and under the bridges on its course.

The Test is a river in crisis, but the casual visitor would never guess it from the tranquil atmosphere of the countryside through which the stream gracefully glides.

You do not have to be a Sherman to appreciate the Test. This is the sort of river anyone would stop to look at and admire, but it is also running water which has turned quite literally into a machine to print money.

For the curious thing is that this most beautiful and expensive of all the southern chalkstreams has at its head not a visible spring of designer water, but a factory that has provided the paper for Bank of England banknotes since 1724, and which now furnishes the requirements of 130 central banks around the world.

When Henri de Portal, the founder of the company, arrived in England it was as a Huguenot refugee, hidden in a wine



Stockbridge's town clock

cask. In 1710 he became the tenant of Bere Mill on the Test at Laverstoke and produced the first watermarked paper two years later.

It is still there, down an unsignposted lane below what was formerly the Whitchurch workhouse and across a brick structure known affectionately as the Christmas Cake bridge because of its curious ornamentation. The mill now houses the Portal estate's riverkeeper and his trout hatchery, whence six-week-old, 3-in fry are squirted into the river from a watering can.

Security is necessarily the watchword for the estate's specialist banknote paper work, but similar care must be taken to protect the fish and the precious river they inhabit. What happens on the upper reaches affects everyone downstream, so a team of chemists monitors the works to see that nothing harmful escapes to pollute the river.

The emotive hold the river has on those who know it was eloquently illustrated recently on *Desert Island Discs* when RCA rector Jocelyn Stevens begged Sue Lawley to let him have a reach of the Test as his luxury to take with him to his hypothetical exile. She was not

is four miles shorter than it should be, and the Wallop Brook, which comes in below Houghton, is also on the National Rivers Authority's resuscitation list.

Keepers and anglers regard the situation as desperate, but tourists are unlikely to notice anything wrong.

For one thing the Test valley has plenty to offer and to get the best out of it, imitate the water. Drift downstream, taking time, idling by the meadows, pushing into the byways.

Are there, for example, more imposing almshouses anywhere than the showy Arts and Crafts-style range of Manor Cottages at Freefolk? They were, surprisingly, built by Lord Portal as recently as 1939.

In Whitchurch the river glides past allotments and gardens along Test Road, and past a silk mill which used to supply lawyers' robes. Now restored and open to visitors, it turns out scarves, ties, waistcoats and dress lengths.

At the end of the lane called The Weir, by The Fulling Mill, fat trout hang in the water for walkers on the footbridge to admire. One can follow the left bank of the river closely via Winchester Road, Tufton and Testbourne, through to Longparish, but it is worth diverting to Hurstbourne Priors near the junction with the Bourne.

Hurstbourne Priors was the home of the singer Harry Plunket Greene, who celebrated the place in an aptly titled fishing classic, *Where the Bright Waters Meet*. The village's picture book cricket ground is backed by a church, a rookery and tall trees garlanded with mistletoe. Not only the cricket pavilion but even the bus shelter here is thatched.

The next village downstream is Longparish, where Nick Faldo is said to have paid £750,000 for fishing rights and has promptly fallen foul of the locals by being photographed fishing from a boat with an outboard motor.



Timeless. In high summer the healthy weed grows

no less eager a sportsman — Colonel Peter Hawker, a Peninsular War veteran who logs in his robustly written diary a 50-year catch totalling more than 12,000 fish.

Some days he hauled them out at a rate of one every four and a half minutes. Hawker was not above trolling for trout with live minnows, and was "ludicrously amused with throwing a fly on horseback".

At Longstock the local pub is called the Peat Spade, but the banked depression down by the river marked on the Ordnance Survey as an earthwork is thought to be the remains of a dry-dock dug by Danish invad-

tion, despite its name Danebury Ring, on the way toward Nether Wallop. Excavations from 1969 to 1981 have shown that Danebury, a 10-acre site fortified with ditches, was a busy settlement in the Iron Age. Finds from the Iron Age are on display at the Museum of the Iron Age in nearby Avebury. Along the river, divided into several channels and with man-made causeways, are curious little thatched huts — the fishing huts. The clear view from the road between Longstock and Longparish is an octagonal thatched island, with a decorative tower on top.