



{ CLUB FISHING }

MANY HAPPY RETURNS

One of stillwater trout-fishing's most enduring clubs celebrates its 70th birthday this year. What's been the secret of its success?

WHEN A GROUP OF dedicated Midlands-based trout fishermen held a meeting at the Angel Hotel in Northampton on January 9, 1952, few

would have dreamt the association they formed that evening would go on to become one of the largest stillwater trout-fishing clubs in the country.

Marking its 70th anniversary this year, Mid-Northants Trout Fishers Association (MNTFA) remains a welcoming and inclusive club, which not only works hard to keep its members, around 100, informed and engaged, but also seeks to attract new members, encouraging young and old to experience the positive effects of fly-fishing.

The club doesn't have its own water, but perhaps that is to its advantage. It bases its activities at Anglian Water's Pitsford and Ravensthorpe reservoirs, also fishing at nearby Grafham, Eyebrook, Draycote and Rutland, a rich variety and some of the finest stillwater fishing in the land. This autumn, the club is organising a trip to Llyn Clywedog, while members often form smaller

parties to fish rivers across Derbyshire, Hampshire, Scotland and Wales.

You need good people to run a good club. Leaders and doers. Organisers and negotiators. Brains, brawn and guile. A host of skills honed in the nine to five that can be deployed in the best interests of local trout fishing. MNTFA has no shortage.

Chairman Don Moore has fished Pitsford for more than 40 years, all that time as a Mid-Northants member. He said, "Being based around Northampton, we are fortunate to have ready access to all the major Midlands reservoirs."

Don's dedication to MNTFA is impressive, but he's a mere boy compared to their oldest member, Peter Woods, 94, one of the club's founders. The oldest active member is David Froggatt, 89, who still casts a line most weeks and has clocked up more than 40 years with the club, as well as fishing for the Army's Soldier Palmers team.

Mid-Northants has a loyal core membership, but it is not resting on its laurels.

It is in many ways a model club. It is online, it seeks and uses outside funding, and it strives to meet modern requirements around coaching and inclusion. It understands, like many more



David Froggatt (centre) is MNTFA's oldest active member.

enterprising clubs, that fishing faces huge pressures in areas such as recruitment and access to water, the result of competition from other activities; and that all anglers face a fight to improve water quality and habitats.

In 2014, it started an official coaching programme to create a more professional level of tuition, something that had previously been given informally by experienced members. Initially, members Seumas Halliday, John Clarke and the late chairman, Ian Pow qualified as Level 2 coaches with the Angling Trust's First for Sport programme. The club now has eight qualified coaches, led by Seumas, plus experienced volunteers who deliver quality tuition in casting, fishing methods and tackle, entomology and fly-tying. This has proved a big



Club competitions offer impressive silverware.



Proud to wear the logo.

BANKSIDE VIEW



"Coaching gives us an opportunity to spread the word. We get everyone from first-timers to experienced fishermen who want to gain a few extra yards on their cast"

Seumas Halliday, head coach, joined 2001.



"It's a really friendly club and everyone has made me feel so welcome since I joined"

Hank Needham, membership secretary, joined 2017.



"Getting people together keeps them fishing, especially during the winter months"

John Sumner, vice-chairman, joined 2010.

Members have a strong and active social scene, on and off the water.





“This year, club coaches gave more than 40 free lessons over two days”

attraction to new members, and around one quarter of MNTFA members have benefited from some form of coaching.

The club also fosters close contacts with local coarse-fishing clubs, encouraging their members to try fly-fishing, and runs free monthly coaching sessions at Pitsford lodge from March to October, open to non-members and often including first-time family groups. Coaching is advertised on the club’s Facebook page and through the Angling Trust, via the Eventbrite website.

“In 2021, we provided about 150 hours of coaching for people aged seven to 75,” said Seumas.

The club has also received significant cash and support from The Angling Trust as well as a grant from the Angling Improvement Fund to help with coaching equipment and health and safety costs.

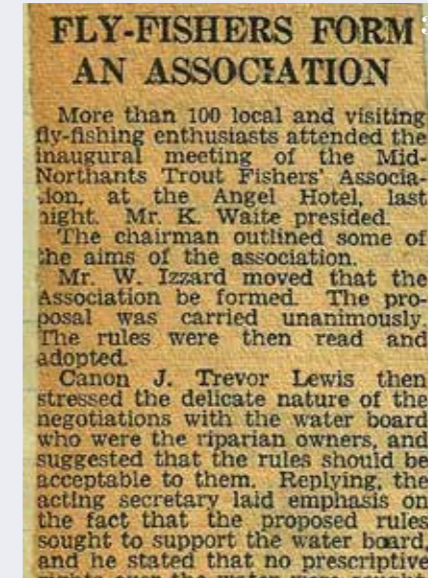
For the past eight years, chairman Don has organised a stand at a local show where club members talk to the public about fly-fishing and entomology and give fly-tying demonstrations. This year, club coaches gave more than 40 free lessons over two days. They are kept up to date with the latest teaching methods through the Angling Trust and by Master Instructor Karl Humphries, MBE.

As well as attracting new members, you must maintain the enthusiasm of those who have stayed through thick and thin. The club has a busy events diary that includes Anglian Water’s Tuesday evening boat league at Pitsford, organised by member and resident tackle-shop guru Mark Mathieson from mid-May onwards. There is regular fly-tying tuition with member and entomology expert Kevin Rowley, ▶

Graeme Pearson, one of the club’s keen fly-tyers.

Chairman and coach Don Moore with a lovely brown trout taken on a Booby GRHE.

David Anderson and coach Stuart Payne drift Pitsford’s small half.



1. The club’s first secretary, Tom Ivens. 2. Launching one of Pitsford’s early boats from the original boat jetty. 3. A clipping from the Northampton Chronicle and Echo, January 10, 1952. 4. Coach and club fly-tying organiser Kevin Rowley continues important work for the Northamptonshire Biodiversity Records Centre. 5. Chairman Hector Woolnough made an outstanding contribution to the club.

A POTTED HISTORY

Like so many good ideas, this one started with a group of like-minded people gathering around a table with a pint or two. Mid-Northants Trout Fishers’ Association was formed in January 1952 at the Angel Hotel in Northampton. The club took its name from the then Mid-Northants Water Board that managed the local reservoirs.

Colonel SW Miller was elected chairman of a temporary committee, which included Tom Ivens as secretary, Cyril Inwood, Mr E Nutt, Mr CC Robinson, Mr RP Swannell and Mr W Izzard (who had earlier proposed to form the club). Its main goal was to promote the interests of anglers at local trout fisheries, the Ravensthorpe and Hollowell reservoirs. These waters had seen a decline in the quality of the fishing with catch returns very low following issues with weed growth, low stocking, no Sunday fishing and only two boats and six day-tickets allowed at each site.

The club managed to negotiate improvements, which included increasing the day-tickets and boats, introducing Sunday fishing, relocating coarse fish, and providing a bailiff service at Ravensthorpe and Hollowell. This, along with increased trout stocking, was partly funded by the club.

Unfortunately, trout fishing ended at Hollowell in around 1961, but the club persuaded the Water Board to change its original plans for a coarse fishery at the

413-hectare Pitsford reservoir and stock it with trout, advising on stocking levels and facilities.

Pitsford is split by a causeway and, originally, boat fishing was only allowed in the smaller half, but it was extended to the whole water in 1977 after agreement was reached with the sailing club by club chairman Viv Church.

The 1970s saw the membership increase and the club was a founder member of the Federation of Midland Fly Fishers, which helped secure Rutland Water as a trout fishery. Pitsford had not fulfilled its expectations, so the club, with input from British carp record-holder Richard Walker, negotiated an increase in the yearly stocking from 8,000 to 24,000 trout from 1972.

In the 1980s, fishing in Pitsford’s small half was stopped without consultation when it was designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Led by club chairman Hector Woolnough, fishing was restored to most of the area after communications with the House of Commons. Hector also introduced beginners’ courses at Pitsford lodge, which he ran until his retirement from the committee in 1997 after 17 years. During the late 1990s, the club moved away from a concentration on competition fishing to a more social focus. In 2007, then membership secretary Ashley Cooper launched the club’s website.



Pitsford's Wheelyboat carries the name of the club's famous vice-president.



Bert, Don Moore's wire-haired Hungarian vizsla and MNTFA club mascot, named after Don's father.



The Members' Memorial Bench on The Gorse bank at Pitsford.



The Bob Church memorial bench – the perfect place for a fisherman's tale.

“Club tradition dictates that anyone who blanks is presented with a plastic duck”

and a Monday social evening at a local pub, where the talk is often about everything but fishing. There are social fishing days, where experienced members are paired with newcomers or those keen to improve their skills. Competitions organiser Dave Anderson puts on ten friendly boat competitions a year, followed by a BBQ. The format gives everyone a sporting chance of winning. Club tradition dictates that anyone who blanks is presented with a plastic duck.

In winter, vice chairman John Sumner helps organise talks and demonstrations and produces a quarterly newsletter to keep members informed about general business and future events. In all, a pretty good return on the £15 yearly sub (January to December), which is free for a year if you join following an Anglian Water beginners' course. MNTFA's website is run by membership secretary and web developer – their very own piece of Silicon Valley – Hank Needham, who moved to Market Harborough from San Francisco and joined the club in 2017. The site is welcoming, clear and slick. All the info you need and inclusive – it's translated into eight languages.

At the helm is the president, Grant Gibson, a keen, knowledgeable salmon fisherman as well as a regular on Pitsford and Ravensthorpe. He's always happy to share a boat with new members and pass on his experience. A day with Grant would almost certainly see visits to productive areas like Stone Barn Bay, The Cliffs and Pitsford Creek at Pitsford; and The Island, Dam and Coton car park bank at Ravensthorpe. Don't pass up on that opportunity.

In the heartland of the stillwater trout revolution, the club has a long list of past members who were influential in the development of the sport. The great Tom Ivens, author of *Still Water Fly Fishing*, was club secretary from 1952-53. Cyril Inwood and Dick Shrive, pioneers of Northampton-style boat fishing, were early members as were fly-tying innovators Bev Perkins and Cyril Lineham. Most famous of them all was club vice-president, England team manager and tackle-maker Bob Church, MBE,



Ravensthorpe was one of the club's original waters in 1952.

whose wife, and England Ladies international, Jeanette, was also a member for many years. Several other members have gained international honours: Bob Draper, Dave Currie, Richard Webb, Gareth Headland and Mark Mathieson have all fished for England.

From its conception, the club has played a major role in maintaining the quality of trout fishing in the area, something that continues to this day. Seumas and Don regularly attend meetings of the Angling Trust's Nene, Welland and Witham ▶

THE CLASS OF 2022



Graeme Pearson with a 14lb brown trout taken from Pitsford's Stone Barn Bay on a size 12 Diawl Bach.



MNTFA president Grant Gibson with a 23in (around 6lb) rainbow, caught during the 2022 President's Cup.



John Mills, coach and former treasurer, with a 15lb 2oz rainbow trout from Ravensthorpe.



Alan Harding with a clean Pitsford rainbow of 7lb.



MNTFA member Barry Jones plays a good fish taken on a Black Buzzer fished under the bung.

Consultative Association, which includes other local fishing clubs, The Nene and Welland Rivers Trusts and the Environment Agency. If that sounds rather grand, the topics discussed are grittier: fisheries and habitats, predation, enforcement, pollution control and funding for projects on the rivers and reservoirs. It's important stuff and having a seat at the table really matters.

How will the club celebrate its birthday? Don said, "I'm organising a dinner with a guest speaker in October, and we will be promoting it on our website and social media pages. We want to let people know about the club's rich history, but also about the things we continue to do to ensure it and the sport has a bright future." ■

WORDS: ROBERT HARDY
PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE

Factfile

MEMBERSHIP

£15 yearly sub (January to December), which is free for a year if you join following an Anglian Water beginners' course. Junior Membership is also free for those from 8-18 years old.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Web: mntfa.co.uk

The club uses MemberMojo for secure online membership services. Payment can be made using PayPal, cheque or cash or to the treasurer directly with cash or a cheque after registering with MemberMojo.

BENEFITS AND LOCAL TACKLE-SHOPS

Quarterly newsletter and subsidised summer BBQs. On-site tackle-shops at Pitsford, Rutland, Eyebrook and Grafham.



MEMBERS' FLIES

Tied by Graeme Pearson



The Claret Cruncher is a year-round catcher of fish.



Peter Gathercole's Green Butt Daddy is the perfect pulling fly in a good wave.



Booby GRHE, a favourite fished on its own or as the point fly on a washing line. It's an excellent corixa imitation.