

BROADLY SPEAKING

Our man behind the gates, **Richard Jordan-Baker**, shares life living at Broadlands



I am devoting all of this month's page to tell you about the 17-year-old boy who, after only spending one day with a river keeper on the River Piddle, decided it was how he wanted to spend his working life.

The 17-year-old son of the local 'Bobby' who's way of life is now caring for Broadlands' four-and-a-half miles of the famous chalk stream River Test, its coarse fishing lake, carrier and a stretch of the River Blackwater.

We shared some of our favourite medicine from Romsey's Flack Manor brewery one evening recently and talked about life on the river.

After a seven-year stint managing five miles of the River Itchen, Jon Hall arrived at Broadlands, still only 26 years old, to manage one of the most famous and difficult stretches of the river, a stretch that is broad, fast, of varying depth and close to the urban outer reaches of Southampton – geography that brings good and bad.

The summer months are, I think it's safe to say, the easier months of Jon's year. It is a little warmer, a little drier, the days are longer, there are abundant picnics to be shared and it's all about people skills, weed-cutting and some mowing and strimming. The key is making sure his customers, the fishermen, whether dry-fly on a trout beat or bait on the carp lake, are happy. This, even when it's cold, the river is in flood, the fish aren't rising and the 'hatch' isn't what it might have been.

The winter, so now, is the test of the river keeper. It's basically, long, cold, hard work, mainly on your own. Regardless of the weather there are bridges and groins to be repaired, trees to be felled, pruned and, on occasion, pulled from the fast-flowing treacherous water. This isn't for wimps! The digital age has brought some help in the form of cameras, drones and iPhones, especially for safety, but, there's no escape from icy mornings, bitter winds and very cold water. It was of course, very easy to have this described while snug by the log fire in the Three Tuns nursing my second pint of medicine.

The summer sees the all-too-famous trout and salmon fishermen walking the beats, casting a fly, watching the water, watching the insects and stalking the fish as they lurk in the pools and in the moving water stay still, using their tails to effortlessly fight the current. The winter sees the coarse gentlemen arrive – after the grayling, roach, chub and pike. They sit on the bank in the perishing cold, rods out to the water – a wholly different experience but still hunter and prey. As Bob and Paul say....' and away'. Jon's job, when one thinks about it, is much like his father's –



Jon Hall looks after five miles of the River Itchen

Guardian of the stream

the village Bobby. He protects the assets and the people on his beats; is often confidante and teacher, mentor and guide and, more often than not is a lone worker.

Like his father, it's a vocation, not a job. He must be, as far as he can be, all things to all fishermen.

As ever, for my reader, I am reading Roald Dahl's letters to his mother, *Love from Boy*. Like me he went to Repton. He hated it, as is abundantly clear from his letters home

and his short story, one of his *Tales of the Unexpected*, *Galloping Foxley*. No wine tonight but instead an ice cold v and t. On the turntable, the new Cure album, *Songs From a Lost World*.

If he's not out frightening a poacher half to death, (you have to be a toughie as well) Jon is currently reading a book about carp fishing in the late 1980s. He won't stop! He'll be listening to AC/DC or Metallica and likes a glass of Talisker. He deserves a large one! ●