



# Master OF THE MEND

They send **Tom Carroll** some of the worst young offenders around and he endeavours to change them with flyfishing. Sceptical? So were we...

**T**HERE'S a footpath leads steeply off the car park at West House Trout Lakes. Stand at the top of the slope and the whole vista of the County Durham fishery opens up at the bottom of the hill.

I dally there a while, enjoying the view. Who am I kidding?

I dally because of unease. The idea of young criminals having their lives turned around by fishing lessons may be the right story but am I really the right person to be covering it?

Reading the *Daily Mail* is a ritual in our household. Every day I set myself the challenge of getting to page 10 without being wound up by what I read. Every day, I fail.

Every day, my wife says she's going to buy another newspaper because she's worried about my blood pressure.

And every now and then my son regales friends and family with his impersonation of 'dad reading the paper', that involves making his face go red and repeated utterance of the words "bloody scandalous".

If I'm not quite 'Outraged of Tonbridge',

I'm certainly 'Hacked-off of Wisbech'. I don't want anyone hung, flogged or stuck in the Army: I'm just sick and tired of injustice and people so hell-bent on being nicey-nicey that they jettison every vestige of common sense in the process.

Ironically, I remain open-minded enough to wonder if Tom Carroll and his young offenders deserve a chronicler who's more sensitive to what they're trying to achieve. Walking down the hill to meet them, I feel like General Patton on his way to cover a CND convention.

I needn't have felt so uncomfortable. Cynicism, I soon learn, is a regular visitor to these Wednesday morning sessions. It turns up with a security tag around its ankle and a bulging social services file. It comes with a criminal record that would look horrendous alongside an adult's name, let alone a child's. It comes with the same question on its lips as I have on mine: how does fishing even begin to change lives such as this?

Tom Carroll set about finding an answer to that question three years ago. Many have drawn the connection between the vacuum of young life on street corners and the

trouble that pours in to fill it: Carroll was one of the few who did something about it.

He established Fishing With Tom as a way to get young people with too much time on their hands into fishing. A charity and Ferryhill Angling Club got together to cover the cost of the tuition and checks he needed to comply with child protection laws, local businesses and the public chipped in to pay for tackle and the Environment Agency provided free rod licences. Interestingly, he invited 104 firms in the fishing trade to help with his new venture. Three of them replied to his letter.

'Fishing With Tom' opened for business on April 1, 2005, when Carroll's noble intentions came face to face with his raw materials.

And "raw" is the operative word. While the scheme is available to youth groups like the Scout movement, those responsible for the rehabilitation of young criminals soon got wind of what Carroll had started: now some 75 per cent of his intake consists of young offenders. And we're not talking apple-stealers here.

One of the teenagers fishing this morning



firebombed a shop. "It wasn't a grudge thing; it was just a prank," the young man tells me, his tone suggesting that he now finds the incident as hard to believe as I do.

"I've had one kid who'd macheted someone," Tom recalls, "and other kids who either go astray because they've been abused or by abusing children themselves."

He used to read the reports on the young offenders being sent to him, to get some idea of what he was facing. "I had to stop," he confesses. "You end up crying your eyes out at what you read and with the best will in the world you pre-judge them. I want to take them at face value."

He's had children turn up with no shoes or wearing just a shell suit on winter's mornings. To see Carroll in his regulation flyfishing gear of baseball cap and fawn shirt throws into stark relief the jagged edges of two utterly different worlds that he seeks to interlock.

It seems impossible; too great a leap. Surely, you think, there should be a halfway house in this rehabilitation – something more physical, with scope for working off frustrations?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. If you want to know about Fishing With Tom, you have to know about the man who started it.

The *Daily Mail* reader in me, I confess, was braced for some well-intentioned sap who thought discipline and repression were the same thing and who'd gush

## "There's a different person standing in front of us...We'd like to know what's happened to you"

about the need to let young people express themselves, while his young charges hid behind bushes and barbecued swans.

Wrong on all counts.

Naivety died in Tom Carroll the moment he let slip that he was thinking of joining the Royal Ulster Constabulary in his native Northern Ireland. It was a risky move for a Protestant in the 1970s. For a Catholic like Tom, it was tantamount to a death-wish.

"You go ahead with this," a senior figure in the local Nationalist community warned him, "and either you or your daddy will end up in an early grave."

Carroll backed off but the memory lingers and possibly drives what he does now. Several times during our conversation there's an exasperated edge to his voice

when he talks about those who would boss around the destinies of wayward youngsters: "I think some kids are expelled too readily and labelled too quickly," he insists.

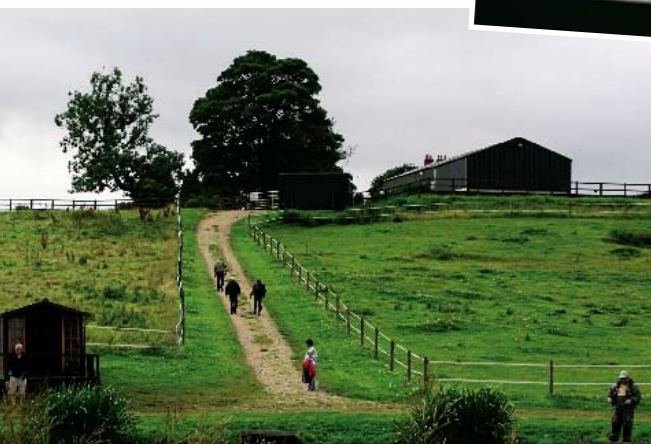
Not that he's oblivious to the fact that some of those kids do themselves no favours. He's seen them swagger down that hill, clearly wondering why they should listen to a 51-year-old guy with a fishing rod.

Their first lesson tends to involve history rather than casting. As they fire questions at their host, probing for weakness, they discover that they have no monopoly on 'streetwise' and all the ugliness the euphemism hides.

They learn what it was like to grow up during 'The Troubles': to be ordered to witness a punishment shooting, as Carroll and his peers were several times in their teens, to watch a man wet and soil himself before bullets are fired into his knees.

"I tend to have their undivided attention after that," says Tom, unsmilingly.

He's not your archetypal Irishman. His resolve is unmistakable but he's



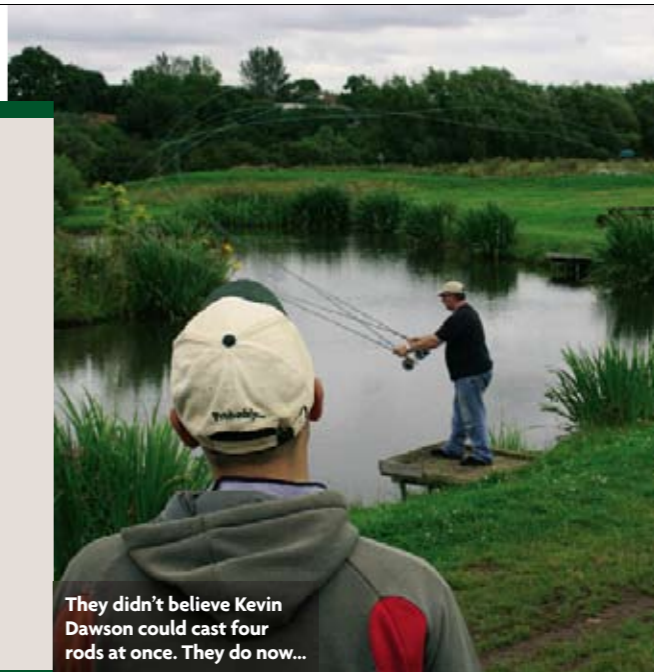
"Whatever my problems," says Carroll - pictured right with angling coach Kevin Dawson on his left, "I go home to a nice house and family tonight. Some of these kids go home to hell..."

Those youngsters who do take to fishing are fast learners.

### Contacts

Full details of the Fishing With Tom scheme can be found at [fishingwithtom.com](http://fishingwithtom.com). Fishing days are hosted at:

- West House Trout Lakes at Bishopston**, Co Durham. Tel: 07836 330157. Web: [hadrianequine.co.uk/fishing/fishing.htm](http://hadrianequine.co.uk/fishing/fishing.htm)
- Aldin Grange Lakes at Bearpark**, Durham. Tel: 0191 3846090. Web: [aldingrangelakes.co.uk](http://aldingrangelakes.co.uk)
- Tanfield Lake - West Tanfield** (Near Masham). Tel: 01677 470385
- Jubilee Lakes at Redworth** (Near Shildon). Tel: 01388 772611. Web: [jubileelakes.co.uk](http://jubileelakes.co.uk)



They didn't believe Kevin Dawson could cast four rods at once. They do now...



For various reasons, the security tags soon look out of place...

softly-spoken and reflective, and there's a note of melancholy in his voice.

If he'd spotted the need to beat the Devil to idle hands, discovering that his own son was a heroin addict made him do something about it. His son is now off drugs and has rebuilt his life but it was the names he rattled off when he explained how "everyone" was doing drugs – names Tom knew – that persuaded his father that lamenting a lost generation could no longer be a spectator sport.

As to how worthwhile it has all been, three years on, let's just say that at one point,

I have to gesture towards the five or six teenagers in his care this morning and ask him outright. Is this an act?

Carroll smiles. "No act," he says. "This is how they'd be even if you weren't here."

One of his kids was before the magistrates for review recently. "There's a completely different person standing in front of us today," they told him. "We'd like to know what's happened to you."

Me too. I'd expected sullen savages: what I encounter are polite rough diamonds with smiles on their faces and tags on their ankles, animated when they describe the thrill of fighting a fish. "One of them literally shook with joy when he caught his first trout," I'm told. "Another ran up and down the hill, screaming and we had one girl wet herself..."

Not everyone takes to it, it must be said, and Tom has to be permanently mindful of the world in which many of his visitors live. Hampered by the effects of an industrial injury, he must be discreet when taking his medication while teaching. "My daily dose of morphine has a street value of £90..."

The rules are simple – mutual respect at all times and no swearing. Some 'progressives' may smirk at the quaintness of that latter rule but there's an argument that if you wish to take the violence out of a person, you start by taking it out of his language. I defy anyone to spend a morning on the Fishing With Tom programme and tell me it's a groundless theory.

I'm struck by how relaxed it all is. There's no awkwardness between the kids and the adults teaching them, no sense of some social experiment tarted up as fun.

It's just a group of people enjoying their fishing and by the end of the morning, I've come to realise how easy it is to underestimate fishing's attraction when your life is good.

What if it's not? If all you know is fear,

abuse and looking over your shoulder, why shouldn't several uncomplicated hours in the countryside with people who ask nothing more of you than civility, be the most wonderful thing about your week?

In some ways, it's not teaching youngsters to fish that emphasises the importance of what goes on here; it's taking them home afterwards.

"They either get quieter as they get closer to home," explains Youth Engagement Service officer Gordon Eddy, who works closely with Carroll, "or they get really wound up because that's how they think they're expected to be on their patch."

One girl who took a fish home with her was guarded as to how it had tasted when she attended the next session. Under gentle questioning, she revealed that her parents had taken it from her and sold it for drugs.

Such horror stories must be off-set against the scheme's triumphs; the word that filters back through officialdom's grapevine of youngsters who took going fishing as their cue for going straight, of reduced sentences and security tags consigned to the dustbin.

Those are the tangible markers of what Fishing With Tom has achieved. A newly-acquired charitable status that will hopefully open the funding doors is another.

And then there are triumphs that go unrecorded, save in the memories of those who witness them.

"To see kids come here as Neanderthals and leave full of pleases and thank yous and so proud of having achieved something," Carroll explains, "to have a kid whose own parents didn't want to know him, who's seen as unreachable, pour his heart out to you and then say he's never talked to anyone like that before..."

"My only regret about all this is that I didn't start it 30 years ago."