

Fascinated by water even as a child, Simon Cain now devotes his life to restoring rivers. Text and photographs by Charles Stuart

Cain: The Able River Mender

IN November 10 years ago I called Simon Cain. We'd never met but I'd picked his name out of a book on the chalkstreams. He'd been "restoring" the banks of the Wylde, turning round the drought-ridden river. I liked the idea that someone could mould something as dynamic as a river. Simon was an itinerant river mender, a watery cowboy, catching work here and there, but he put food on the table by restoring and building fly rods.

Simon's workshop was a blacksmith's shop on the banks of the Wiltshire Avon. Inside were

an earth floor, a varnishing cupboard for rods, a dusty bench and hundreds of pieces of split cane. He built superb fly rods, though the rumour was you had to wait your turn and shouldn't hold your breath. His mind was elsewhere.

Simon's mother told me that he'd frequently go to see her late in the evening. "He'd be wet through from walking in rivers." He talked about rivers as if they were alive, like a poet and a lover. I was thrilled. I listened: "The river is a living thing. When it's sick I take its pain into myself. I work all day to give it new life. I can

feel its flow, what its saying, I know what it needs and I can sense its recovery, its insects, and plants and birds and animals returning."

Back then, with few people willing to commit money to this new idea of river restoration, and the National Rivers Authority actively hostile to the process, only Simon believed that he could make a success of it. His friends twiddled thumbs and waited for rods to be fixed.

But enthusiasm is infectious, especially when driven by the romanticism which grips Simon every time he talks about water, and



gradually projects done for nothing evolved into projects done for real money.

Now the projects have to wait their turn like the rods used to. The blacksmith's shop is empty and Simon operates from a renovated barn just downriver. Simon's company, the Chalkstream Angler, runs the tackle sales, rod building and fly-fishing on a few miles of river out the back while upstairs his desk spills over with diagrams of rivers, slides, photographs and project reports. Once a year, Simon and the Environment Agency (EA) organise a river

menders' day here – talk and drink in equal measure. Simon calls it the “powder keg society” where the only common ground is a passion for rivers. There's a gang of river menders now; some are scientific in their approach. Simon is still the most intuitive.

Simon grew up in Tobago where his father was a missionary priest. It's obvious from family stories that he was interested in water even as a small boy. “For the palm trees, crabs and fishes, bless ye the Lord,” was Simon's refrain at family prayers while other brothers and sisters blessed Land Rovers and bicycles. But his big talent was for music. Simon played the cello so well that it was expected he would become a musician. But when the time came Simon took a short trip to Fiji and New Zealand. It turned into a long trip. For years he lived off his wits and his fishing rod, and when he came back it was as a split-cane rod builder. He set up a workshop in the bell tower of St Edmund's church in Salisbury.

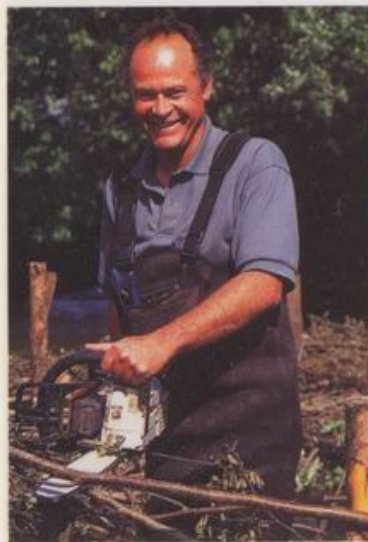
I'd never seen this bell tower workshop, so last time I met up with Simon we went to have a look. St Edmund's church is now an arts centre. The curator unlocked the door to the bell tower. “Sixty-six steps,” said Simon. I counted, and he was right. At the top I asked Simon whether anything was left from his time here. He looked around.

“Don't think so, I cleared out pretty well. You know it was amazing anyone came up here. You'd hear the old colonels on the stairs, a few steps at a time, lots of wheezing. Some would take five minutes. Oh yes there is. Look here, it's the hole for the varnishing tank, cut into the floorboards.”

Now that we were in Salisbury Simon was impatient to show me his latest project, 300yd of the River Avon in the middle of town. The river runs in a long curve linking two bridges either side of the busy city centre. There's a pub, a footpath, blocks of flats and a small park. The river is sandwiched between concrete banks. Before Simon started work there were only a few plants in the river and harsh angular edges to the concrete. That a river restoration project even happened here at all is a measure of how far things have come in the last 10 years; the EA, Agenda 21 Bio-diversity group, the district council, English Nature, the Wild Trout

Society, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and Sage all joined forces to sponsor city centre work that flood defence engineers would not have countenanced in open countryside 10 years ago.

“When I started work on the River Wylye in 1989, my first project, I put the plans in and they were refused. They just thought it was too risky. I was planning to alter miles of riverbank.” Simon's proposal to build a new riverbank, narrowing the old channel in places to half of its original width was radical at the



Simon Cain's numerous projects on the River Wylye in Wiltshire (left) are seen as radical

time. “My boss said ‘You're starting on Monday, with or without permission.’ He was a big guy and I didn't want to argue, but during the project I was in a permanent state of paranoia. The local gossip started followed by an article in the *Independent*, and then the Authority wrote to us demanding that we cease work. Everything hit the fan. They were all over the place with measuring kit. In the end they couldn't find anything wrong and gave us retrospective permission. Funny thing was they called it a ‘fruitful collaboration’.”

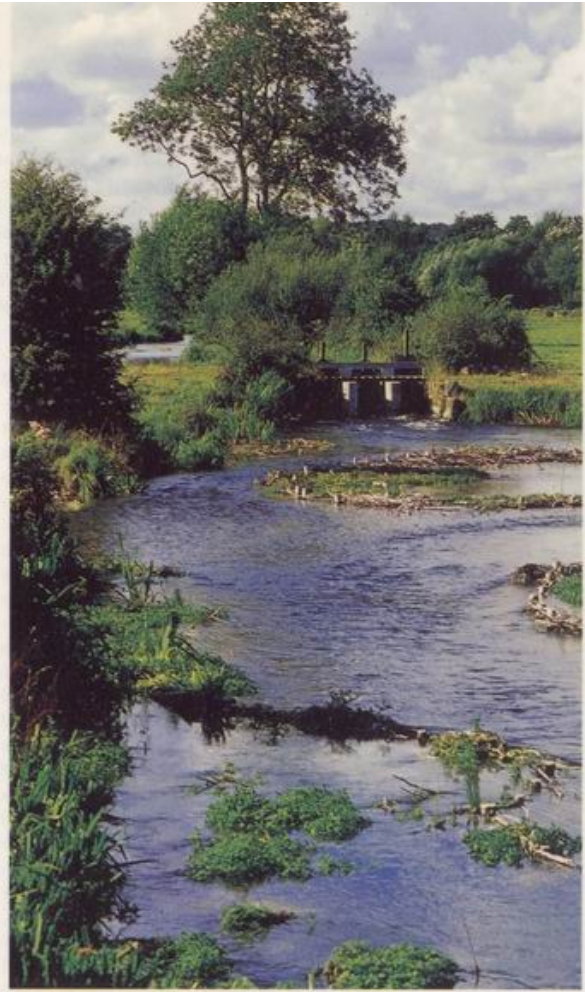
Since then the concept of river restoration has become more readily accepted. Flood defence departments of the EA have softened in their approach and there is a growing school of thought that approves of the “two-stage” channel which Simon's work, among others', helped to promote. The engineer's dream of a trapezoid channel is not only terrible for wildlife, it probably exacerbates floods; a narrow river which can spill harmlessly over broad, flat banks is better on all counts.

At the Salisbury site we looked down the geometric formality of the old concrete banks to a sinuous line of wattle – hazel posts driven into the river bed and interwoven with coppiced hazel. Soil had been packed down behind this new river-bank, the edge was lined with plants such as flag iris, meadowsweet and purple loosestrife. The new banks squeezed in the river. The water bounced off edges, swirls and eddies where once the flow would have been linear and slow. The gravel was polished clean by the faster water.

“There are also ‘hazel mattresses’ on the bed of the river,” said Simon. “They'll catch weed and start a weed bed. These bank edges will grow and plants will spill over the edge forming an organic margin – great habitat for >



Simon has been restoring the river in the centre of Salisbury (above). His team of river menders work on a project on the River Avon (below and right)



young trout and salmon, great habitat for crayfish. Birds will nest along these banks. This was a wonderful project – a project for schoolchildren, for anglers, for the people of Salisbury.”

We ate a sandwich sitting on a park bench at the lower end of the new river and threw bits of bread to a large wild trout which had taken up just off the curling backflow created by the wattle bank. The trout raced ducks to the bread.

After that we drove to the Avon just up from Simon's workshop. Simon's river menders – he now employs a small team – were weaving branches in and out of a line of hazel posts on the far side of the river. Simon leaves the physical work to his team-mates now, and explained why by turning a creaking shoulder until it clicks. “Ten years of those posts and my shoulders are knackered.

“The thing about this project is we've got something from nothing. The carrier behind this river was derelict and the river here in very poor shape. By narrowing here, I've built up the weed beds which have raised water levels. The owner loves it. Now there is enough water to

run the carrier, we've built another few hundred yards of river and it's crawling with wild trout.”

This new carrier looked like it'd been there forever, despite the fact that it was built only last year. Simon calls his work “soft-engineering”. Soil and faggots of willow and hazel soften into the existing environment very quickly. Plants wash downriver, catch on the wattle walls and start growing even before soil has been used to fill in behind. Before long a rich diversity of plants colonises the river-bank. The profile of the river bed changes. Ranunculus and bright green starwort start to grow where previously there was only silt. The trout, grayling, salmon parr and bullheads move in by themselves.

“I try to let the river heal itself. I listen to it,” he said. “Walton said something like ‘Study to be quiet.’ He'd have been into all this,” I replied. “Let's go to the place I did my first job. I followed a dredger up the Ebble and planted weeds in the stream he'd just wrecked. Naive, but my heart was in it,” said Simon.

So we drove to the Ebble to end the day fishing, strung up one fly rod and fished up

from the bridge where the dredger had been 15 years earlier. A few fish moved, but they were spooky. Simon caught a rainbow which had escaped from one of the Ebble's fish farms. A few casts later he pulled in a better fish – a handsome brownie that we stopped to photograph.

On our way from the river to the pub Simon talked about what had led him to his river work. “I was into Thoreau,” he said, “and I found this quote which was an inspiration at the time ‘Follow your genius closely enough, and it will not fail to show you a fresh prospect every hour.’ I remember quoting that in a letter to my parents at the time I decided to spend my life fixing rivers. And Thoreau was right.” □

HOW TO GET YOUR RIVER OR ROD FIXED

Simon Cain can still fix your river and your rod. For a report on the state of your stream, call 01722 782999; www.riverdoctor.co.uk For a custom-built fly rod in cane or with a Sage blank, or for split-cane rod repairs, call the Chalkstream Angler on 01722 782602; www.chalkstreamangler.co.uk