



The history of Leek & District Fly Fishing Association from 1972 to the next millennium!! Or nearly forty years of memories!!

After more than a thousand years of industrial use, interference and pollution word got out in the early 1970's that a major industrial abstractor and polluter of the Staffordshire Moorland's River Churnet was about to close. This was enough of an opportunity for a small group of local men from the town of Leek to mobilize and start to think of forming an angling association to see if the river could be restored to a viable fishery. The large papermill production line closed in 1970 after nearly 200 years operating at Cheddleton. It was in 1972 that the Leek & District Fly Fishing Association was formed at a time when they had no waters but an idea for the future. Tony Bridgett, Alan Winkle, Ray Shenton and Phil Robey created the committee and set about getting others who were interested to get involved by way of fly-tying classes with local rod-maker and fly-tyer Bill Tagg, pie and pea suppers, raffles and general get togethers.

By 1973 a stretch of water on the river Churnet near to Oakamoor and Alton was secured with a lease from landowner/farmer Mr Ken Ball and the work started. Water quality was poor but with the help of Mike Leaney of Trent Fish Culture trout stock viability tests were successful and so too was the introduction of over-positing mayflies. Later that year and again in early spring 1974 more yearling trout were introduced. It was this season at the age of 22 years that I joined the Association and moved from coarse fishing to game fishing. I was quickly recruited onto the committee and over the next five years attended fly tying courses, water bailiffs and pollution control/water quality courses put on by the Institute of Fishery Management. All the time we were extending our interests on the river Churnet expanding the Associations membership whilst always remembering that it was the Association's ethos to provide fishing and not fish for it's members. We did everything that we could to make a mark with local riparian landowners from fencing, creating stiles, gates and even rebuilding a bridge sufficient to carry the farmer and his old tractor safely over the river. This dynamic and positive attitude was rewarded with the creation of a successful fishery on the river Churnet though there were many challenges lying ahead for this little band of angling brothers. (Iron blue dun, Terry's Feather Duster}

By the late 1970's as the water quality improved so did the fishing on the Churnet and with the ecology so stocks of trout and grayling improved the membership grew and links with the Forestry Commission and the National Trust allowed for expansion of our waters. It was at this time that having gained recognition for our endeavours as a local association the delicate negotiations took place with agents for the late 10th Duke of Rutland, the late Sir John FitzHerbert of Tissington and the National Trust regarding leasing the Dovedale to Milldale stretch of the river Dove. A major historical fishery of some three and a half miles that was predominantly double bank. This would be the most significant development for the Association and provide for an increased membership that would no longer be a few local rods. Negotiations were successful and once secured the Association produced it's development plan for both waters. Training for it's bailiffs was arranged and other courses about entomology followed with dynamic members contributing many hours of effort on working parties across it's waters.



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From weir and bank maintenance to regular insect surveys nothing was left to chance. Stocking was based on a policy of 'providing fishing and not fish' for it's members who were all limited to an occasional brace. Everything went well until in the mid-eighties the continuing saga of colour pollution on the river Churnet finally resulted in members reporting little or no fish activity throughout the 1986 summer. We had been fortunate in those early years of the 1980's that Sir Richard FitzHerbert approached us to take on his waters on the Bentley Brook thus subsequently helping us while the river Churnet was out of action.

It was in August 1986 that I spent time recording river temperature, dissolved oxygen levels, colour and water quality that subsequently brought my Institute of Fishery Management control of pollution training into effect. I contacted the Severn Trent Water Authority Head Office in Nottingham and arranged a meeting to discuss the situation on the Churnet and view records in the Control of Pollution register together with obtaining copies of the Treatment Plant Consent of Discharges Licences for all the plants above our fishery. The news was not good, and more than three hundred breaches of discharge consent limits were found after that initial enquiry. Having reported back to the committee the ACA were contacted and the then director, Alan Edwards, arranged for me to speak with the solicitor Simon Jackson. Then Dr Bruno Broughton a former STWA fishery scientist was introduced and over the next seven years together we built up our files and the evidence was gathered over thousands of hours to present our case to the High Court in London. Progress was stopped by HM Government for privatisation of the Water Authorities which silenced our action and activity from September 1989 through to June 1990 after the company had been floated on the stock market. Play resumed in 1990 and several attempts were made to get the newly formed Severn Trent Water Company Plc into court only for them to have the case adjourned on technicalities either legal or scientific. Eventually we, Dr Broughton, Dr Nic Everall, the barrister, solicitor Simon Jackson, clerks and I stood again outside the High Court at the Old Bailey in June of 1992 awaiting our chance for justice when our barrister was summoned inside. He returned only ten minutes later with the news that the Severn Trent Water Company Plc had accepted full liability and would address all issues and pay all costs and compensations. We had won! The first angling association to successfully prosecute a private water company.

The total cost to the new Water Company was twenty-eight million pounds that was including a new ozone plant at the Cheddleton works costing eleven million pounds the balance upgrading all the water treatment plants on the river Churnet together with our costs and the restoration programme needed. Over the next three years everything came together, we introduced Lathkill brown trout and grayling stocks from the river Dove at Mayfield and Ellaston with the co-operation of the riparian owners, clubs, keepers, the new National Rivers Authority and the Grayling Society together with a massive effort by our own members.



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Having a successful outcome to the legal case meant that we could restore the Churnet and continue our water expansion, restoration and development. It also provided a substantial amount of funding that would protect and secure the Association. The Dove waters allowed us to increase our membership numbers and the additional income was put to good use in acquiring our first freehold fishing rights for two lovely sections of fine trout and grayling water on the little river Hamps from landowners and farmers that I had known for many years. This additional water came with more introductions from the late Neil Lambert and a local postman member Andy Paterson secured us a further stretch of the Upper Dove at Crowdecote. Lots more work for committee and the willing Association members over the next decade and more.

It was not all work and no play. We all enjoyed some of the finest game fishing available anywhere. Links with the Grayling Society and local neighbours meant that regular outings during the winter months resulted in many happy get togethers on the banks of the Dove at Mayfield and Rocester with fine food and mulled wine to keep away the chill. Evenings of fly-tying spent at the Royal Oak in Leek also developed the tying skills of many of our members. AGM's and regular dinners allowed us to meet with partners and relax with many fishy tails being told. We even became affiliated with The Izaak Walton Society in America and hosted several guests from all around the world. The river Dove was a great asset to the Association but we never forgot our roots and the river Churnet was soon producing excellent catches of home bred brown trout and grayling. Mayflies were on all our waters and constant monitoring ensured that any concerns were acted on quickly and effectively.

In 1993 we celebrated the tercentenary of the death of Izaak Walton author of *The Compleat Angler* at the Izaak Walton Hotel in Dovedale then owned by one of our landlords and patron the 10th Duke of Rutland. This event brought us recognition from the angling press, and we spent a lovely day earlier in the year with editor of Trout Fisherman John Wilshaw fishing and walking the beautiful river Dove through Dovedale and Milldale. The Churnet was not to be out done and Jane James of the ACA together with Bob James came to report and fish on the restored river Churnet. When asked what they would like to achieve from the day it was said that to catch a brown trout, a grayling and perhaps see a kingfisher would be nice. All three requests were met in less than 30 minutes!! Great coverage was gained from each of the events and membership took an upward turn.

Having had all those years of the Water Companies being both robber and police up to the privatisation the National Rivers Authority was formed in 1989 to protect and manage all forms of water resources. It was later absorbed by the Environment Agency in 1996 as an efficiency and cost saving move of the government. Not a good idea and many of us expressed our concerns at the time. It was at this time we noticed the effects of climate change with certain hatches of fly disappearing from our waters. Questions were asked of the E.A. regarding increase in water temperature,



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higher water flows and some very dry summers but they did not respond very positively.

By the mid 1990's we were still enjoying the fruits of our labours with miles of wonderful waters from small streams to historic stretches our waters were being hailed as National Standards by the National Trust. Insect diversity was at it's best and we were moving to a none stocking policy. Barbless hooks had been adopted as an Association rule some years earlier. Lots of behind-the-scenes work was still going on with problems due to sheep dips affecting insect life on the Upper and Lower Dove. New pyrethroid chemicals were replacing the old nasty PCB treatments and as an invisible killer we were monitoring water quality and the effects on insect populations and diversity. This being so all was well with the world and our members could take great pleasure from our achievements.

The new millennium arrived without all the technical IT issues happening only to be followed by devastating terrorist attacks both home and abroad.

It was on the morning May 10th 2004 that I received a telephone call from one of our longest established river Churnet landlords, Mr Geoff Burton, advising me of our next challenge. It arrived in the form of a slurry spill and major pollution incident that was brought about by an unintentional effect of actions by the Environment Agency. In an attempt to flush an upstream feeder slurry spill through the receiving river Churnet they released a huge amount of treated clean water from a treatment plant adjacent to the river. Unfortunately, this well-intentioned emergency response only reactivated the deoxygenising effects of the slurry resulting in a total fish kill through our entire length of the Churnet. I spent the day with Phil Robey checking the entire length of our water assessing the level of destruction, photographing the thousands of dead fish caught in the eddies and pools. Local newspapers, radio and Environment Agency officers all attended this major incident to assess and record this devastation. All those years of restoration all that hard work wiped out in just a few hours was soul destroying and emotionally very sad to see and deal with. Yet we did it all again even after another scare in July the same year when another slurry spill resulted in a total fish kill in the Coombes Brook, a tributary of the river Churnet. This time the E.A. managed to protect the main river and isolate the spillage enabling them to deal with it. A lucky escape though the damage had already been done.

The next years would see us again restore the river Churnet using a new method of supplementary stocking by way of trout egg incubation boxes that we had constructed and installed in many locations along sections of the Churnet. This work was led by our then Chairman the late Gerry Allcock with help from E.A. fishery scientist and Association member Dr Tim Jacklin. Amazing success delivered Lathkill genetic brown trout for several years into the once again improving waters of the river Churnet. More fishery management skills learned and implemented by this dynamic little association of like-minded brothers of the angle. The success and management dynamic of the Association had allowed us to become fully non-stocking with a catch and release policy enjoying the wild fruits of our labours.



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The Association continued to develop and in 2010 amalgamated/absorbed the Sheffield Anglers making a further three miles of Upper Dove available to it's combined membership. This was further enhanced with waters acquired on the lower Churnet and middle Dove near Rocester in 2011.

After serving the Association for more than thirty years I retired in 2007 and left the finances and waters in a very healthy state with capable hands like Graham, Chris and Malcolm at the helm. A more modern approach has seen the Association continue to grow and the latest asset to be acquired in 2021 is the freehold fishing rights of the Staffordshire bank of the river Dove at Dovedale from our old landlords at the Izaak Walton Hotel thus helping to secure the Leek & District Fly Fishing Association's long-term future and interest in our local waters

It is with some sadness and concern that I make the following observation. It is perhaps better the Devil you know as it is well commented that the Environment Agency who are charged with our water's protection are no longer fit for purpose. Who would have guessed?? Latest news of the private water companies is that in the year up to October 2021 there have been 400,000 discharges of raw and untreated sewage into our rivers and seas. This being so we will have to be on our guard and ready to act in a preventative way when needed by again checking the discharges recorded into our waters rather than wait for the pollution to hit.

In fond recognition of all those other members not mentioned or no longer with us whose willingness and commitment helped to build the Leek & District Fly Fishing Association.

**A short walk down memory lane or recollections of a cynical old heron
composed by Tony S Locker, former treasurer and member of LADFFA &
Grayling Society**