

Bourne retains its identity 100 years on

Brian Clarke finds the stream made famous by one of the sport's most popular writers in rude health

IT IS 100 years exactly — well, it was on August 29 — since perhaps the most famous bag of trout in angling history was landed.

The three fish that made it up were good fish, but not leviathans: 3¼lb, 1¼lb and 1½lb. They were caught from one of two tiny streams that lie like tinsel threads across a Hampshire meadow. They were caught without their captor having to move from one spot. They were caught by a man who had an international reputation as a classical singer. But it was none of this that made the fish famous. What made them known to fishermen the world over is that their capture was described in — and a photograph of the very spot was shown in — the opening pages of one of the loveliest angling books written.

The water was the Bourne Rivulet, a two-mile-long miniature chalk stream that flows into the River Test. The angler was Harry Plunket Greene. The book was *Where the Bright Waters Meet*, Plunket Greene's joyous account of the ten years that he lived in the little village of Hurstbourne Priors, on the river's bank, and fished its waters.

Plunket Greene first glimpsed the two threads of water that unite to make the Bourne when crossing the viaduct at the head of the valley a few years before. He cast his first fly on to it in 1902. His hymn to the valley, its river and

the people he fished with was published in 1924. The book is loved for its language, humour and pastoral idyll that it recreates. It consistently tops anglers' lists of favourite books.

Plunket Greene's grave in the churchyard at Hurstbourne Priors is marked by a simple stone cross. Over the decades the stream — and, for all that it is so neglected, the grave — has become a scene of pilgrimage for fly fishers.

William Daniel, whose company, Famous Fishing, manages the water, says he can sell as many days as he has available to anglers from Britain, mainland Europe and the United States. "Plenty of others come to the valley not because they are fishermen but because they are in love with the book", he says. "They regard *Bright Waters* as an English literary classic."

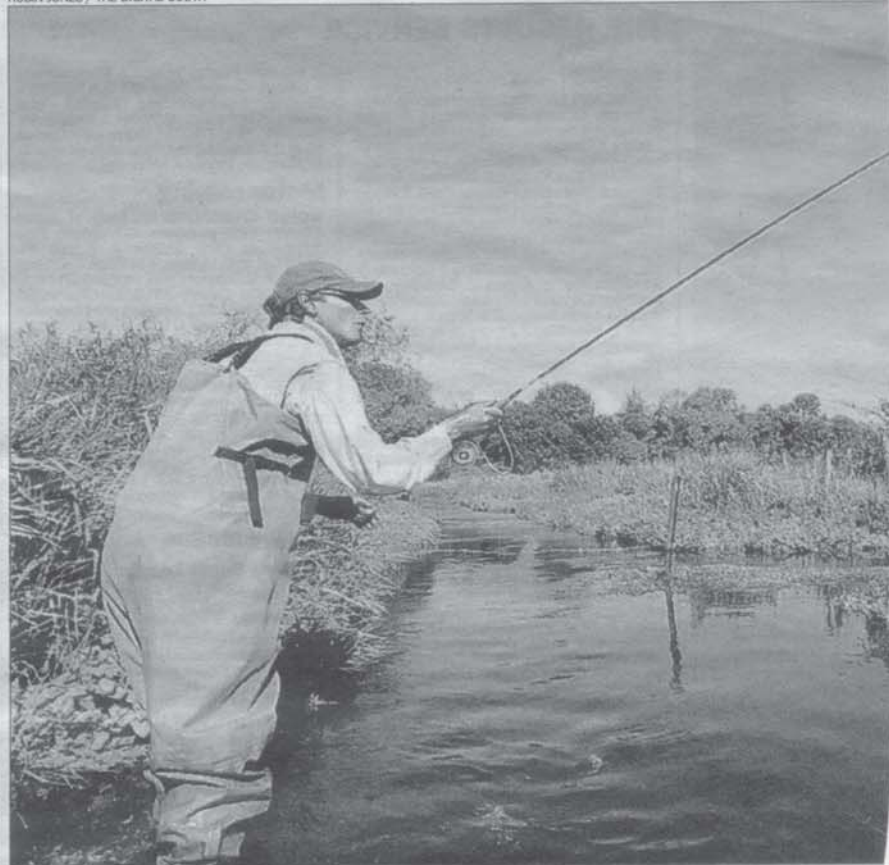
Daniel has often found boxes of flies left by visitors at the base of the cross, in tribute to the book's author.

Most anglers fishing the Bourne for the first time now — wading its tricky runs, trying to catch fish so perfectly camouflaged against the gravels that their shadows are often the only things that give them away — are astonished by how little has changed.

A careful reader of Plunket Greene's book could still plot on a map the precise locations of some of the writer's most vivid and sometimes hilarious adventures. Indeed, anyone so minded could replicate many of the book's pictures and stand in the same places as the original photographer and frame similar views.

Alas, what no one could now do is replicate Plunket Greene's historic catch. At least, they could not replicate it in the same place. While the second of the two streams Plunket Greene glimpsed from the

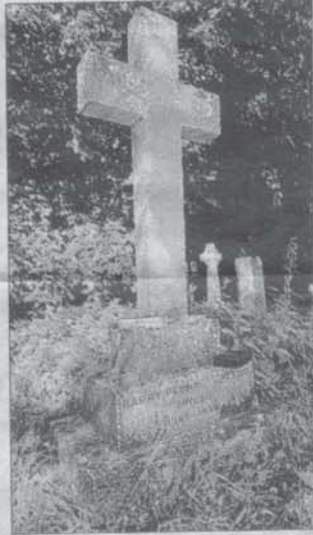
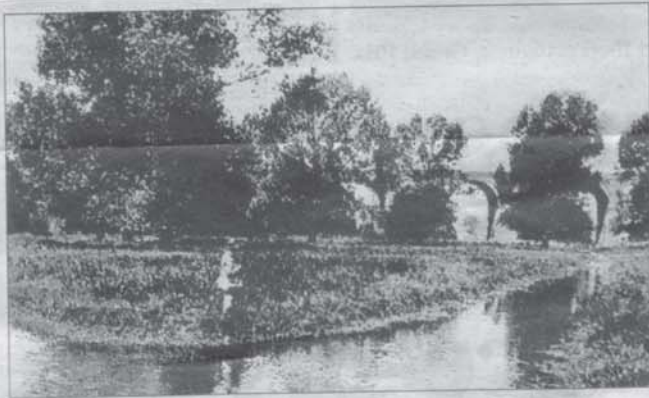
ROBIN JONES / THE DIGITAL SOUTH



viaduct is as sparkling and vital as ever, the one from which he took his three fish now has scarcely a fish, a plant or a water shrimp in it.

The condition of this reach has led to one of the longest, lowest-key but most intensely fought environmental battles of recent years, a furious confrontation between residents, angling organisations and conservation bodies on the one hand, and the owners of a vast watercress and salad-washing plant astride the stream above the viaduct, on the other.

The protesters claim that it is the plant's operations and the chemicals used in them that



are the causes of the decline. The plant's owner, Vitacress Salads Ltd, has come up with proposals in response to some of the objections, have denied responsibility for problems leading to others — and are seeking permission to expand. One application for an extension, granted by the local council, has just been overturned on judicial review, but few believe this is the end of the matter. None of this would surprise Plunket Greene. While *Bright Waters* opens with the capture of his three famous fish, it ends with a lament for a decline in the river's condition and its trout, even in the years he

knew it. Then, Plunket Greene blamed overstocking with artificially reared trout, toxic run-off from newly tarred roads near by — and yes, he railed against the coming of a watercress plant at the head of the valley.

But mostly, in the interim, the Bourne has recovered. Today, Plunket Greene would be astonished by the vitality of the water, the density of the plant and insect life — and the huge number of wild trout still rising and frustrating as they did in his own day.

One hundred years on from his own bag, on a blustery morning, five plump, brightly spotted and impossibly difficult

trout visited the Bourne's banks and were returned. I know because I caught them. They did not come from the same spot as Plunket Greene's and they did not weigh 3¼lb, or 1¼lb or even 1½lb. But a couple went over 1lb and another was close to it.

After so many years, and with so many pressures on the valley being so long resisted, Bright Waters are still worthy of the name. Plunket Greene would have settled for that.

■ Brian Clarke's column appears on the first Monday of each month.

Leading article, page 12

COME FLY WITH ME

An anniversary that recalls the true romance of angling

Fly-fishing might not strike the outside observer as the most romantic of activities. Yet as Brian Clarke, our Angling Correspondent, records on the sports pages today, the 100th anniversary of the most famous catch in trout fishing shows that there is more to this sport than a rod, a line and spare time in which to partake of it. The importance of the event being marked is not the size of the three fish concerned — which were large, but nothing to rival *Moby Dick* — but the description of how they were trapped, published two decades later. It has made a tiny stream which forms part of the River Bourne in Hampshire a place of pilgrimage for those who take fly-fishing seriously.

The author was Harry Plunket Greene, a classical singer by profession, and his tome was *Where the Bright Waters Meet*, a volume that constantly tops the charts of favourite works on angling.

The essence of its success, however, is not the tales of the ones that got away, or even the ones plucked from the water after a long and exhausting struggle to be weighed and then thrown back to Mother Nature. The compelling character of the book is instead its account of the beauty of these river banks, the cunning and dignity of the noble trout, the gleam of the sun on the gentle water and the many friendships struck up among those who fish for sheer pleasure.

This story has an enduring appeal as does the environment to which it pays such tribute. As the photographs accompanying Mr Clarke's text illustrate, not much has changed at this site in a century. The view he found from the viaduct is now much the same as it was when it was first spied by Plunket Greene two years before his epic encounter with the three trout that he recorded for posterity afterwards.

His feat could not, unfortunately, be repeated from the same spot today and there is a fierce argument raging over whether a watercress and salad-washing plant is responsible for the decline of this stretch of the river. But trout can still be tracked down on other parts of the bank by the astute angler — our correspondent brought in five of them.

Every effort should be made to ensure that this pastoral idyll is preserved in this condition. For fly-fishing is an art as distant and distinct from dangling a worm on string and hurling it in as archery is separate from the elastic catapult. The charm of it might not be obvious to all, but as Plunket Greene's lyrical words demonstrate, there is a magic and mystery here to be discovered. May more continue to come together where the bright waters meet; where man and trout compete in guile, mind and patience.