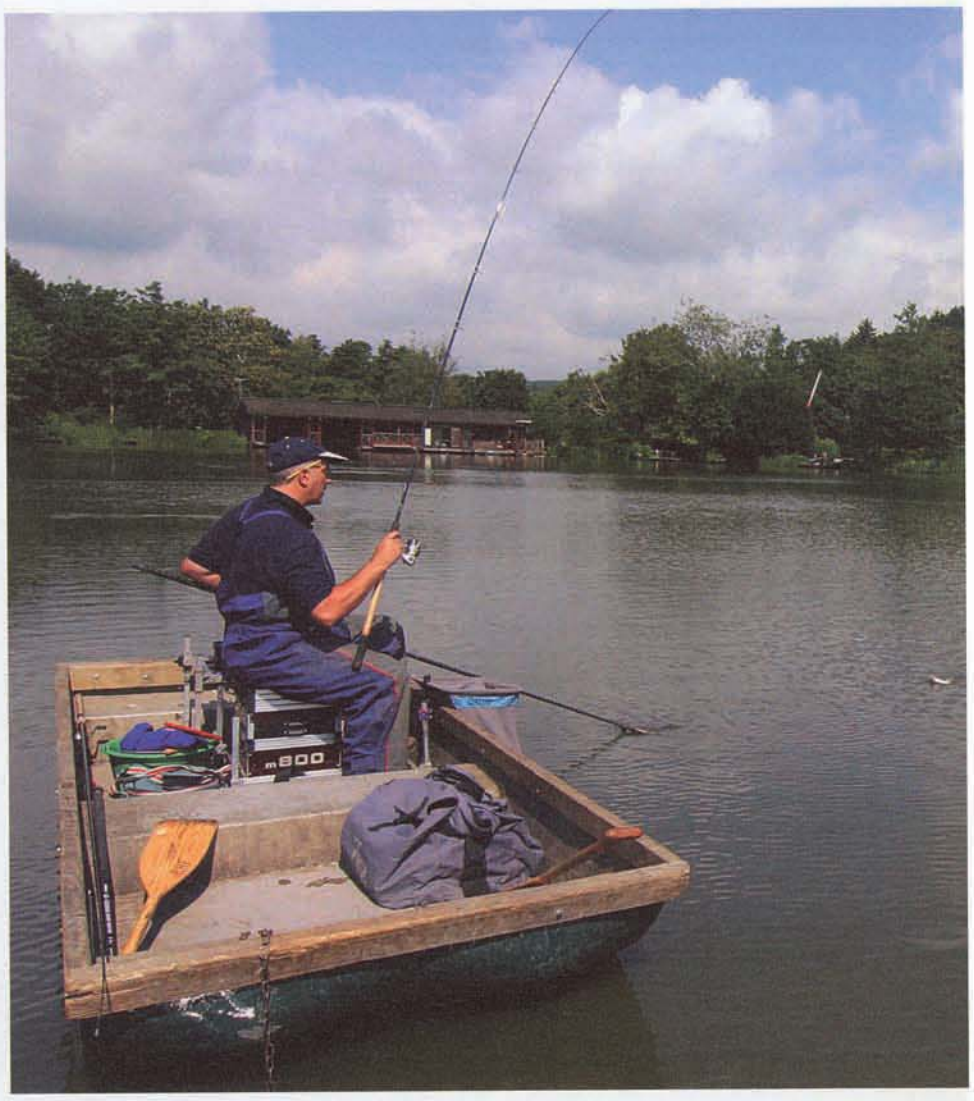
Punts A Go-Go

The nearest most anglers get to a punt is buying a lottery ticket or laying a discrete wager with the high street bookies. But at Surrey's Old Bury Hill Lake, punts are part of the fishing furniture – and the only gamble is how much to feed! Dave Johnson reports.



Old Bury Hill Lake, renowned for its bream fishing over many years, was a hotbed of match activity in the late '70s and early '80s. Many of the famous Dorking squad – past and present – were weaned here on this lovely Surrey estate lake.

Back then, winning weights seldom topped 30lb but nowadays 50-60lb nets are brought to the scales on a regular basis and pleasure catches have been recorded to well over 100lb.

While the feeder and pole are now prime tactics, there are still some who cling to the old waggler ways...and not always from 'terra firma'!

For more than 30 years, Old Bury Hill has offered visiting anglers the option of fishing from their fleet of punts. I can personally testify to having sampled this relaxing and rewarding form of fishing almost that many years ago! In Southern England, this is something seldom seen away from the River Thames, and consequently very few people will have tried it. But it's an experience well worth seeking out, for it gets you into those 'nooks and crannies' previously inaccessible from the bank.

The well-used fleet of eight punts have borne the bums of many famous rods, John Wilson being perhaps the most celebrated. But today, the fishery's shop manager Russ Evans was my companion afloat.

Being a keen match angler, Russ regularly organises and participates in open matches here the 'OBH'. But taking to the punts is just one of those things he's never got round to doing – until today.

Most visitors who have booked a punt session at OBH bring cushions, folding chairs or basic tackle boxes. But not Russ. His creature comforts demand the very best of seating facilities...a Milo box with full attachments!

As I entered the boathouse, I was surprised to see how well the crème de la crème of seat boxes fitted into the stern (or bow) of the punt. Russ had obviously spent time on the internal arrangement of his floating platform.

I, on the other hand would require a little more space in my 'box' to aid my mobility. For those not conversant with this form of water transport, a punt is basically a shallow box on water with identical blunt ends!

We'd decided to try two swims – the first just off the island's point facing the front bank, and the second somewhere in 'the Jungle' – so called because of the dense vegetation extending over the margins. Our quarry would be bream, tench, carp, and maybe one of the venue's superb crucians.

Rather than a punt pole, we were armed with canoe-type paddles. We set off with Russ leading the way... but not for very! It was apparent that he was no Red Indian when it came to paddling, but some guidance from yours truly got him back on track – if a little slowly.

Anchors Away

Arriving at our first swim, we set the two heavy concrete anchors (one at each end) supplied with each punt, to position us about five metres off the island. Rather than fish towards it, Russ intended feeding an area some 15 metres back towards the facing front bank.

His chosen feed was BCUK's B1 Active 3mm hard pellets plus a few of his hook samples – namely sweetcorn plus two flavours of Ringers 6mm Bag-Up pellets, soaked overnight in either BCUK's B1 or Bloodworm liquid attractants. He also had some hemp.

Russ feels that Bury Hill bream get so much groundbait thrown at them that they have a tendency to back off, whereas a bed of small pellets seems to keep their attention focussed – an approach favoured by quite a few regulars.

Plumbing up revealed a good six foot, to which Russ added another extra foot so that the bait would be anchored on the deck. "Bream don't like a moving bait here," he stated confidently, firing out two large pouchfuls of the pellet mix and another of hemp.

Tackle was simple because of the space restrictions of the punt. Two 13ft rods were set-up, a Carbonactive Sentient and a Shimano Beastmaster Carp. Each had Daiwa reels loaded with 4lb Maxima to 3lb Shimano hook lengths and size 14 Kamasan Animal hooks, with a 3AAA Drennan Insert Crystal waggler.

With most of the float's shotting capacity acting as lockers either side of the base eye, Russ bunched 4 No.8s together just above the 12 inch hook length to boost stability. Simple, but very effective and tangle-free.

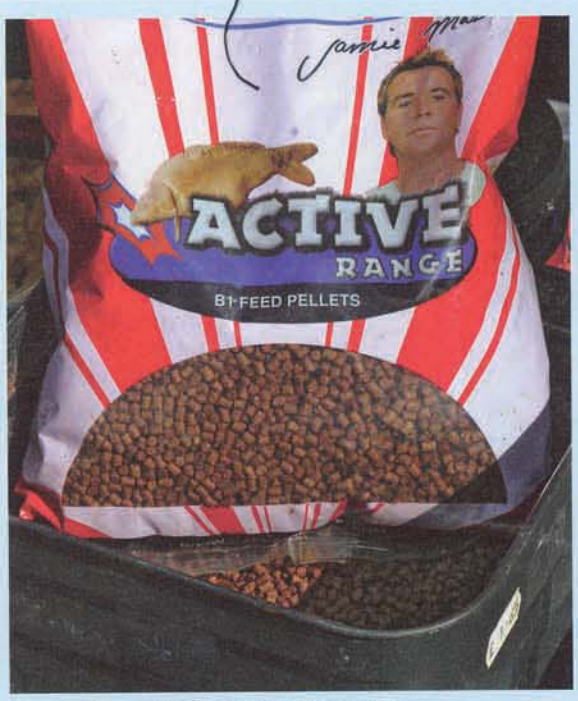
Don't Rock The Boat

Tell-tale bubbles begin to rise after several minutes, but it's some 35 minutes before the day's first fish – a skimmer of around 1lb, was landed – or rather boated.

"It's quite common for bream to take their time before getting their heads down, and although I pricked a decent fish earlier I'm not too concerned about the delay. You can't rush bream or they're likely to spook", he noted.

Russ was beginning to experience the common 'landlubbers' syndrome of boat movement. I did comment before we set off whether he'd brought any seasickness tablets with him!

However, that was soon forgotten as a steady string of skimmers and bream over the next 90 minutes settled him right down. A feisty 4lb 8oz tench also crashed the party,



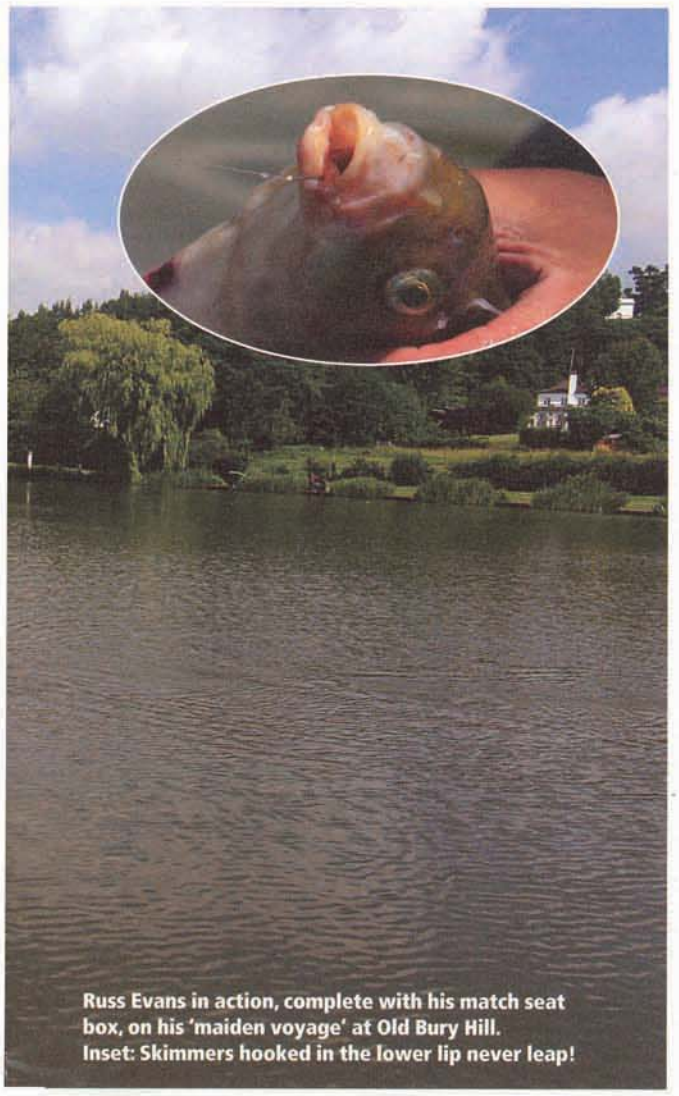
Russ reckons pellet is a far more effective feed than groundbait.

When the breeze dropped, accurate feeding by hand was possible.

Regular pouchfuls of the 3mm hard pellets were introduced

Check that flavour flooding out!

Two different flavoured 6mm expanders, plus sweetcorn, for hook baits.



Russ Evans in action, complete with his match seat box, on his 'maiden voyage' at Old Bury Hill. Inset: Skimmers hooked in the lower lip never leap!

putting a big smile on his face.

Having decided that we'd search out other options rather than just stay static, we called it a day after a couple of hours and pulled the net into the boat for a tally-up and photo.

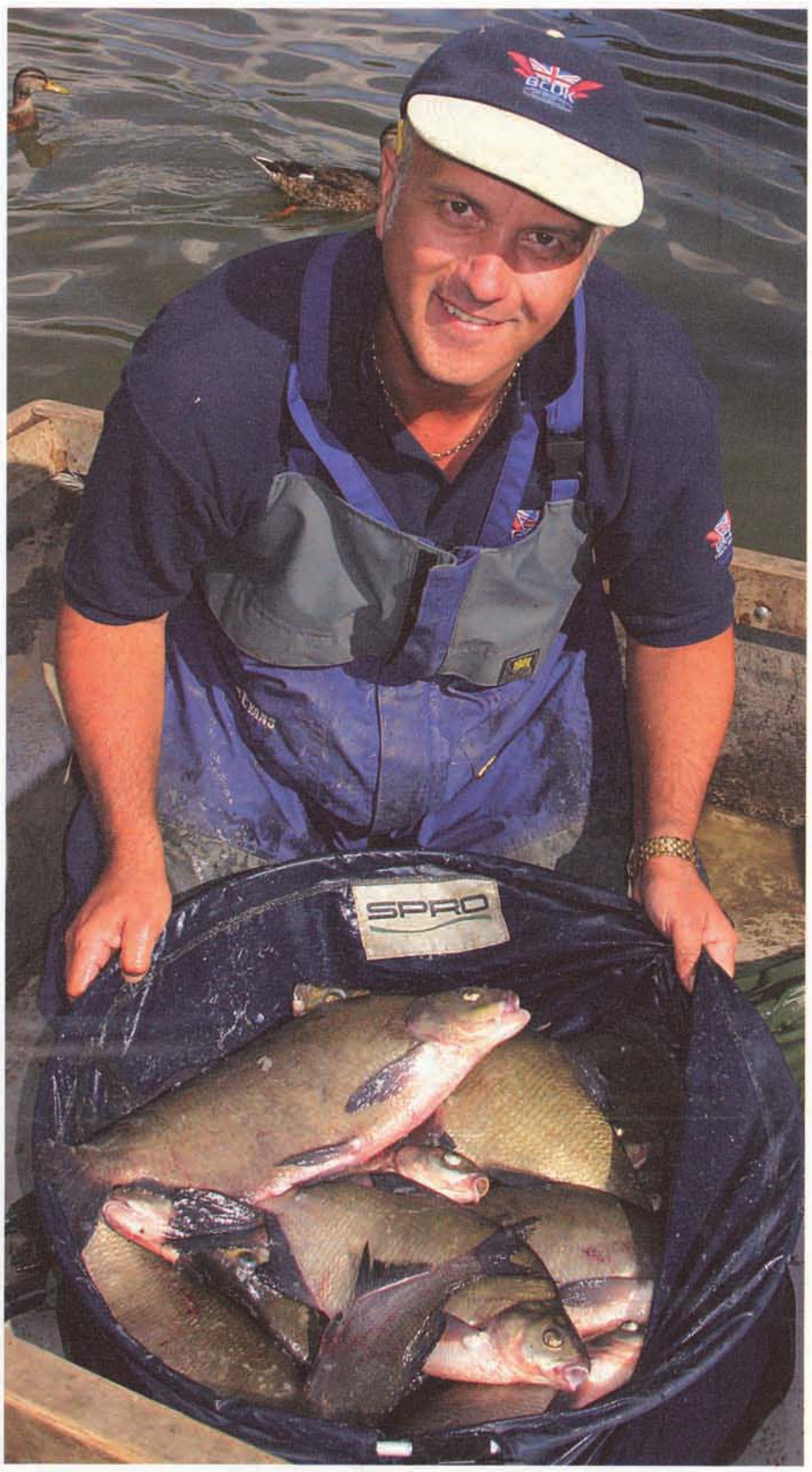
I was now in ground-breaking journalistic mode because all my previous features had been done on solid bank with plenty of background. Here, in the limited environment of a small punt, we just about managed to display his 12 fish catch which easily went 20lb+. Next stop 'The Jungle'...

Jungle Fever

Another punt was present in the main jungle area, so rather than moor close by we decided to try the quieter area right at the entrance where a fallen tree protruded from a reed bank. After quietly tying up to the tree, Russ baited up in identical fashion to the earlier swim.

Again, the hook was baited with one of the bloodworm-soaked pellets and flicked out some 13 metres to the baited spot, out into open water. This time, the float sunk away within minutes and Russ was into his first fish – again a skimmer of around 1lb 8oz.

Small pouches of feed were regularly flicked in to keep the swim topped up, an important aspect when bream fishing as a passing shoal can soon mop up



A fine net of bream from the second swim brought Russ's total to over 60lb.

After a slow start, a hard scrapping tench joined the skimmer party in the first swim.

Instant action after moving to 'The Jungle' area.

a bed of feed and be on their way before you know much about it. Plenty more followed, prompting me to wonder why this swim got going so much faster than the first one?

"The pellets I'm using are normally associated with the areas just off-bank, so it's possible that the fish, being in mid-water, are a little bit more confident about feeding on them – although that's just theory you understand," offered Russ.

Although quite a bright day, an erratic breeze often created a nice constant ripple on the surface which any bream angler would agree is better than flat calms. Around the 90 minute mark, a couple of 3lb-plus bream in quick succession signalled the arrival of better quality fish moving in. Russ's overdepth float was giving classic bream bites, a little lift before sailing away. Some of the better fish began 'porpoising' out of the water, a trait many of you will have experienced.

These acrobatic antics of hooked fish seem mainly confined to bream and hybrids. Russ has another theory regarding this, and it's something we put to the test over the last hour of our session. "I've found that nearly every fish which leaps out of the water is hooked in the top lip. Normal behaviour showed the hook in the bottom lip, and when the fish displayed some partial acrobatics the hook tended to be near the side top area of the lip," he explained.

Perhaps it could be something related to the manner in which the fish feeds – finicky, confident or just plain greedy/ Whatever the case, Russ's theory seemed to have some substance based on our close checks of the hook hold during that last hour.

Despite no tench in this swim, nor any sign of the carp or crucians, Russ finished up with 26 skimmers and bream for a tally well over 40lb. He'd clearly found his 'sea legs', while his pellet feed option seemed to have worked a treat.

The day had been an enlightening experience, and for me it certainly brought back some relaxing memories from yesteryear. Maybe I'll rekindle my yearnings and head back for a day afloat with tackle. Or perhaps Russ could organise a punt match? Now that would be something really different, especially the weigh-in!

Venue Fact File

Bury Hill Fisheries, The Boathouse, Old Bury Hill, Westcott, Dorking, Surrey RH4 3JU

Tickets: Adults £11.50 (1 rod), Juniors (15 or under)/OAPs/ Disabled £8.50 (1 rod), excluding Sundays and Bank Holidays. Second rod £5.50. Evening Tickets £5.50 per rod, available for last four hours of daylight. Boats £5.50 per person. Club, Season and Tuition bookings available.

Restrictions/bait bans: Dip all nets when entering fishery. No keepnets or sacks except in matches. Barbless hooks only. No method feeders or fixed leads. Large unhooking mats and landing nets required. No particle baits except sweetcorn, hemp and carp pellet.

Facilities: Lakeside café, toilets, tackle shop, tackle hire, disabled access/facilities, professional tuition from qualified angling instructors, boat hire.

How to get there: The fishery entrance is off the east side of the A25, just outside Dorking.

Contact: Estate Office on 01306 877540. E-mail: info@buryhillfisheries.com or visit the impressive website www.buryhillfisheries.com