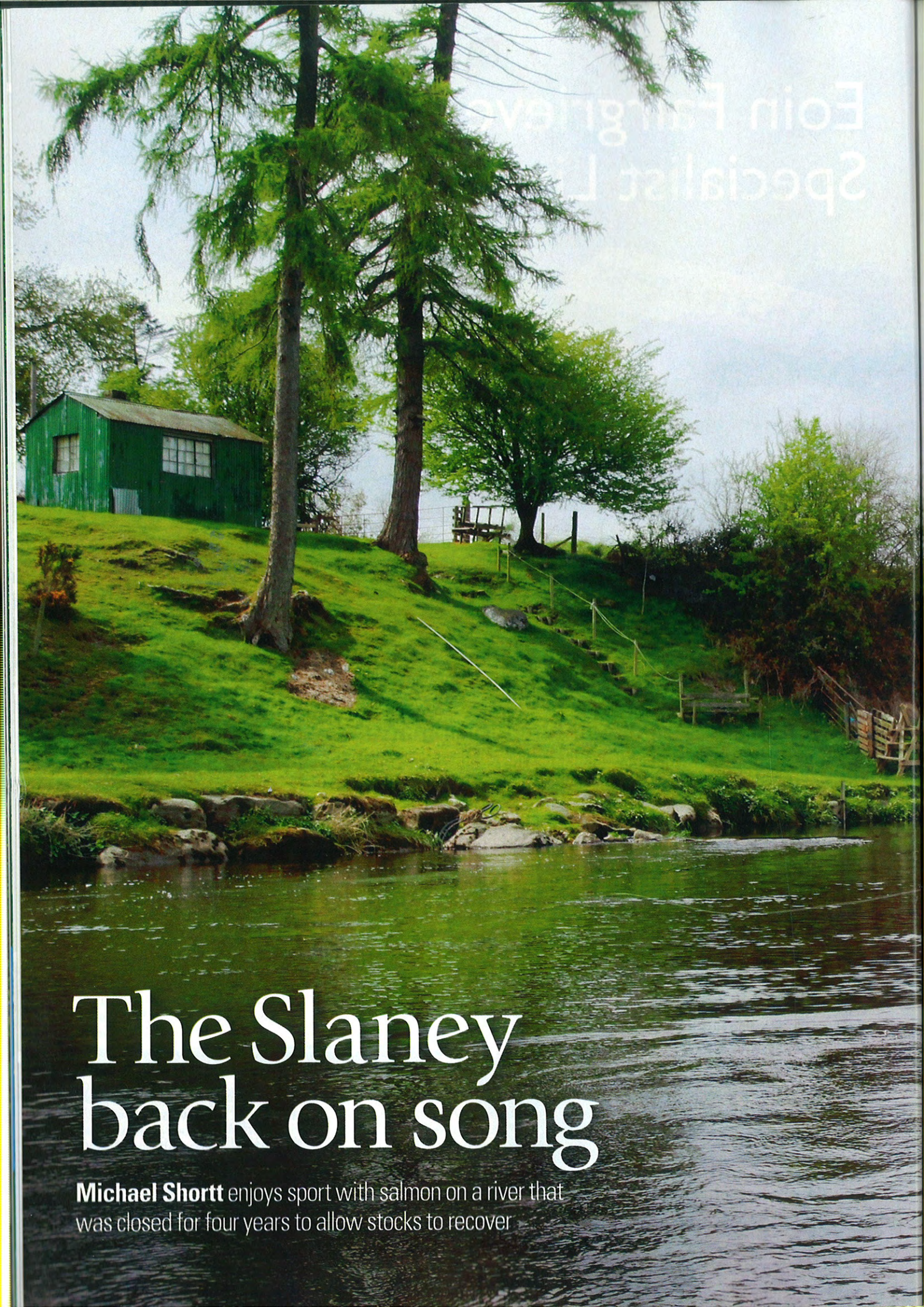




Eoin Fanning
Specialist

The Slaney back on song

Michael Shortt enjoys sport with salmon on a river that was closed for four years to allow stocks to recover

**Michael Shortt
speycasts his way
down the Batteries,
with the old fishing hut
on the far bank.**



The Slaney back on song



Michael Shortt has been fishing for 60-odd years and has been T&S's Northern Ireland correspondent for more than 20 of them. His favourite rivers are in the west of Ireland.

WE DROVE INTO the rain south-east of Portlaoise and it was still with us as we entered Bunclody. We stopped at the bridge. The Slaney was in high, brown flood. Four weeks earlier our trip had been postponed because, for a month, there had been no water. Now it looked as if we were to be beaten by too much. As guests of the Slaney River Trust we were to fish different fisheries over the next three days on this river famous for its spring salmon. Closed to salmon fishing in recent years, due to a serious decline in the run, it reopened last season on a catch-and-release basis but was lightly fished. We booked into Moss Cottage and, convincing ourselves that the rain was easing, headed for a pint and something to eat.

We arrive at the hut to find the gauge reading 4 ft and the river muddy brown. "You won't be fishing today" is the greeting from gillie Michael Donohoe, "But it's falling fast and will fish tomorrow. You'll get salmon - it'll be in perfect order." He tells us of the four fish, 10 lb-16 lb, taken by Anthony Doran just before the

flood, and another estimated at 18 lb. Better than biscuits with our coffee! Mark Corps gets on his mobile and with a series of calls rearranges our schedule. Luckily we will be able to fish Clohamon tomorrow and if, in the words of Kingsmill Moore, who lived and fished on the river for many years, "Heaven attends our wish", and Michael is right, we'll have a fish or two.

After much discussion about the pools, the lies and the flies we might use there is still a day to fill. From bridge to bridge, through rich farmland and past old woods, we follow the coloured river to Enniscorthy. We are not far from Wexford, where the Slaney reaches the sea some 70 miles from its source on Lugnaquilla in the Wicklow mountains. Leaving the Glen of Imaal it grows as it heads west then south eastward, flowing fast and widening, past Baltinglass, Rathvilly, Tullow, Bunclody and Enniscorthy to the tide. Above Bunclody the river valley is narrower, hilly and wooded, with a succession of streams and relatively shallow pools. Below, the valley widens, with much arable land, and the river deepens.

It's now late afternoon and we head upstream to check the gauge. The river is still big but less coloured so we give it a quick, fruitless, throw below the weir on our way to eat and an early night.

Next morning we arrive to find the river has dropped to 2 ft 6 in and, still clearing and falling, is fishable. Tackling up, I feel under-gunned; 15-footers are in sight as I put together my 12½-footer and a fast intermediate. I add my leader and Michael's pick, a medium Cascade conehead. I arm it with a single barbless hook. Mark and I will fish the top of the beat, including the famous Kiln Hole - a certainty at this height, we're told! Below the weir we start on the left bank at the Garden Stream. I go first; Mark will follow.

Full of hope I make my first Slaney casts, remembering what Paul Sheehan wrote: "In spring salmon fishing, it is not the despair that gets you, but the hope." All is good; the water is visibly clearing as I repeat my casts and work towards the Kiln Hole. At the end of the Garden the

stream hits the opposite side and bends round to the left in deeper water under a higher bank. I'm fishing into the Kiln. Mark shouts, "If you don't get a fish there you don't deserve one." Casting a longer line I fish expectantly round the curve. The "V" at the run-out is getting closer and I've only a couple of casts left when the line stops and I feel the pull. I lift into the fish and it's on.

It doesn't feel big but knocks deeply in midstream before making a short downstream run. It holds position in the faster water and is reluctant to move. I walk it slowly upstream. It begins to fight and after a number of short, powerful runs and more deep head-shaking I bring it off the stream and at the second attempt net my first Slaney fish - not silver, not big, but a solid 12 lb 7 oz spring salmon. I return the fish and Mark takes the front as we fish through the Barrister's Cast and into Tail of the Island.

Lunchtime and we head for the hut. We have seen no fish and wonder how many are in the river. Conversation with other rods tells of lost fish below the hut and others sighted. Encouraged, we cross the river by boat and start at the Batteries just above the hut. The river is a delight to fish, with either a clear bank or enough footing at the edges to allow wading and easy spey casting. We work our way downstream but it is beginning to turn colder with a stiff easterly breeze. By late afternoon we have reached the bottom of the beat without so much as a handshake and only one sighting. We give the Garden and the Kiln another throw. Neither of us has a touch and it is now pretty cold.

That evening Mark and I join members of the Slaney River Trust. Over a pint, John Carroll tells me that in the 1900s estuary nets would catch 12,000-15,000 salmon annually, that numbers fell to 3,000-4,000 by the '60s and by 2000 to as few as 1,000. The disease, UDN, also affected the rod catch very hard in the late '60s. Fisheries where 200-300 were recorded were catching just 15-20. Research showed that, since 1970, the spawning stock had been below the conservation limit in every year but two. ▶

"The 'V' at the run-out is getting closer and I've only a couple of casts left when the line stops and I feel the pull. I lift into the fish"



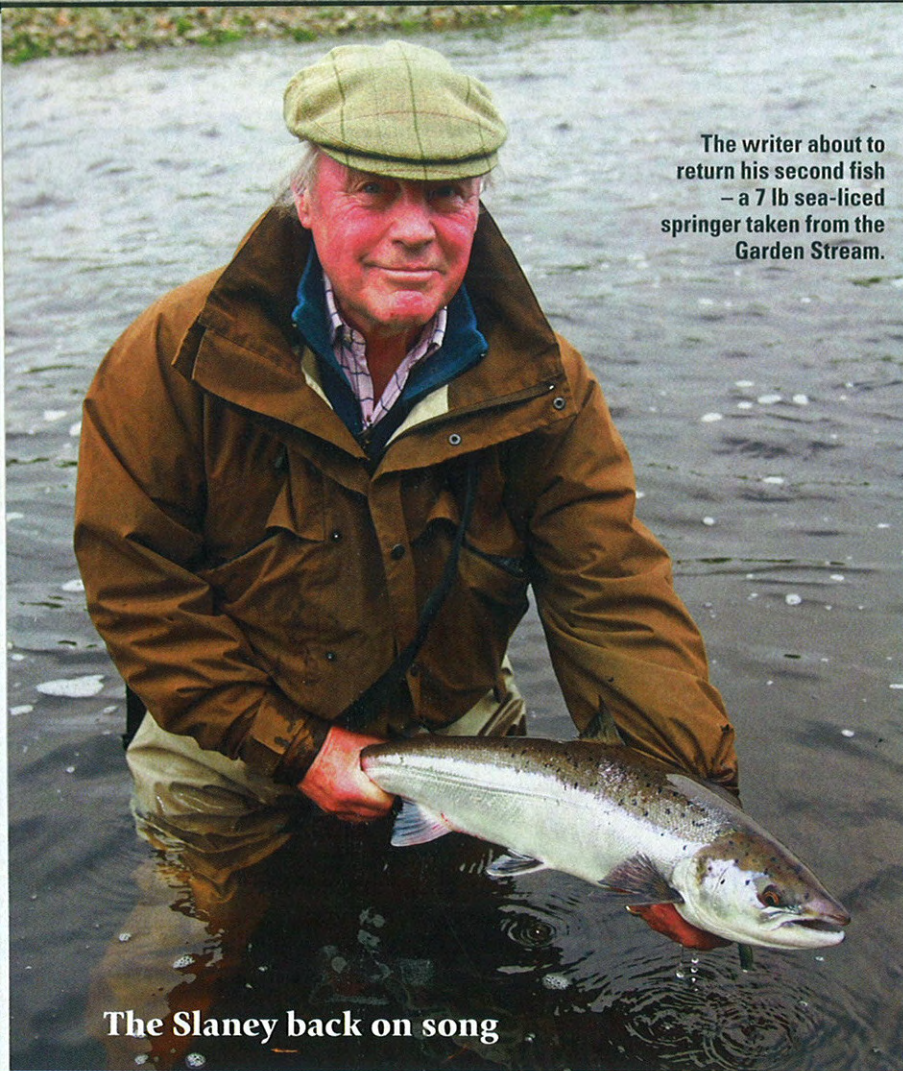
A conehead Cascade - the fly that did the business. Michael fishes it with a barbless single hook.



A cast below Clohamon weir, with the water beginning to clear.



Michael nets his first Slaney springer at the Kiln Hole.



The writer about to return his second fish – a 7 lb sea-liced springer taken from the Garden Stream.

The Slaney back on song



“The fish never showed as Mark played it ... Some five minutes later the rod sprang straight and he shouted something unprintable”

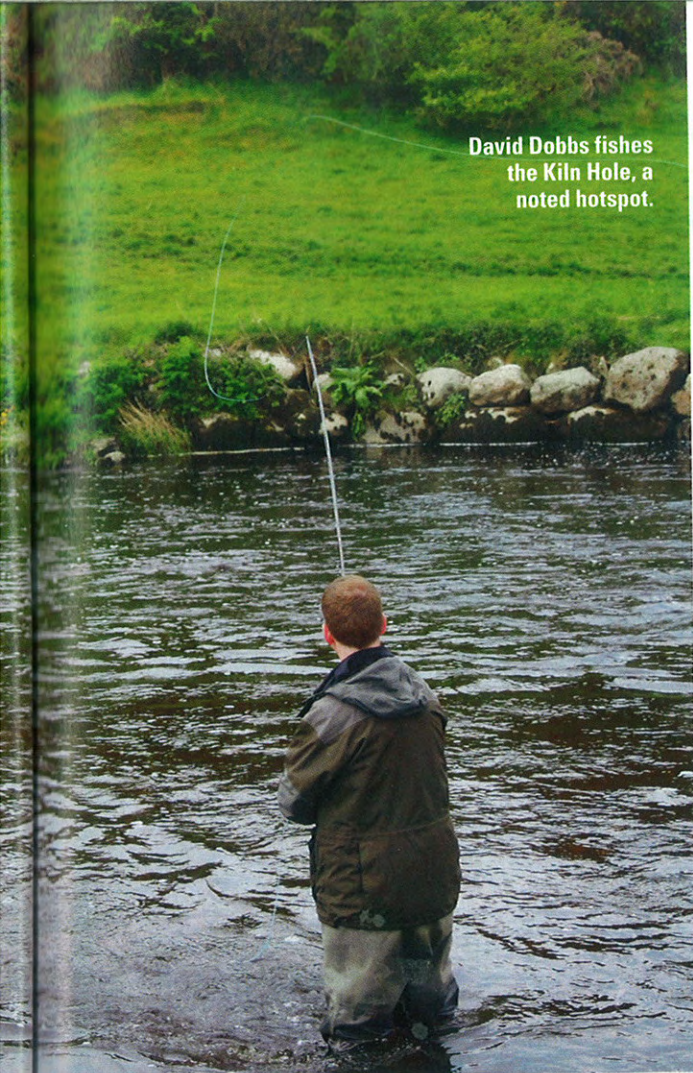
Salmon stocks in Ireland are now managed on an individual river basis and each river must exceed its conservation limit before any exploitation of fish is allowed. Due to this serious decline in numbers, collective action was needed and the trust was formed in 2005 to represent clubs, fishery owners and anglers. With grants from the European Regional Development Fund, private capital from clubs and fishery owners and help from the Central and Eastern Fisheries Boards (now Inland Fisheries Ireland) much work has been done. The river was closed from 2007-2010 and since then has operated on a catch-and-release basis. Before then few salmon were returned. With more salmon on the spawning beds returning numbers, and catches, have improved.

Our last day was a return to Clohamon - due to the flood and altered plans we would be unable

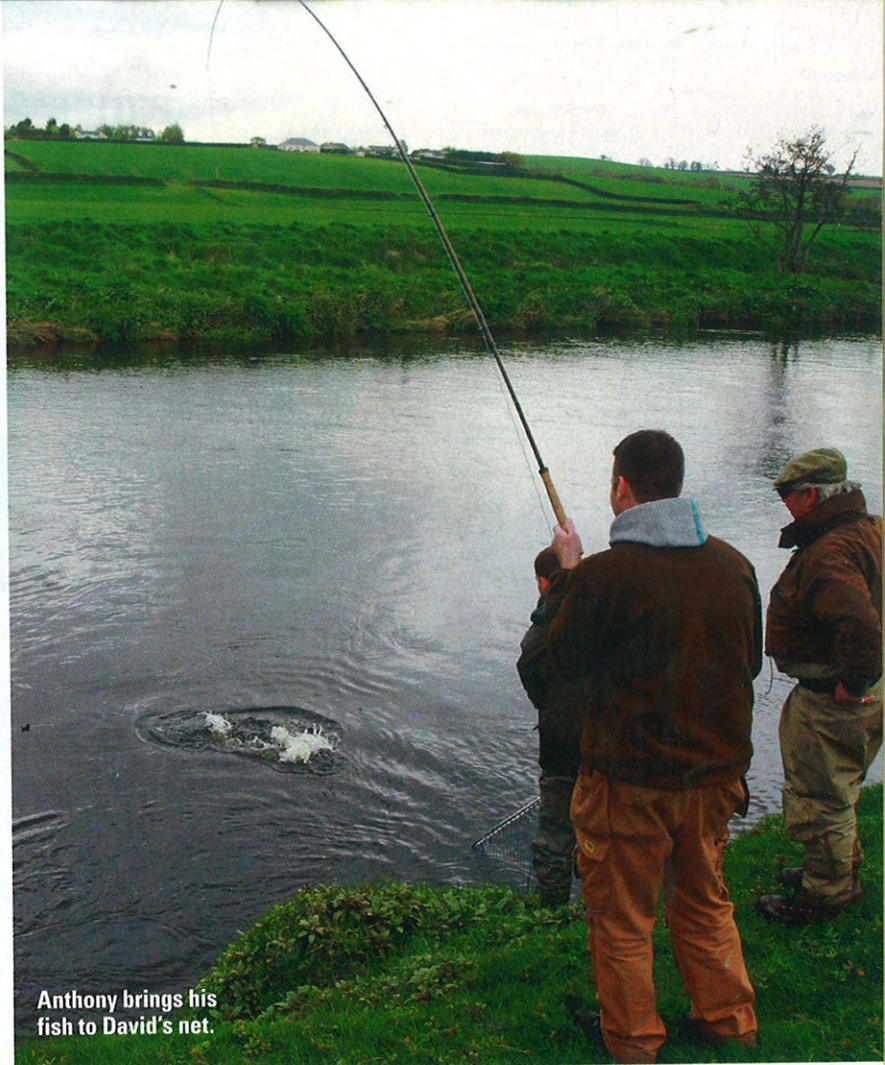
to fish other water. I wasn't complaining as David Dobbs, our host, excitedly told us that we wouldn't find the beat in better condition - even better than yesterday. We crossed in the boat and walked upstream and started, once more, below the weir. The water was clear and inviting, the streams running well, and David promised fish for us all. I insisted that he and Mark begin - I'd had my fish - and I would follow. Mark started in the Garden Stream as David reminded him that the fish were on our side and to be ready for a take on the dangle. I chatted as I watched David begin in the pool above. I'm not sure if it was a wish to be rid of me or being a good host but he was insistent that I fish - even suggesting that I head to the Kiln! Mark was now halfway down the Garden so I began behind him. I cast to the far bank and as my fly caught the stream I wondered if it were too heavy in the lower water. I felt it touch

bottom a couple of times as it swung to my bank. Too lazy to change, I cast again. This time it stopped just as it started to swim and, assuming I'd bottomed, I lifted to free the fly.

Suddenly the rod bent and a silver fish rolled before turning downstream! I'm not sure who was the more surprised, me or the fish. I hadn't expected a take on the other side but thankful - and lucky - that it was hooked I gathered control. After a number of downstream runs it held in mid stream while David readied the net. One more run when it first saw the net and then David lifted a pretty sea-liced fish of 7 lb. After much comment on hooking it behind Mark we, now encouraged, returned to the fishing. I watched as they fished through the Kiln and Barrister's without success. David then gave Mark explicit instructions on how to fish the next short run. Pointing to a stone he said, "Just out from that is



David Dobbs fishes the Kiln Hole, a noted hotspot.



Anthony brings his fish to David's net.

where you'll get the take." A few casts later, just where David had said, Mark's rod bent and he was into a heavy salmon. The fish never showed as Mark played it, making repeated short, deep, head-shaking runs. Some five minutes later the rod sprang straight and Mark shouted something unprintable.

We continued.

We had reached the stream below the hut, and our last chance before lunch. I saw David's line straighten and pull off his reel. He lifted and all looked good when the line slackened – just a handshake. Over lunch, deliciously provided by David's wife Alex, there was, inevitably, much discussion about the merits of single, double and treble hooks. Would the fish have been lost using trebles? I use Kamasan Aberdeen hooks in sizes 2 or 4 depending upon the tube, and add a longer plastic sleeve to my tubes the better to hold the shank. Others use shorter, rounded carp hooks. Does it make a difference? Perhaps, but I like to see a good gape on my singles. Confidence in what you use is more important.

We fished our afternoon from Taylor's to the bottom of the beat at the Major's Stream. We saw a single fish but touched none. The weather turned colder, the breeze turned easterly, and, after the encouraging morning, our spirits were duller. Walking back, we met Anthony Doran, he of the pre-flood four fish, who had come to see how we'd done. He'd seen a fresh fish in Taylor's on his walk down. I suggested that he might take my rod and catch it – he could do no worse than Mark or David! Reaching Taylor's, David handed over his rod. Anthony stripped line from the reel and on his first proper cast lifted into the fish! Feeling unsuitably dressed for photographs, he handed the rod to David saying, "Job done." Between them, some minutes later another bright sea-liced fish was returned to end our day.

It was encouraging to hear that fish, sea-liced and in the high teens, had been caught throughout the system. It is wonderful that these fish are returning to a river famous for salmon that are almost entirely multi-sea-winter. Many fish

between 20 lb and 30 lb were caught in the 1950s and early '60s. Perhaps the Gatcheen, Fortunes, the Golden pool, the Barrister's, Crow's Grove, the Fairy Seat, Escurra, the Well Stream, the Dining Table, Bagenal's and the Major's – pools famous in the great history of the Slaney – will once more see the fish of old. The future of the Slaney is in good hands.



Factfile

■ **Slaney River Trust:** www.slaneyrivertrust.ie
Fishing is controlled by clubs, syndicates and riparian owners.

■ **Ballintemple Fishery:** Contact Tom Butler on 00353 (0)59 915 5037 or 00353 (0)86 817 9238.

■ **Clohamon Fishery:** Contact David Dobbs. Tel: 00353 (0)879 673 111.

■ **Enniscorthy Anglers:** Contact Danny's Angling and Outdoors, St Senans Rd, Enniscorthy. Tel: 00353 (0) 87 900 5991.

■ **Solsboro Fishing Association:** Contact Bernard Cash (daytime only). Tel: 00353 (0) 87 922 5536.

■ **Tullow Salmon and Trout Anglers' Association:** Contact John Duffy. Tel: 00353 (0) 59 915 2740.

■ **Moyadie, Monfin, Glass Door and upper Ballycarney beats:** Contact David French of Fanning French and Associates on 00353 (0)87 922 1833.

■ **Farmleigh Fishery:** Contact Carmel Gormley on 00353 (0) 87 253 9474.

■ **Other information from:** www.fisheriesireland.ie, www.failteireland.ie and www.mosscoottageireland.com

