

Pursuits

The things we long to do



Many sportsmen show a natural talent for fly casting. How about Sir Menzies Campbell? ➤➤

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➤ Sir Menzies Campbell has a good reason for wanting to improve his fly fishing.

"I've got a bit more time on my hands now," smiles the man who was forced to stand down as Liberal Democrat leader last year.

An emptier diary means that the veteran politician is determined to take up his regular Friday rod on a trout loch at Bowhill, near Selkirk, more frequently. Among the fellow syndicate members with whom he fishes are a local GP, and a judge, not to mention Lord Steel, another former Liberal leader. Sir Menzies is keen not to be upstaged next time the Liberal grandes share a boat. And so when the FT offered a fly-fishing lesson, it was enthusiastically accepted.

But we are a long way from the lochs of Scotland: the Duke of Northumberland's Albury Estate is hidden in the Surrey countryside near Guildford, a relatively short drive from central London. With abundant insect life and clear water, the estate's private-syndicate water is a perfect retreat from the Westminster circus.

Fishery manager Tony Hern introduces us to the lake, where he strives to keep fish sizes and stocking density to a more natural level than in many commercially run fisheries. Anxious to boost my pupil's chances, I ask Hern which flies have been working recently, and then quickly snatch a couple of killing patterns from his box.

It is clear that Sir Menzies is rooted in the Scottish fishing tradition. His father first took him fishing when he was eight, on the Rivers Teith and Allander. "I've never had a lesson in my life," he says. I'm about to fix that, and start by demonstrating a roll cast, the most basic, and one of the most useful, fly casts.

Many sportsmen who are competent in other fields show a natural ability for fly casting, and I am curious to see whether the rule applies to Sir Menzies, a celebrated former Olympic athlete. I help him to slow down his casting stroke and remove some of its power. Soon his casts are



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"I'm in a fankle," Sir Menzies says, as he untangles his line - a Scots term I feel I'll be using a lot

flying out sweetly over the Albury rainbow trout.

We move on to overhead casting and, true to form, Sir Menzies demonstrates a natural sense of rhythm, pausing to let the back-cast unfurl fully before tapping the rod forward to send the fly-line arrowing out over the water.

Naturally, not all his casts are perfect. "I'm in a fankle," he says after one abortive attempt leaves the line tangled - teaching me a Scottish term that I have a feeling I will use a lot.

After an hour's intense practice, using a scrap of wool instead of a hook on the line for safety and convenience, we are both itching to start fishing properly. The lake's trout are cruising well within casting range and I hurry to tie on one of Hern's blue-flash damsel nymphs.

I try a quick cast and immediately the fly is engulfed by a rainbow. I press the rod on Sir Menzies and he shows his experience by subduing it quickly.

We've broken our duck, but now I'm even more anxious than he is that he hooks the next one himself.

But the next one is not so easy to find. The trout have clearly seen Hern's flies before and the large damsel is treated with disdain, even though Sir Menzies is frequently dropping it in front of the fishes' noses. My suggestion of a fly change is agreed with alacrity.

"I was walking along a beat once after catching a sea trout, robustly discussing with the ghillie whether to change the fly," he tells me. "And as we were talking I stepped off the path, and the bank wasn't there. I broke my ankle. And so the moral of the story is: never argue with the ghillie about the fly."

But even Hern's mayfly nymph, which should be perfect for the time of year, is failing to meet with approval in the tricky conditions of bright sunshine and clear water.

As we fish on and chat more, Sir Menzies relaxes into the casting. The line gradually extends further and presents the fly more delicately.



Sir Menzies has fished from boyhood but has never taken lessons



It is clear that country sports, a world away from the political whirlwind, are an important source of relaxation for Sir Menzies. "After I stepped down as leader, one of the first things I did was go off and shoot a few clays," he recalls. "I just wanted to do something different." And let off some steam, no doubt.

We move to the more shaded, deeper part of the lake where I hope we may encounter more feeding fish in cooler conditions. As Sir Menzies breaks for a phone call, I take the opportunity to tie on one of my own smaller, drabber flies.

As is so often the case, the more subtle approach is the answer. I quickly hook another trout, which dives deep, and Sir Menzies brings his conversation to a premature end as he hurries to grab the rod and land the fish. Confidence buoyed, he fishes on, letting the fly sink a little further into the depths before beginning a very slow retrieve.

The perseverance pays off as we watch the line lift off the surface and the rod-tip buckle over. This is the best fish of the session and it gives us both a few heart-stopping moments as it runs hard – pulling line from the reel – and then jumps clear of the surface. It is a close call. As I part the fold of the net to retrieve the trout, I realise the small hook has already fallen from its mouth. Another few seconds, and it would probably have been lost.

We marvel at the characteristic iridescent purplish stripe along the flank of the rainbow trout as I hold it in the water to recover. It is none the worse for its exertions and soon powers off, showering us with spray.

"What a way to end the day," says Sir Menzies. "My cast, my fish." ■

Bob Sherwood is the FT's London and south-east correspondent and a qualified fly casting instructor

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Second opinion

By Margaret McCartney

“ It may be summer, but doctors are already ordering stocks of vaccine ready for the flu season.

The NHS pours a lot of money and effort into its annual drive to vaccinate as many people in the high-risk groups as possible, and it has a pretty decent record of doing so. So there's a good chance that if you are over 65, live or work in a care home (or elsewhere in the health service), have a respiratory disease such as asthma or chronic bronchitis or a condition such as diabetes or heart disease, you will be offered a flu jab free of charge.

The question, however, is whether the NHS should be making such an effort to give you that jab. There have been several reports that vaccinating some of those groups classed as "high risk" does little to cut the risk of complications from flu, for example pneumonia. A paper published in The Lancet this month matched older, healthy people who



had received the flu jab with others who hadn't – and found no evidence that the vaccination reduced the risk of contracting pneumonia. Nor is this the first piece of research to sound a note of caution on the benefits of vaccinating some high-risk groups.

Perhaps there's a better approach to the problem. Indeed, the Modelling and Economics Unit of the Health Protection Agency Centre for Infections has just published a paper (in the journal

Vaccine) that suggests the community as a whole would be better protected if we targeted our effort on giving children the jab. This would, the research says, reduce both influenza and the complications arising from it, both for children and adults.

Granted, the paper carries lots of caveats about interpreting mathematical modelling studies – the researchers describe their work as "very preliminary" – and clearly we need to test the idea in real-life studies. But some studies have already examined this thesis. Evidence from Japan, published in the New England Journal of Medicine in 2001, showed that the more children were vaccinated, the fewer adults died from pneumonia and influenza. The demographics of Japan are not entirely comparable with the rest of the world, and so we cannot be certain that we would get the same result if we followed this course in the UK. But this is an important theory that deserves serious consideration.

And while we are considering ways to reduce the toll that flu takes every year on the vulnerable, it is worth remembering another recent paper – a systematic review published last year in the British Medical Journal – which identified

hand-washing as a highly effective means of preventing the spread of flu.

A simple piece of advice, but a good one. *Margaret McCartney is a GP in Glasgow.*

For lively discussion of the latest medical issues go to Margaret McCartney's blog at blogs.ft.com/mccartney

FT.com

THE DETAILS

Albury Estate in Surrey offers day and season-ticket fishing on three different lake venues and the River Tillingbourne, in addition to its syndicate water. Details at www.alburyestate.com