



THE LOCH NEAR LEICESTER

Scot Steve Cullen feels right at home on pine-fringed
Thornton Reservoir in the English Midlands

THORNTON IS ONE OF THE first boat venues to open in the Midlands and is popular in February and March. It's more than 150 years old, the first reservoir built to supply Leicester, so it's an old-timer compared to whippersnappers like Rutland, Grafham and Draycote.

At only 75 acres, it's also small potatoes compared to those other Midlands waters. Before it became accessible to all anglers, a previous owner — I think Leicester Water — ruled that you must live within the parish to wet a line. Now, it suits many anglers, although the locals are called locals for a reason.

Deepest at the dam, some 30ft, most of the lake is shallow at around 12ft. This makes it an ideal venue for the floating line. It also appeals to float-tubers, that lesser-known corner of our sport. Many "tubers" head to Thornton in the warmer months, attracted by its small size and sheltered banks.

Early in the year, things are often easy enough: find the fish and tailor your tactics, usually lures fished deeper in the water. The fish are found along the bank opposite the lodge in the Thornton Arm and down towards Wood Bank — rarely elsewhere.

But Thornton isn't always straightforward. Damsel hatches must be seen to be believed. The nymphs are on the move from June through July when I prefer to fish from the bank because the trout are tight to the shallows, chasing nymphs in and around the abundant weedbeds. I like to keep moving, with a light rod, 10ft 6wt, a longish leader and single damsel nymph — no garish damsel lures; instead, proper imitations. My favourite is a Tasmanian pattern called a Pot Scrubber Nymph. It charms the damsel-feeders. If the fish are jumping out to take the adult flies — which you will see at Thornton — I switch from the nymph to an Olive Midas dry-fly. It does a consistent job on the surface.

There's great dry-fly fishing, too, across the middle. The best winds are from the east or west,



Scandal: rumour has it the lodge was once a location for the trysts of Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson.

Thornton's wooded banks offer shade and shelter.



“No garish damsel lures; instead, proper imitations”



taking you all the way from the corner of the dam into the Thornton Arm, and vice versa.

A single dry-fly will often outfish a team, and red is the best colour: a Bob's Bits in a soft wind and a Big Red in a blow. Again, I'll use a light rod, and expect fish in the 2lb-3lb range with an occasional surprise. The venue record is a huge 14lb 2oz rainbow.

There are a handful of brownies to be caught, too; the best in recent years was an impressive 10lb 2oz. Thornton was once known as a brown trout water, created to look like a Scottish lochan, with wild fish spawning in the Markfield Brook. Sadly, thanks to industry and the nearby M1, the resulting pollution means those days are gone.

I have fished Thornton many times, though not much in recent years. I was looking forward to seeing what, if anything, had changed. I rang the fishery boss, Ifor Jones, and somehow, despite their being a competition on the day of my spring visit, he managed to find me a boat.

I had read the previous week's reports and sport had been productive with almost all the trout caught in the small, relatively shallow Thornton Arm. Fast-sinking lines with Cat's Whiskers and black lures were the high-scoring methods. I hit the ➤



Scots Pine.

Pot Scrubber Nymph (left) and Olive Midas dry-fly.



STEVE CULLEN

is a guide, instructor and all-round game-angler with a wealth of knowledge

Put your back into it, Steve.



A “rattling” rainbow.

“Something wasn’t right, but what? The boats. There was something about the boats...”



Lines for every depth and presentation.

vice and rattled up some Pitsford Peas, Cats and Damsels. Happy with my work, I went to the shed to get everything ready and stashed it in the car.

The next day I was up early and soon driving down the tree-lined drive to the angler’s car park. I slowed down to look at the competition boys as they prepared to head out. Something wasn’t right, but what?

The boats. There was something about the boats...

Then it registered. All of them, bar one, had an electric engine, and you can guess whose one that was.

Well, the loud, agricultural language that came out of my mouth was shocking. I’m glad the windows were shut, although I’m sure the ducks in the dock looked around.

Although the venue’s small, I’m 50 and broken, and the thought of rowing, even in the slight breeze, filled me with dread. Worse, my boat partner Peter Gathercole is in his mid-60s, so there’d be no sharing the load. Bugger!

Several cups of coffee later — the lodge is well stocked with hot drinks and snacks; awesome filled rolls are sold at Thornton Post office — Peter arrived after a traffic delay. I hit him with the news, and he

took it much better than I had. “Oh well, it makes things more interesting,” he said. Soon, we were in the boat, and I was rowing my way awkwardly towards the wrong side of Wood Bank. All the competition guys had anchored around the point and were casting toward the shore. But I had watched them from the lodge for some time, and they’d not caught much.

I weaved past them to clean water on the Lonesome Pine side of the point, where Peter dropped anchor. We were 70 yards off the bank. Although I’m not a fan of anchoring — I prefer to cover more water in early spring — it’s often better than drifting.

The lake was coloured, but not badly, the visibility about 3ft. I set up a Rio sink 3 line and two flies: 8ft to a little coral number on the dropper and 6ft to a black fly on the point.

Often, early in the season I’ll start with a very fast sinking line and work from the bottom up. But with coloured water, it’s a good idea to start from the top down. You tend to find the fish near the surface where more light penetrates, allowing them to see better.

After only a handful of casts and a slow pull-and-pause retrieve, I felt solid resistance, lifted the rod, ►



Figure-of-eight retrieve...



...followed by a long draw was all it took.



Imagine summer and damsel nymphs scurrying towards the reed-fringed margins.



Another fat Thornton trout.

“Long pulls proved crucial all day. I had to entice the fish on to the hook”



An assortment of Boobies, Blobs and Fabs for the fast sinker.



Damsels and Pitsford Peas for another occasion.

and pulled into fresh air — the trout had gone. I fished on for half an hour, swapping my flies and varying my retrieve but nothing happened. However, one of the anglers to my left had landed several fish. Careful observation told me he was on a Di5 40-plus line and that he was fishing very, very slowly.

I decided it was time for a change. There was no messing about. Off came my medium sinker, on went my **super-fast**. Pattern choice was basic: two Boobies, 8ft apart; white on the dropper, black on the point.

The plan was to cast as far as I could and get the head of the line down on the lakebed and retrieve the flies very slowly. This quick change of tactics brought instant results. On my second cast, having counted down for 20 seconds and with the slow figure-of-eight retrieve halfway back to the boat, the line rattled.

Booby takes are strange. They remind me of fishing worms on a spinning rod — also rattly. Anyway, with a little manipulation, usually one long pull on the line, you can convert these mouthing takes into fully-fledged lock-ups.

Long pulls proved crucial all day. There was little

sinker

in the way of “bang and they’re on” — I had to entice the fish on to the hook.

Although the trout wanted the flies moved slowly, they were high in the water. The Booby on the point took most of the fish. The medium-sinking line and the speed at which I had retrieved meant my flies had gone below the fish. The fast-sinking line and Boobies allowed me to keep the point fly high and retrieve it more slowly.

I enjoyed a hectic spell with the trout coming thick and fast. I could hear anglers upwind cottoning on to my success.

“Christ, he’s got another one. That’s two in two casts!”

“He’s in again. We need to move.”

“Right, lift the anchor. We need to get closer before anyone else does. There must be loads in front of him.”

As you can imagine, given the competition, it didn’t take long before boats started sneaking in all around me. Rather than hog the area, I decided to move and let the competition guys fill their boots. I dropped into the area they’d vacated on the lodge side of Wood Bank. As I settled in, I could see rods bending in the area I’d been fishing. From my position, it seemed intermediate lines paired with fast retrieves were doing the business, cementing my suspicion the fish were high in the water.

Even though I’d moved the boat 100 yards up the reservoir, my catch rate remained consistent. My flies, fished slowly and higher in the water column, proved irresistible to Thornton’s many new stockies. I tried other techniques from the Bung to straight-lining buzzers, but I knew deep down that fishing in those ways at that time of year in coloured water was futile. The method I’d honed — a super-fast sinking line and two Boobies with a slow retrieve, and a quick 2ft draw if I had a short sharp take — proved unbeatable.

Thornton is a beautiful venue, largely due to its original design. The water and surroundings are what you’d expect to see on a private estate in Scotland, including the Scots Pines. This attraction adds so much character; at times, it feels ethereal.

Although it’s not far from the M1, it’s peaceful and holds a special place in many anglers’ hearts. It’s consistent, too, given the management’s new policy of stocking slightly smaller trout better able to cope with low oxygen levels in summer. The proof’s been seen in catch returns over the last two years.

Thornton doesn’t have the intensity you will find at larger reservoirs. There seems less pressure to catch baskets of trout, something of which there’s too much at the larger Midlands waters. To me, that makes Thornton more special.

But I still wish its boats had engines. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE

Factfile

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CONTACT

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PERMITS

Buy day tickets online at flyfishstore.co.uk
A selection of fish kill plus catch-and-release permits available. Permits should be pre-booked and can be posted in advance or

picked up at the lodge. It is advisable to call the fishery first to check the fishery is not fully booked. Juniors may share an adult’s permit. Day-ticket season: February 1 to November 17. Boat hire and electric engine hire should be booked in advance. Season tickets are also available. Check up-to-date prices and rules on the fishery website.

