

ISSUE 07
13TH MAY 2020



Cyprynews



A VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE:

The Road to Orchid Lakes

By Marsh Pratley



One remarkable outcome of the request for material for the revived Society newsletter has been the arrival of a big chunk of material from Marsh Pratley, the backbone of a book he has been writing to let his family know a bit more about himself! As most of you will know Marsh is suffering from terminal cancer, which has proved to be his inspiration for writing the material. We will keep you informed about Marsh's health problems, the book's progress, and its availability, but in the meantime here are a few extracts from a series of chapters to whet your appetites. From boyhood to the ownership of Orchid Lakes Marsh's has been a remarkable journey. The material represents a great read and we are currently gathering additional material to turn it into an actual book for publication in the fairly immediate future. In the meantime our thoughts are with Marsh, and his health struggle.

To start the ball rolling I was born at home, which was quite common in those days, in what was then a small village called Didcot in Berkshire. My parents were travelling fairground folk and used to travel from village to village with the fair. Shortly before I arrived on the scene they settled down in a four-bedroom council house with a large garden and a small allotment at the back.



I grew up with my four brothers and two sisters. My mother, or 'Kit' as I later called her, had always told me I was the seventh son of a seventh son of a gypsy, and that I had 'special powers'. She never spoke about what happened to the missing children; presumably they died in childbirth. Given that I only found out after she died in 2009 that she had been born out of wedlock to a well-to-do gentleman and was fostered out – complete with a totally different name to the one I had known all my life – nothing would have surprised me.

Life in those days wasn't so hard as the generation before me but when you sleep four to a bed, nose to tail with army greatcoats as blankets – which had a tendency to make you itch – it set you up for later on in life to appreciate the things that are now taken for granted.

Food on the table was all very nutritious, albeit in short supply, and lots of bickering went on as to who had more than you. It was quite common to have just bread and lard for tea, and if there wasn't enough to go round an argument would follow, and then more often than not we'd get a wallop with a belt and buckle and sent to bed with a sore ass.

• • • • •

I was about nine when I was indoctrinated into the world of being a paper boy. I could hardly sit on the saddle and pedal, and when loaded with papers as well it was a real test of strength to keep the bike upright. Six days a week I'd be up at 5am and never missed a round for six years until I gave it up. The bike was my means of transport and enabled me to travel. Life took a bad turn for me when I was out on my paper round. I was delivering papers

in Wessex Road and I could even tell you the number of the house when a thought entered my head which kept recurring at odd times during that week. It was just a few days away from my 10th birthday and I kept thinking what it would be like without Dad. At the end of the week my sister came into the bedroom and quietly woke me and whispered in my ear that dad had been killed during the previous evening. I later found out that he had gone out on his motorbike to look for a camping site to take us on our very first holiday when he was a victim of a hit and run. Apparently he was hit by an overtaking car and knocked off his bike. He died instantly from a broken neck but despite local and radio coverage his killer was never found. I still had to go to school that day and the teacher made some excuse to get me out of the class so that he could tell everyone what had happened.

• • • • •

Another Saturday job I had was during the shooting season. I would make my way to the Horse and Harrow, a country pub in West Hagbourne. Just 10 years old, skinny as a toothpick and in short trousers and wellingtons far too big for my feet, I'd have to line up with a dozen or so other hopefuls to get a beating job. Ol' Ken, as he was known, would go along the rank picking out the lads he wanted and the rest were sent packing. Ken was from the typical upstairs/downstairs brigade, a working class man whose knowledge of the local countryside was relied on heavily by the 'guns'. Most of them lived or worked in London and they would turn up in their 4x4's and sports cars armed with their Purdeys. The syndicate leader was straight out of the Victorian era, a stout man with a rod-iron back dressed in plus fours with a tweed shooting jacket and matching deerstalker cap. He spoke with authority and woe-betide anyone that didn't listen. I christened him the Colonel-in-Chief. On his word the guns would dutifully take to the Landrovers: once in Ol' Ken would issue his orders to the beaters and we would cram onto the tail gates.

The day was spent yomping over ploughed fields in a line abreast with Ken barking his orders to anyone who fell short of the mark. The mud would accumulate on my wellies to the extent it felt as though I was carrying another person on each foot. If that wasn't bad enough the next beat would be in a field of kale. I could barely see over the top and I had no such things as waterproofs or long socks. I was soaked to the skin and every step was painful as my wellies slapped against the back of my knees. We would break for lunch back at the pub where we were given half a glass of cider and a sandwich. We were never allowed inside the pub with the shooters as that would be breaking social barriers, and considered improper.

All the pain was forgotten by the next day knowing that I'd soon be beside the water. By this time I'd acquired a Shakespeare Alpha Zoom rod which did me for everything from bleak snatching to pike fishing. My love affair with chub fishing started when I fished the Witham, which was a small, shallow, meandering river in Oxfordshire. I soon learnt that the most successful way of catching them in the warmer months was by free lining a large piece of flake on a size four and letting the flow take it down stream. There was something magical about watching it, and even more so when a pair of rubbery lips engulfed it.

One of my favourite places was the back stream at Long Wittenham, some four or five miles away. One side was controlled by the London Angling Association and the other by Birmingham Angling Association. That never really mattered to me except when there was a match on and I'd have to find somewhere else to fish. My rod was tied to the crossbar with the rest of my tackle in the panniers and off I'd go. There was never a question about taking any food or drink with me as it wasn't something that came into the equation. I'd spend all day by the river until 30 minutes before curfew then pedal like crazy to make sure I was back home in time. A minute late and all hell would be let loose and another early night without supper would ensue. In those days there wasn't the concern about 9-year-olds going off on their own for the day, and the thought of anyone wanting to harm or molest you was never an issue. At that age I never gave a thought to my own safety and when I look back I often think how lucky I was to still be alive after taking some ridiculous chances.

Whatever free time I could get I'd spend it fishing. Even in the depths of winter I looked forward to being on the banks of the river. I still didn't have a clue what I was doing but it was infinitely better than stopping at home. One day in February I made the four-mile trip to Clifton Hampden where there was a well-known free section of the river which ran alongside the road. The river was flowing quite fast and was just lapping at the edge of the bottom steps that had been installed in the bank years ago. Opposite was a small weir adjacent to the lock keeper's cottage. The gates were half open and my idea was to ledger down the inside margin for basically anything that would take a bait. As I walked down the steps my foot slipped and I ended up in five or six feet of water: I have memories of going under and looking around me thinking 'I can't see any fish!' When I popped up I was several yards downstream and instinctively grabbed hold of an overhanging branch: the current pushed me closer to the bank where I was able to scramble out. I can't say I felt any symptoms of shock at all. I was more amazed that I hadn't seen any fish. It was a long and wet ride home and to this day the ol' dear never knew what had happened.

• • • • •

Saturday night would be spent in the social club across the road from the hostel. The rugby team would be in full flow with copious amounts of drink being consumed – and an equal amount of vomit being projected later on in the evening. On one occasion a group of lads hired a white van for the weekend to attend the Isle of White Pop Festival. I was invited and about 20 of us were crammed in the back of the van and had to keep quiet during the ferry crossing to avoid paying. It was roasting hot and very uncomfortable, to say the least. I don't remember much about the festival, or indeed the weekend, but I'm assured it was a good event. During the half-term holidays most of them would go back to mummy and daddy for a break, which meant the hostel was nearly deserted. At Christmas it was even worse as myself and Martin, who was a canny old Scotsman, were left behind on our own. For three years on the trot on Christmas Eve he would fall down the stairs and get taken into hospital – presumably to enjoy the company and the food – which left me totally on my own.



Once Royal Marine training had been completed life became a bit easier

Once Royal Marine training had been completed life became a bit easier and after doing a signals course I was assigned to HQ Commando Forces, and then on to Raiding Squadron. We all have snapshots in our lives that very few are privileged to be party to, and in my case there were a lot of chapters and episodes that I can look back on and think, 'Yeah, I did that'. One such event was when Jock Jappy, another marine, and I were attached to the SAS for a job

out in Turkey. We took a four-tonner loaded with a 17-foot Rigid Raider, and a 45hp Johnston engine, and made our way down from Istanbul to Gallipoli. The SAS lads decided they'd navigate, but unfortunately they took a wrong turning. We ended up going up a mountain and there was no way we could turn round until we got to the top. With a 600 feet drop to the side myself and the other bootie were balancing precariously on the side of the wagon to add more weight and traction to the wheels. Eventually we arrived at our destination, more through luck than good judgement.

• • • • •

For the next couple of years I bummed around doing various jobs and doing my best to settle back into Civvy Street – which was never easy when you are used to being on the go and making instant decisions all the time. If something needed doing you just got on with it rather than having to refer to the boss or, worse still, a committee. Numerous times I fell foul of the management and often I'd find myself on a disciplinary for pinning some jumped-up nerd against the office wall. I started work back at Harwell and it was only when I



I was always more interested in catching the largest of any species I could, although that's not to say I didn't appreciate whatever I caught.

got back into my fishing that I naturally started to mellow and allowed myself to relax, rather than being resentful of the establishment. The big fish scene was in its infancy and I knew I wanted to be a part of it. I was always more interested in catching the largest of any species I could, although that's not to say I didn't appreciate whatever I caught: to me every fish of any species that graced my rod was appreciated.

My involvement in angling politics started at Harwell which had its own lake and a stretch of the Thames. Every month the committee would meet in a



Former Society chairman Marsh became a director and was a big factor in the rescue of the Society following the legal action in 2016.

bar and discuss the same thing month after month with nothing being resolved other than the dates of working parties and AGMs. Most of them were there in name only and had been since Noah built the Ark. After two years of being nominated I was eventually elected onto the committee, much to their annoyance. I firmly believed that if you are elected you are there to represent the people that voted you on, and not for your own gain or glorification.

• • • • •

One of my quirks, if you can call it that, is that I have always slept in the buff, even in the coldest winter months. My clothes would always be in the sleeping bag so that I had something nice and warm to put on in the morning. My shreddies were always placed readily available under my pillow in case I had a run during the night just to allow some dignity. Most people that know Phil Smith knows he likes copious amounts of tea on the bank and we'd often have a brew at silly times of the night or day. To combat having to get out of my warm bag for a call of nature I kept a special mug known as the kingfisher mug, so-called because of the beautiful picture of my favourite bird emblazoned on the side. Undo the side zip, flop it out and job done without the need to get out in the cold. Very often we would get visitors on the bank who just wanted to sit and talk for hours on end when all we wanted to do was to be left alone to get on with our fishing, or just relax. No amount of subtle or unsubtle hints would register with them. (It doesn't take much imagination to realize where this story is going.) If you overstayed your welcome you'd be offered a cup of tea in the kingfisher mug. Rest assured Phil I never made you a tea in that mug.



Orchids have always been my favourite flower and now I had just purchased Orchid Lakes – and it felt so right.

In 1995 Dorchester Fisheries went into receivership and offers were invited by sealed bid for Dorchester Lagoon and Orchid Lakes, along with a number of other waters under their control. The Dorchester Sailing Club on the lagoon knew I was interested in purchasing Orchid and wanted to know if I would be agreeable in us combining for a joint bid. The long and short of it was that in my naivety I said 'Yes.' Then, the day before the deadline,

when bids had to be placed, they came up with a figure short of the asking price.

My immediate thought was that I would lose out on Orchid and in a knee-jerk reaction, and a hasty meeting with them, I upped the price by a considerable amount for a longer lease on the fishing rights on the Lagoon. I was fortunate in that I had taken early retirement from Harwell with a nice lump sum plus some other accumulated money from a legacy: I was in a position to be able to make an offer. As an added incentive we also said that we would sort out the legal costs between us. Our offer was accepted and it was another of those times in life when it was meant to be. Everything fell into place and couldn't have been planned better if you'd tried. Orchids have always been my favourite flower and now I had just purchased Orchid Lakes – and it felt so right.



On the way to raising £250,000 through the Anglers Against Cancer charity with fellow organisers Ron Buss and wife Jo, and a lot of help from our friends