

A Welsh masterpiece

ANDREW CARTWRIGHT fishes a river which flows through an estate built by the famous artist Henry William Banks Davis

It's funny how one thing leads to another. A gentleman travelled recently all the way from Epsom, Surrey – a journey of 4½ hours – for a day out on the River Severn. During the day we talked about fishing in different places, wild mountain lakes, expensive southern England chalkstreams and also the upper Wye valley. I remarked how I had always liked the look of the River Wye below Rhayader, but hadn't had the time to go and have a fish there. The gent I was guiding said he was intending to fish in that area the following week and was staying at Glaslyn estate, a stretch of water I had looked at a long time ago but found it was strictly for guests of the estate only, with no day tickets, so it looked like that piece of water would remain on the list of waters I could only dream about.

A couple of days later Mr Paul Harrison called me, he was the new owner of Glaslyn and asked if I'd be interested in having a look at the river, with a view to guiding his guests. Well, I

had to think about it (for a split second). A date was set.

As you drive south from my home, you start down the Wye valley from Llangurig and from here you are only twelve miles or so from the source of the Wye, high in the Plynlymon mountains. The river meanders its way through pastoral land and can be seen as you drive along the A470 towards Rhayader. The main problem here is keeping your eyes on the road because the Wye valley is one of the most picturesque from source to sea, with the river never that far from your gaze.

As you drive through the small market town of Rhayader you're nearly at your destination. Glaslyn is approximately three miles further. You would easily be forgiven for missing the turn to the estate, as it is hidden within a long line of trees, which form a short tunnel to the main house. *The Secret Garden* springs to mind as you turn in, and what a delightful place these trees hide. As soon as you emerge from the trees Glaslyn house is straight in front of you, sitting beautifully alongside the

PROFILE

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A handful: a Glaslyn grayling is released.



river, with immaculate gardens and a suspension bridge stretched across the river. As you turn around, the view takes your breath away, with the river stretching out in front of you towards





the hills, a little weir and an island in the middle of the river, with long glides and faster water glistening in the sunlight. I was speechless.

Mr and Mrs Harrison were there to meet me and tell me a little about the fishing and the estate. Glaslyn was built by famous artist Henry William Banks Davis (1833-1914). He was a landscape and animal artist, both in paint and sculpture. Some of his works of art are on display in the Royal Academy and in several of his works he used local views. He was a keen fisherman as well, and who could blame him, living in these settings? You can really tell he had an artistic flare as the main outlook of the house faces up the river towards the west, so as the sun sets it shines all the way down the river straight at the house.

More cover

After our talk it was time to get the gear out and have a walk along the river to see where to start. I crossed the suspension bridge and once on the far bank I walked upstream to see what different types of water there were to fish and what methods to use. I also checked to see if I could see what fly life might be coming off the water, but a

very strange thing had taken place. I'd walked all the way to where the River Elan joins the Wye and I hadn't thought about fishing once! I was just looking at the scenery and the wildlife, very unusual for me indeed.

So it was time to snap out of it and concentrate on the fishing. The weather was grey skies with a mist and chill in the air. In front of me was a nice fast boulder-strewn run, so here was a good place as any to make a start. I hadn't noticed any fly life (might help if I was paying more attention) so I thought I would prospect with three Spiders.

Setting up my 10' 5-weight rod and floating line, firstly I attached a seven and a half foot tapered leader, to which I added two droppers about three to four feet apart, so it was a total leader of about 16ft in length. The water was quite low and very clear, so I thought lighter breaking strains would be to my advantage, so the point fly would be on 4lb tippet. Mind you, I must admit these days I'm not so much of a breaking strain person but diameter is more important to me. If you shop around you can find some quite heavy breaking strain lines that are no thicker than much lighter ones. The 4lb one I

Master of all he surveys.

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'Artist Henry William Banks Davis was a keen fisherman as well ... who could blame him, living in these settings?'

use is about the same diameter as most 2lb lines.

As for selection, I hadn't seen much fly life, just the odd sedge fluttering about and some small gnats. I thought as there weren't many pointers as to what to put on the leader I would set it up to search the water. On the point I tied a little Baetis Nymph of my own creation (size 14) and a Hares Ear Spider (size 14) on the top dropper (a good fly when sedges are about). On the middle dropper I placed a Black Pearl-bellied Spider (size 16). I de-greased the leader with a little bit of Fuller's earth to take the shine off and got started.

I headed for the faster/rapid water, thinking it would give the fish less time to make up their mind whether they wanted the fly or not. This also gave me more cover with the broken water. I kept well away from the edge of the water for the first cast with a little roll cast upstream to give the flies time to sink and work their way to the appropriate depth by the time the fly line came level with me. There was a tiny flick of the tip of the line which I thought would be the bead on the nymph being too heavy and snagging the bottom, but it wasn't. It was a good fighting trout of about a



pound in weight which I quickly landed. As this was the first cast I considered that it might be quite a good day! The trout had taken the nymph and I presumed that, as there was a chill in the air, it had put the fish down. As I worked my way down the run the water was getting shallower, until it was only just covering the gravel guards on my waders. I realised that fishing the shallows and trying to keep low so as not to be seen didn't seem like a good opportunity to find a fish, but you should never discount any water as if you fish it properly you are always in with a chance. This time though, there was nothing, just a couple of false bites of weed on the rocks.

Disapproval

I came to more of what I thought was more productive looking water, deeper and faster moving. As it moved over the tail of the first run I had fished, it became more boulder strewn. I kept the rod tip high with a short line, enabling me to work the flies between the boulders. As the flies moved between two boulders I had to lift the rod tip

higher to stop the line snagging, which, in turn, must have lifted the flies up in the water column, and made it look as if my nymph was making a break for freedom. Then bang, there was a momentary flash of silver, then nothing, I knew immediately that a nice grayling had been lost. The run was quite short and there was no more action here.

Downstream of Glaslyn House, the river narrowed slightly, with woodland either side of the river. I took a moment to study the water, to see if there was any surface activity, but there was nothing. With all the falling leaves I would have thought there would have been some aphids and other flies falling on the water's surface. On the opposite bank I spotted a pair of dippers diving in and out of the water looking for food and downstream one of nature's more skilled fisherman was at work, a tall and slender heron. Our eyes met and he was gone, screeching his disapproval at my being on his stretch.

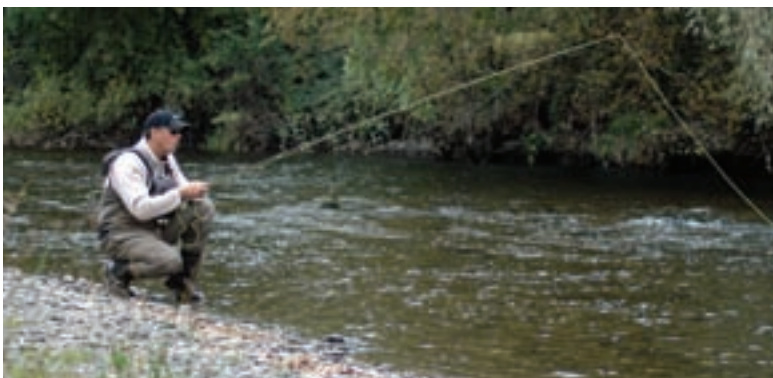
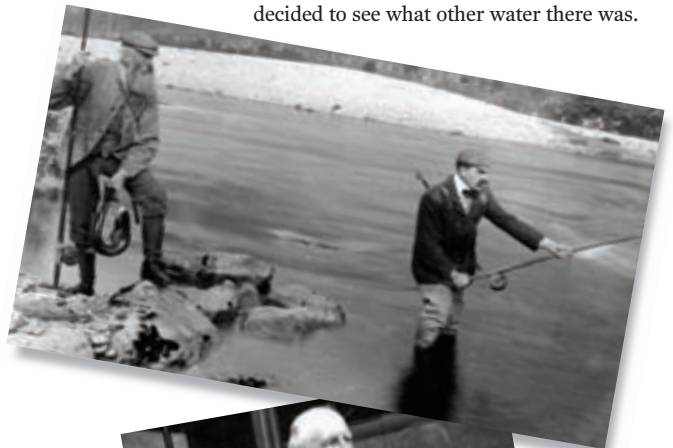
I noticed a run just below the spot he had just vacated which screamed 'fish!' at me. There was a boulder-laden head to the run with a good push of

A work of art.

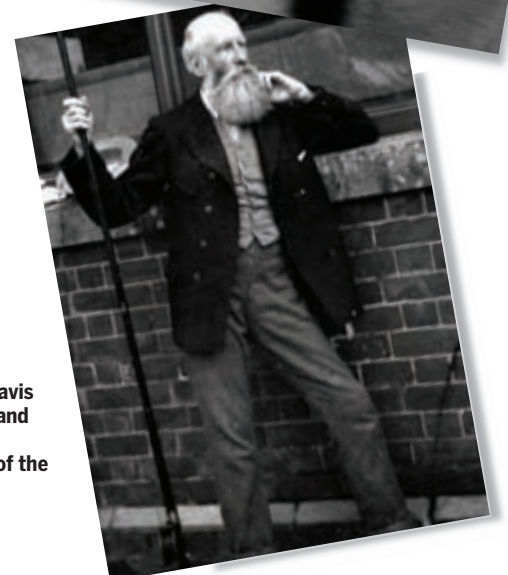
water running the whole way through it. I waded in. As I worked the flies in and out the rocks there was a very small twitch of the fly line and soon another trout was thrashing around the fast water. It felt about four times its size, but in fact was a spectacularly marked fish of around half to three quarters of a pound (one up to me, Mr Heron)!

As I continued along this run, the water was getting too deep for comfort, so I crossed the fast water at the start of the run. I slipped and slid over moss and weed covered rocks, but it was worth it as I could now work my way all the way to the bottom of the stretch of water. As I was on the opposite bank, I thought I would start at the top of the run that I had just fished. With my flies dancing in and out of the boulders, a very similar thing happened to earlier. As I lifted the fly line to stop it hooking up on the rocks there was a sudden judder forward but this time he didn't shake himself free. It was a nice grayling of over a pound. And what an account he gave of himself! He stayed deep in the current, when he finally came to the net he had taken the Nymph again.

It was around 1pm by now and with over four miles of water to fish, I couldn't make my mind up whether to keep going down the river or to make a move to see more of the other runs. I made my mind up to finish the run in and then have a look at the lower beats. After finishing the run, another four fish had been caught. I decided to see what other water there was.



The author keeps low as he fishes a shallow run.



Henry William Banks Davis (above, and right), creator of the Glaslyn estate.

Glas bottom

The bottom end of Glaslyn is a wider river, more open on the right bank and tree-lined on the other. The character of the water is similar to the upper beats with fast boulder-filled water leading into a nice glide. Looking at the river bed it looked slightly harder wading with some slab rock and bigger stones. Not seeing any surface activity I carried on with the technique I had been using earlier in the day. I decided to start in a gorgeous run of fast water which lead into a glide of about 2-3ft depth. I repeated the upstream roll cast and watched the tip of the line for anything out of the ordinary. After about ten casts and about 6ft down the faster water, the tip of the line paused for a split second, the rod top lifted gently and a fish shot off down the pool. It felt like a very good fish, not showing itself at all. It then moved higher in the water and rolled and there was a tell tale flash of a silver and purple fin then it went back down and held station. For a moment I wondered if one of the other flies had snagged on something, but it was just the power of the fish holding position in the current. It seemed to take an age until it was finally landed. It was a grayling of 1 1/2lb, quite slim but very athletic. After slipping him back into the water I noticed the first tiny rise I had seen all day, moving down the run I had another small trout and lost two more fish.

In the next run a fish came to the surface to take something in the same place a couple of times, this could have been what I had been waiting to see all day long. I enjoy all methods of fly fishing but there is something special



The author wields broad brushstrokes in the shadow of Glaslyn house.



Glaslyn collection: clockwise from top left – Pearl-bellied Black Spider; Aphid F-fly; Hare's Ear Spider; Bead-head Baetis Nymph.

about catching one on the dry fly. The fish I had seen rise hadn't come up again in over ten minutes so I debated about changing to a dry.

If you are familiar with the water and fish it a lot you should have a good idea what sort of fly life will be on or in the water. In my rig box I have a Czech nymph set-up, nymph/spider set-up, two or three dry fly set-ups and a trio set-up, so I'm prepared for anything.

Now and again

The fish below me came up again. It wasn't really a confident rising fish but one that put in an appearance now and again. I took off the Spiders and Nymph and wound them onto a cast holder and put on a dry. The tapered leader had about 4ft of 4lb tippet attached so the whole leader was about 14-15ft long. There were leaves on the water so I chose a size 20 bright green F-fly to represent a green fly/aphid. By the time I had swapped over, which took about two minutes, the rises had stopped. This is typical, you have gone to all the trouble of changing everything, only to find it is all over. It is always worth giving it a try, though.

For the last few years I have preferred to fish dry downstream, the reason being, the first thing the fish sees is the fly with no fly line flicking over its head and with no worry about it seeing the leader first. (Some people say that a conventional dry, when fished upstream, is facing the wrong way round so you should tie the flies back to front, which might actually have some validity.) All you have to do differently is to use slack line casting techniques.

I cast the dry out into a line of bubbles where the leaves were drifting, showing me where the food lane was. On the first drift through there was nothing, and on the second nothing. Then, third time lucky, I struck lucky and up he came, another hard fighting grayling which proved to be the best fish of the day. It weighed somewhere between 1 1/2-2lb.

All in all, I think I landed about twelve fish, with several missed and lost. I had a fantastic day using a variety of techniques for the different types of water I encountered. This was my first visit to Glaslyn and I know that as I get to know the water I will have to spend less time looking at the scenery and more time concentrating on my fishing! Glaslyn is a beautiful and scenic place even if you don't want to fish. There are long picturesque walks, a variety of wildlife, from dippers, herons and red kites to otters, so if you are a fisherman and your partner isn't, there is still plenty to satisfy you both.

Glaslyn is only available to people who stay on the estate in either the two cottages or the two chalets (aptly named 'Salmon' and 'Trout'). There are no day tickets available so you know that you will never be overcrowded or the water over fished. There are also some surprises to be seen on the fishing front.

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‘There was a tell-tale flash of a silver and purple fin’

- For further information on Glaslyn contact Mr Paul Harrison on 01597 810258.
- Day-ticket water is available on the Upper Wye through The Wye and Usk Foundation (www.wyeuskfoundation.org). It has Passport fishing on sections above Rhayader.

