

# New life for the Taff

The Taf Fechan.

Urban rivers like the Taff and Afon Lwyd only form a small proportion of the total fishing that's available via our Passport scheme and booking office, but we see them as real jewels in our crown – rivers that have miraculously come back from the dead. Theo Pike, author of *Trout in Dirty Places*, explores the story of the Taff and Taf Fechan.

*"This romantic stream is formed by the junction... of two streams, called respectively the Taf Fawr and the Taf Fechan, 'the greater and lesser Taff', which descend from the highest mountains of South Wales, the beacons of Brecknockshire...*

*Its stream, in dry weather, is frequently scanty, but in case of sudden rains or thaws, the waters of this, as of all other mountain rivers, roll over their rocky bed in an impetuous and destructive torrent. The vicinity of Merthyr Tyd-vil has greatly contributed to render certain portions of the Taf unworthy of the angler's attention. The poisonous matter discharged into it from the iron-works, and the lawless practices of the forge-men, continually diminish the stock of fish. In dry seasons, these depredators assemble in bands, and, wading into the streams armed with sledge hammers contrive, by violently striking the stones under which the trout are concealed, to destroy an incredible quantity*

*of fish of all sizes..."*

When you're looking into the deep, dark past of an urban river, finding a quote like this is gold dust for any writer or river restorationist. For one thing, it tells you how far we've all moved on – even the most unscrupulous modern poachers have given up stunning trout with sledgehammers. And it also gives us license to hope and plan: if all those years of abuse couldn't kill the Taff completely, maybe we really can use what we now know to make a better future for this and many battered urban rivers.

Because there's no doubt about it: the Taff has been through the mill. Not long before George Agar Hansard wrote those words above, in 1834, it was still said that a squirrel could scamper from Cardiff to Brecon without touching the ground. But within a matter of decades, the ancient sessile oakwoods on the 'beacons of

Brecknockshire' had been clear-felled for coal-mining pit props, and Merthyr Tydfil's annual production of iron had grown to equal a quarter of the output of the whole United States. As the industry developed, ironworks down the whole length of the river converted to steel milling. Temperatures in the blast tunnels under the Cyfarthfa furnaces reportedly reached a searing 1,500 degrees, and vast quantities of water were used to quench hot steel in the forges - heating, deoxygenating and contaminating it with oil and other pollutants before flushing it back into the Taff with all the washings from the factories' cinder dumps.

Even when the iron- and steelworks started to decline, and then shut down altogether, coal and chemical industries grew to take their place, and brought their own set of problems. When I interviewed Tony Rees, Chairman of the South East Wales Rivers Trust and long-time stalwart of the Merthyr Tydfil Angling Association (MTAA), for the first time in 2011, he pointed to the gaping black culvert where Wales' biggest colliery once stood in Merthyr Vale.

*"When the pits were running and all the coal washings came out at night into the river", he told me, "I even wrote a letter to the Chairman*

*of Welsh Water, telling him I thought it would be nice to see the fish coming up the Taff with miners' lamps, because that would be the only way they'd have got through all the coal dust in the water..."*

But I always think it's a fabulous irony that the confluence of geological factors that put so many urban rivers at Ground Zero of the Industrial Revolution are now the same circumstances that can produce (shhh!) some of the best fishing in Europe. Those mountain streams and Carboniferous-era seams of limestone, coal and iron on the southern edge of the Brecon Beacons once provided power and raw materials for Cyfarthfa's forges: today, they add tumbling oxygenation and a spike of high-pH chemistry to the water of the Taff that's noticeable in the diversity of its flourishing fly-life, and, in turn, its populations of trout. (As local guide Gareth Lewis says, it's only when a hatch comes off that you see how many fish the river really holds...)

By 2009, championed by the legendary Moc Morgan, and again in 2013, the whole river catchment was considered healthy enough to host the International River Fly-Fishing Championship between the home nations of Wales, England, Ireland and Scotland. In



*Another superb wild brown from the Taff, showing why it is so highly regarded by trout anglers.*



2011, the Environment Agency even listed the Taff as one of the ten most improved rivers in the UK. But environmental miracles like this don't happen by accident, and it's largely due to the hard work of members of MTAA that the upper Taff can now be said to offer truly world-class fishing for wild trout.

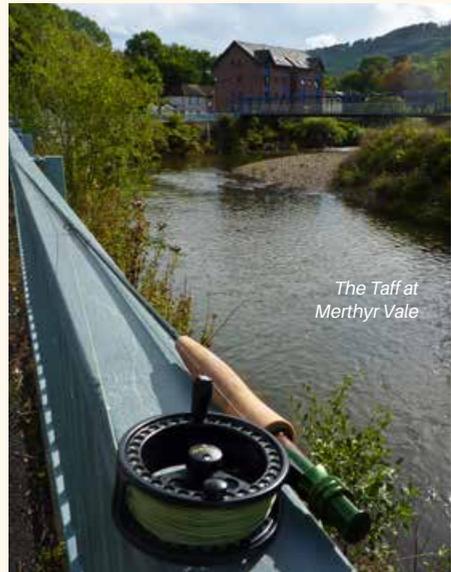
For this part of the river, the modern era began in 2001, when the Club started work with the Wild Trout Trust to improve the health of the Taf Fechan between Pontsticill reservoir and the Blue Pool at Aberglais. Historically, this isolated stretch of stream had suffered repeated pollution problems from the water treatment works below Pontsticill dam, as well as being starved of spawning gravels because the reservoir interrupted all the natural processes of sediment transport.

Now, more than 80 tonnes of gravel were replaced, trees over the riffles were coppiced to let light back into the stream, and flow deflectors and other structures were installed to add habitat diversity. Supported by Orvis and the local Gurnos Community Project, hundreds of hours of hard work by MTAA's volunteers paid off in better fly-life, more wild trout and better fishing. There was even a boost for the local economy, as travelling fly-fishers came to the Taf Fechan from as far away as Holland to see the results of this early example of river restoration for themselves, and the project went on to win

a runner-up spot in the Wild Trout Trust's Conservation Awards in 2004.

But anyone who fishes our urban streams knows only too well that these are truly rivers on a knife edge – always something less than a single wrong turn of a stopcock away from catastrophe. And so it proved for the Taf Fechan on 13 August 2006, when calls from local farmers started coming in to say that the river was running white with three tonnes of aluminium sulphate from the water works, and all the fish were dead...

During the weeks that followed, Tony Rees and his crew of volunteers had the



*The Taff at Merthyr Vale*

heartbreaking task of picking up more than 7,000 dead trout, talking to the Angling Trust and the Environment Agency about court cases and restitution, finally receiving a total of £47,000 in compensation from the water company. But even with careful restocking, their best guess was still that the river would take up to 12 years to recover from this blow.

Today, however, the Taf Fechan is back on sparkling form, and so is the main river (in the run-up to those first international fishing tournaments, the amount of rubbish removed by the MTAA's volunteers was amazing, including a full set of traffic lights complete with the cable connecting them!) Thanks to funding from Defra related to the European Water Framework Directive, the South East Wales Rivers Trust is steadily dealing with fish passage problems throughout the whole Taff catchment: grayling still can't quite get over the weirs at Quakers Yard, but salmon have recently been seen spawning in the upper Taf Fawr for the first time in 200 years.

Now, where the waters of the Taff once ran Bible black with coal dust from the collieries, you can stalk big wild trout that are also known to move up and down the full length of the river on their own mysterious travels.

And whether you prefer matching the hatch with surprisingly tiny dry flies, or carefully dissecting current seams with weighted nymphs and indicator rigs, there's room here for every technique. Yes, the Taff's recovery is a true miracle of modern river mending, and I know where I'd like to spend much more of my own fishing time this season...

The Merthyr Tydfil Angling Association controls about 10 miles of fishing on the Taf Fechan and the main River Taff. For the 3rd year in succession, day tickets are now available via the Wye & Usk Foundation: find out more at [www.wyeuskfoundation.org](http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org)

*Theo Pike is Chairman of Trustees of the South East Rivers Trust. His trail-blazing book 'Trout in Dirty Places' was published by Merlin Unwin Books in 2012, followed by 'The Pocket Guide to Balsam Bashing' in 2014, and his blogs can be found at [www.urbantrout.net](http://www.urbantrout.net) and [www.theopike.com](http://www.theopike.com)*

