

Homage to the Head Keeper

(Salmo Trutta – 2007)

“I hope you’re effing legal!” The stentorian voice came from somewhere far above me, causing a fluffed cast and a feeling of guilt brought about by years of childhood poaching, this despite being a fully paid up member of the Slitherford & Sandyford Flyfishers’ Club on the hallowed waters of the Derbyshire Wye. Initial confusion over, I spotted the grim face of the Head Keeper looking down from a limestone crag. Not a particularly auspicious start to a friendship that has endured over 20 years. I explained that I was a new member, hence my appearance late in the season. The stern look cracked into a smile and minutes later he was beside me, explaining how he was on the lookout for a notorious poacher who boasted he could fish any water in Derbyshire at will, just by carrying a fly rod and looking the part.

In those days poaching was rife and the Head Keeper, who was new to the post, already had a fund of stories about their antics. There was an occasion when he apprehended a chap boldly fishing a worm in the President’s Pool, accompanied by his girlfriend. The poacher initially accepted that it was a fair cop but his girlfriend thought otherwise, proceeding to abuse the Head Keeper, verbally and physically. The poacher became involved in the melee and the Head Keeper’s dog, Barney, clamping his teeth into the poacher’s *gluteus maximus*, refused to let go. As the fracas developed, the Head Keeper noticed that as he swung the poacher around, Barney was grimly hanging on, parallel to the ground. Eventually calm was restored and Barney was persuaded to disengage, subsequently being proposed as President of the Club in honour of his courage.

These days we still have our fair share of poaching incidents but Barney would be turning in his grave if he knew about the politically correct nonsense the Head Keeper has to go through to secure a conviction. His greatest achievement in the poaching department has been the establishment of a network of locals and neighbouring keepers who report any suspicious activity, combined with a vastly improved relationship with Derbyshire Police who now view poaching as a proper offence, having realised that poachers tend to be serious criminals on their day off. A call out now could easily involve the Firearms Unit and the Helicopter as well as the local bobby on a track bike.

Fortunately for the Head Keeper, our stretch has been officially classified by the WTT as a perfect trout breeding factory, so apart from a bit of tree work and litter picking, he has little else to do. During the Winter months, when he takes his six - month paid holiday, he may pass the time playing golf, feeding the fish and improving the facilities in the Hut, which now boasts a fitted kitchen and a luxurious rustic toilet facility. This is the most important aspect of the Head Keeper’s role, for the Hut is at the very epicentre of the social life of the members, not to mention the Police, Footpath Diversity Outreach Officers, Nature Reserve Wardens, WTT Directors, Environment Agency Fisheries Officers and other local ne’er do wells. It is here that the Head Keeper has found his true vocation. He is in his element helping us to celebrate Opening Day, dispensing his famed bacon and tomato fricassee butties, cooked to perfection on the gas barbeque. For those wishing to fish late into the evening, the welcoming light in the Hut window might indicate that the Head Keeper

has returned from the Buxton Tandoori with supper. On days when the fishing is slow (thankfully very rare) he may help us pass the time with a little pitch and put with golf balls retrieved from the river, courtesy of the inaccuracy of Buxton's golfers. As our cricketers say, what goes on tour, stays on tour (if only!), and so it is within the Hut, where over coffee and brandy the most outrageous nonsense is talked and the insane goings - on in the world are put to rights.

Equally, we may find the Head Keeper in a less than happy mood, brought on by thoughtless "tourists" who seem to think that the right to roam includes our particular piece of private land and that we should lower the level of the river so that they may walk along dry footpaths without sullyng their white trainers. Or it may be that a member who should know better has allowed his dog to foul the bankside grasses during the strimming season. These little incidents can result in petulant threats of resignation, which are usually withdrawn on acceptance, for the Head Keeper knows only too well that there are many who would leap at the chance to be considered for the Best Job in the World. Whether or not they would be able to follow in his footsteps remains to be seen.