

The Head Keeper and the Curse of the Bobby's Helmet
by David Marriott

Keen followers of the Head Keeper's career will recall that by the end of last season he had things pretty well sewn up. Poaching was under control, the mayfly was re-established for the first time in living memory, the skins of the only mink in the neighbourhood were now adorning the wall of the Hut and the fishing was so good that the members were eating out of his hand. Well, more correctly, out of takeaway containers from the Buxton Tandoori. In the twilight of his career all that was left to do was to find a successor. Even this seemingly intractable problem was solved by the merger of the Club with its downstream neighbour, bringing with it two excellent keepers. He could look forward to his annual six month winter holiday with the quiet satisfaction of a job well done. Perhaps he might stay on for a season or two to ensure a smooth hand over.

But even as he contemplated this happy prospect, something was stirring, deep in the leafy wastes of the Buxton Parks Department tip. An alien organism that would, during the steamy months of the following summer, make him wish he had taken early retirement when it was offered. For there in the tip, through which flow the innocent, chuckling headwaters of the infant Derbyshire Wye, lay the germinating seeds of thousand upon thousand Himalayan Balsam plants. These 21st Century Triffids grow rapidly in great swathes, up to two metres high. The seeds quickly spread down the watercourse until the banks are covered with the plants, cutting out the light so that the native plants cannot thrive. When they die back they leave the banks barren and exposed, leading to erosion in the winter floods. They have become a real menace along our rivers and, with the equally invasive Japanese Knot Weed, are a notifiable species.

Such is the generous nature of the Head Keeper that in his spare time he keeps an unpaid eye on the water of our upstream neighbour. It was here that the advance parties of this loathsome plant were spotted. The first attempts at removing them were disastrous, for the seed - pods burst on contact, sending seeds far and wide. Indeed, both its scientific name *Impatiens Glandulifera* and its colloquial name, *Policeman's Helmet* must have been given by a botanist with a sense of humour, since its ejaculatory profusion leaves little to the imagination. Improvisation was required and the problem was overcome by putting a plastic sack, condom – fashion, over the heads of the plant so that the seed - pods burst impotently inside. Quick work was made of these interlopers but the keepers reasoned that to get there the seeds must have travelled down stream, from another site. They followed the river miles upstream, finding more and more infestations and, just as they neared the headwaters, made the awful discovery of the Mother Source. Drove of the stuff covering a council tip, with a small stream running through it on its way to the Hallowed Waters.

The council staff appeared oblivious to the seriousness of the problem. Fortunately permission to enter the site was readily granted by the tip manager. The keepers agreed that there was no option but to clear the site by hand and they set to work immediately on the back - breaking job of removing the plants. The work was made even more unpleasant by the hot and humid conditions, the sickly sweet smell of the flowers and the attentions of the increasingly irritated bees and wasps, who, understandably, were not best pleased at the removal of their main source of nectar.

The keepers worked on this project day after day throughout the summer until the site was cleared. Even then, they would find new plants springing up after a few days. This was not what the Head Keeper had in mind when he agreed to stay on. He had been looking forward to his last few seasons, fondly imagining an Indian Summer pottering about the Hut, chatting with members and engaging in polite banter with the poaching community, all the while keeping a paternal eye on the New Head Keeper and his Assistant as they busied themselves doing whatever it is that keepers are supposed to do. He was clearly going to have to call it a day – a conclusion rapidly reached when it dawned on him that the eradication programme was going to take several years. Fortunately, the Head Keeper had for many years assiduously accumulated a host of useful ailments, which he would summon up, Munchausen – like, whenever things started to look strenuous. This called for something creative but not terminal, something that would permit light duties but preclude botanical warfare. A balsamic allergy perhaps? Botanophobia? Yes, he thought, a smile playing about his lips - they would do nicely.

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