

My first season on the Yateley Car Park Lake ended carp-less! Yep 100+ nights for just a few tench! So what exactly went wrong?

Well not a lot really, I mean obviously a season blank could never be considered a success but this was the Car Park Lake, one of the countries toughest pits containing a small stock of carp that have been highly pressured for years. Some of the anglers on there had fished several seasons without so much as a sniff! Obviously with this level of pressure comes all sorts of problems and considering I'd spent the previous four years tackling a big 100 acre pit with just a handful of regulars was completely inexperienced when it came to fishing a modern day circuit water. Jumping in at the deep end doesn't come close to what I was attempting!

My favourite Car Park resident was the super-elusive Arfur and the one carp I hoped to catch most. To me Arfur was the quintessential Yateley Carp, sparsely scaled with huge shoulders and stubby little fins and very difficult to trip up, a true legend! In hindsight I'd got a little too carried away with trying to single him out that first year and had consequently missed opportunities elsewhere on the pond. The problem with Arfur was that once he, or she to be gender correct (!), had been caught during the first few weeks of the season she usually drifted back up to the snaggy north-west corner of the lake and was nearly always caught from here during the autumn each year.

The problem with this area of the lake is that it isn't particularly productive for the remainder of the mirrors. Sure they had all been caught from this end over the years (Heather just twice!) but it was mainly the end nearer the car park that contained the large weedbeds that produced the majority of bites.

At the time I didn't really know much of this and had spent the best part of 50+ nights sat up that corner of the lake blissfully unaware on my little Arfur mission. Although she was eventually caught from this area by Ben Hamilton, her first visit to the bank in just under six months, it was little consolation after so many blank trips! In fact that capture marked the end of action from the mirrors that year and for as many happy members buzzing having tasted success there were twice as many who hadn't!



A spring on the Big Pit was just the break I needed! The Double Stomach at 37lb. First time out with the new bait!

The eight week close season saw me returning with my tail firmly between my legs to the sanctuary of the Big Pit. It felt like I'd been away ages and lost that connection with the place and I struggled to get into it at first.

Eventually after a couple of nights I managed to tune in again and ended up bagging a couple of fish including the awesome Double Stomach, the lakes biggest surviving original mirror at an ounce under 37lb. Having never caught him before I was over the moon and it felt like a breath of fresh air for the first time in ages.

The fact that I'd caught him using a new bait Ian had put together for me for the new season on the Car Park was an even bigger bonus and a major confidence boost for the bait which was something completely different to what the Car Park mirrors had hopefully seen before.

Throughout the winter that first year I'd chatted at length with Ian about the type of boilie I wanted for the new season and after a few different batches got the bait exactly how I wanted it.

Although I'd used a high quality red fishmeal that first season it seemed a little bit too samey for my liking and I wanted the new bait to be like nothing else being used on the pit.

The final version was almost black in colour with no flavours whatsoever, all the attraction was in the base mix ingredients which were all 100% natural in profile. It looked and smelt the one and I simply couldn't wait to get going with it over the Car Park especially after the Big Pit result.



I told Ian I wanted something completely different!



My new bait for the year. Amino 365 Pellets, Steeped Black Tigers and a new custom boilie mix

A few of other baits I'd added to my armoury this year was the new Steeped Black Tigers which I knew Ben had caught Arfur on at the end of last year, Amino Green 365 pellets which contained a couple of the same key ingredients in my boilie mix and Buckwheat, a hemp-like particle a couple of my friends who fished there in the past had tipped me off about the mirrors liking.

The 1st June saw a car park full of excited members enjoying the traditional start of season BBQ. My swim for the opening couple of nights was the Curly Wurly, one of the main players come the autumn but historically slow through the summer. The only glimmer of hope I had was that due to the coloured nature of the water the fish hadn't really started getting into the corners yet to sunbathe so there was a chance they were still out at range in the middle of the pond. 48 hours later without so much as a bleep I was yet again packing away biteless.

My first good chance of the year came a couple of days later when upon arrival I found Pearly Tail and The Dustbin in front of the End Secret. I was gobsmacked the swim was free as this is usually one of the first producers of the year but free it was and without even bothering to walk any further round started setting up. The main feature in the swim was the gravel hump round to the left which the fish loved playing around. The only problem was getting a bait onto the spot without being sussed by the mirrors that sat in the weed just a few yards to the right of it.

After patiently waiting several hours for them to drift off on a little circuit I eventually got a balanced black tiger onto the spot over a pinch of buckwheat and 365 pellets. Sure I had the best trap set that day on the pond I sat back for a much needed brew. An hour or so later both mirrors had returned with The Dustbin rolling close to my hookbait several times. Each time he approached Benny who had the best vantage point would say "here we go mate, get ready". My heart was in my mouth convinced I was about to get off the mark with one of my favourite carp but every time it looked all over it wasn't and I was left hovering over the rod with the shakes.

Eventually as the day came to a close so did my chance. The following day couldn't come quick enough and once again as soon as the sun started to hit the area Dusty returned, this time alone. I already felt better about the situation I was now faced with as The Dustbin is usually the most caught mirror each season and I felt more mistake-prone by himself. After the previous days events I wanted a little more bait on the area and had done this accurately at first light with the bait boat. Within half an hour the Dustbin was feeding over the area! I could clearly see his distinctive shaped tail waving back at me as he went about his breakfast. More rod-hovering and shaking followed until risking one my look I got into position and instantly spotted Arfur moving fast into the area. What happened next left me truly stunned

as I watched Arfur swim straight over to the Dustbin and literally barge him off the spot! The pair of them then exited the swim at pace and I just stood there shaking my head! They never returned.....!



James with The Dustbin at 43lb, I was close!

Over the course of the next couple of days both Pearly Tail and The Dustbin got caught from Trumptions, the first two mirror bites that season. Knowing how close I'd come particularly to Dusty was yet again a tough one to take on the chin, the only pleasing part about both captures was that they came to a couple of mates James and The Wizard (his brother is a film star!).

Although it was ridiculously early into the season I was already feeling the strain and really couldn't see when my luck was going to change. Despite such a good couple of chances I was still the wrong side of the lens and on the Car Park; these chances just don't come along every day.

I visited the lake a couple of times after work the following week on both occasions slipping a bit of bait into the End Secret in case the fish returned but I could tell the chance of a mirror bite from there had gone. The weed in front of Trumptions was growing fast and the carp were now spending the majority of the days in it. It was obvious not only to me but to the rest of the syndicate this was the place to be right now so when I arrived in the early hours to find the swim free on the Friday morning I really did have to rub eyes to check I wasn't dreaming! Considering the first time I managed to get into Trumptions the previous year was September this was a major result and I couldn't get the gear round there quick enough. By mid morning I had two balanced Black Tigers over buckwheat and 365 pellets on the spots and huge Yateley carp all over me! This was it! I was definitely gonna break that duck this week. Heather was due, likely to be huge still and I was in pole position to confirm this, or so I thought....

The following morning after a night spent drinking tea with Al who had spun me into a frenzy by the time he left I woke to find everything as I left it. I was just getting settled with a tea ready for the morning bite that was surely coming my way when I heard Lee Picknell's buzzer who was fishing next door in waiting mans start to tone. To cut a long story short Lee caught Heather at 51lb+ for a third time that morning and once again I was going home with my dreams of catching her remaining just that!

The following two weeks saw me fishing up the other end of the lake unable to get near the fish due to the sheer pressure the pond was under at the time and this was proving a massive test of patience. I didn't mind hard but this was proving impossible! There was nothing to do but roll with it and keep turning up. I wasn't going to catch one of those Yateley legends sat on another pond moaning about how busy the place was so I just kept turning up!

The end of June saw the Car Park carp spawn and straight away the pressure on the pond dropped. I'd already witnessed this the previous year and it seemed plenty of members were looking at the scales rather than the carp. Personally I couldn't have cared less. The only carp whose character suffered from a significant weight loss was Arfur but I wasn't about to shake him off or any of his mates for that matter just because of a few pounds. Catching one meant more to me than that!

The beginning of July saw me returning with renewed enthusiasm. I knew I was giving it my all but just wasn't getting the breaks. The Car Park was obviously a tough nut to crack but I just kept telling myself it was only a matter of time and that remaining upbeat was the only way to go. The fact that the lake was also a little quieter now made things easier and I felt much more confident of getting into the right swims at the right times. Up until this point Arfur was the only mirror to have avoided capture so far and this just reinforced my view of how tricky she was to catch. When she eventually did slip up it was Lee Picknell who had once again done the business and this being his first capture of Arfur was understandably buzzing. In fact this was the first time I'd had the pleasure of witnessing her on the bank despite having clocked up in the region of 140+ nights by now and she looked lovely even at a spawned-out 42lb.

The following week I had a birthday dinner to attend on the Friday and knowing I'd be unable to get down to the pond in time afterwards had booked the Monday morning off work so I could do my full 48hrs starting from Saturday morning. It wasn't ideal because even though the lake was a little quieter during this period as mentioned the main swims were still likely to be taken. It was my only option however so after the dinner on the Friday night I drove over to Yateley arriving an hour or so into dark. Hemp Boy was fishing in the Gate swim which meant I had secured a steady supply of tea and biscuits for the next couple of hours without walking more than five yards!

We sat there chatting with Hemp Boy filling me in on the day's events and who was where etc. I couldn't wait to get started and was getting a good vibe already that my time was nearing.



There is plenty of time for this over the Car Park!

The following morning after a good look round and a chat with a few of the other members I decided to start in Waiting Mans. Ideally I would have liked to get into Des's but this was never going to happen on a Saturday morning so I did the next best thing and booked it for my second night. By now with the weed well and truly up Des's was starting to kick off and had already produced the Dustbin and a couple of commons over the past couple of weeks. Although from Waiting Mans I could still cover the same area of water the line lay into the spots from this side of the pond was generally poor. For the time being it was my only option if I wanted to angle at this end of the pond and went about getting some baits onto the spots. It was turning into a real scorcher and by the time I'd finished I'd already built up a sweat. Lee was next door in Trumptions and confident I'd 'done my bit' sat down for a coffee and chinwag.

By now the amount of fish building up in front of Des's was blatantly obvious and knowing Heather was due again I couldn't help but grin at the thought of being able to move in there tomorrow. I was convinced Heather's next capture would come from there.

A couple of hours later whilst led on my bedchair trying to doze off in the heat I heard Hemp Boys buzzer go round the corner. Peering through the bushes I could see him bent into something and once I established it was a carp and not a tench shot round to help out. Upon arrival I could see almost straight away Hemp Boy was doing battle with the Big Orange and after moving his other rod out the way got into position with the net. Thankfully Hemp Boy's nerve and hook held and within minutes I was scooping up his prize.



Des's Swim the night before I caught Heather

Although Big O was looking a little worse for wear Hemp Boy was understandably over the moon with his first Car Park mirror and after the shout the usual crowd of members gathered behind the swim for the photo session that followed.

Once everything was over I drifted back to my swim with mixed emotions. I was chuffed my mate had got the result he had worked hard for but at the same time I was wandering when my turn was going to come!

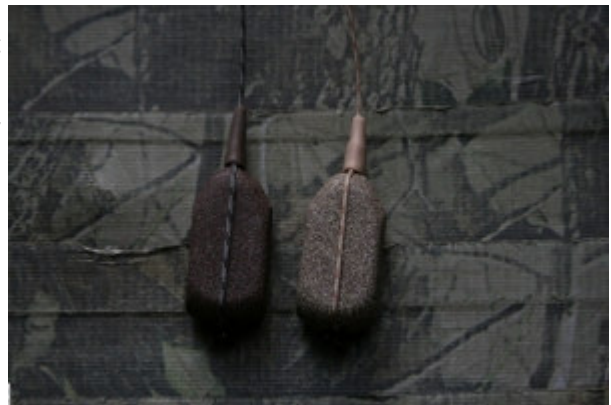
After a quiet night in Waiting Mans I was up bright and early in a much better frame of mind. In a couple of hours I was going to be setting up in Des's and the very thought of what might be in store for me over there had me buzzing to say the least!

At 9am a screaming buzzer from that side of the pond had both myself and Lee standing on the Trumptions board looking over. It was Listen Ere Mate in Des's and straight away I turned round to Lee and said "I hope that's not Heather". Thankfully it turned out to be a 28lb common but I'd seen enough and was soon packing my gear away hoping to get into Des's as early as possible. Steve being Steve made me wait right up until he had run out of time before eventually leaving me to get sorted.

First things first I sparked up the burner for a brew to try and calm down a little as by now I had a million and one thoughts running through my head. I felt close, real close and could sense something special was just around the corner.

Apart from events in the End Secret at the start this was without doubt my best chance of the season to date and I wanted everything to be perfect. I stripped about forty yards of line off the reels until I reached some new unused stuff and tied up brand new leadcore leaders with new swivels. I wanted to leave nothing to chance. Rig wise I set both rods up identically, 3oz Atomic Inline Bottle leads setup breakaway style, 5" Korda hybrid soft hooklengths no knotted to size 6 ESP D7's. Both baited with balanced Black Tiger hookbaits tipped off with a single grain of plastic corn.

The spot I was most confident in was a small strip of clean gravel about seventy yards out right up close to the main weedbeds and after a few chucks had the marker positioned perfectly. When the rig cracked down right next to it I couldn't help but smile. The other rod went equally well and at last I felt like I was angling 100% again. The rest of the afternoon was spent chatting to Sharpy and Andy who were sat making serious inroads into my brew supplies until eventually around eight o'clock I was saying goodbye, my parting words to Nige being "keep your phone on mate, I'll be having her in the morning!"



The breakaway inline lead system I used the second year to improve the rig's hooking efficiency and combat the weed



Atomic Inline Bottle Leads, ESP D7 Hooks and Korda's Hybrid Soft and Supernatural Braid for hooklength's

Being a Sunday the lake was now empty and with the Car Park Lake to my self my mind started to wander again! With the swim finally quiet I decided to tidy everything up and seeing as it was forecast to remain dry throughout the night decided against putting up my shelter.



I switched to 20lb X-Line for the second season to improve line lay which I felt was critical on the Car Park

Before getting ready for bed I moved my bedchair right next to the rods and had one last brew with my eyes fixed over the left hand area before climbing into the bag for some much needed kip.

I didn't bother setting my alarm because I honestly didn't think I'd be needing it and I was right! At 4am I woke suddenly to the left hand roller in meltdown. Swinging my legs out of bed I jumped down the step and grabbed the rod just as the buzz bars were starting to twist. Disengaging the baitrunner the rod was violently yanked back down and I managed to let go of the handle just in time to give line as the fish powered off taking the best part of thirty yards of line, WOW! In the half light I could make out a huge disturbance on the surface in front of Trumptions.

The breakaway inline had done its job and rather than charge into the weed the fish was now above it, albeit about 100 yards out in the pond! Clamping down was met with more power this time a fast run round to the right, at this point I was pretty sure I had Heather on. The only other mirror in the pond renowned for its fighting abilities was the Big Orange and having been caught the day before was hardly likely to be making a mistake again so soon. It had to be her, this certainly wasn't a common and I felt a rush of panic sweep through me. The only thing to do was hang on and try and keep the pressure steady. This seemed to do the trick and after probably ten minutes had her on a fairly short line about twenty yards out.

Just as I was starting to feel in control disaster struck and everything went solid! I could tell from the angle the line was entering the water that she had found a big weedbed close to the island to the right. For a minute I just held the rod at full compression and pondered what to do. I was alone on the lake with the country's finest leather carp stuck fast in weed a couple of rodlenghts out. I contemplated going out in the boat alone which was just twenty yards to my left in its usual place behind Traybins but quickly ruled that one out.

Glancing round to my right I spotted one of the big logs in the swim that were used for seats, although less than two feet in height I wondered if standing on top of one would give me the right angle of pull I needed to tease her out. It was worth a shot and having manoeuvred it into position with my feet whilst keeping the pressure on I climbed on top and did my best balancing act! By now the 3.5lb test curve NG rod was starting to creak and it was obvious something was about to give, thankfully it was her and after a huge boil on the surface she was moving again, this time round to some overhanging branches close in to the left. By now I was happy the hookhold was a good one giving the pressure I'd already exerted and once again clamped down hard turning her just in time.

Just as she started to slowly move away from me I heard someone walking past behind me. I turned round just as Michael the Chemist was walking into the swim. "Do you know which one it is mate" he asked. Trying to play it cool when by now I was totally spun I replied "yeah I think its Heather" Michael looked at me trying to work out whether I was winding him up or not before replying "have you seen her then?, No but I've had her on probably twenty minutes now" He never said another word and crouched beside me as I carried on playing my dream carp. Bit by bit I could feel things were going to go my way as she slowly began to tire and after another couple of minutes had her a couple of yards out and ready for netting. The first time she surfaced just like a submarine facing straight at me exposing her width is a moment I'll never forget, she looked huge and inch by inch I led her towards the net.

As soon as her head touched the spreader block I lifted and she was in! YEESSSSS!

I turned to Michael who by now was smiling as much as me and shook his outstretched hand. I'd done it! I'd caught Heather the Leather, one of my all time favourite carp. I passed Michael the net and sat down on my bedchair totally blown away for a minute before sparking up the burner for a much needed brew. Half way through that I started to come to my senses a little and realised I had a rather large carp in the net that I wanted a photo with! The one person I wanted there more than anyone was Al so at 4:45am I rung his mobile and told him the good news. With Al on his way over I rung Benny, James and Odd too and within half an hour we were all gathered in the swim drinking tea and waiting for the light to improve.



Al and Benny helping out!



The queen of Yateley, Heather the Leather at 50lb 9oz

Eventually with everything sorted Benny lifted Heather out onto the mats. I tried to remove the hook which was a good couple of inches back but had started to get the shakes again so Benny done the honours there. I stood back and watched as the lads took over, carefully transferring her into the weigh sling.

With Odd and Benny holding the bar I stood back as they lifted before James calmly announced "oh she is over fifty!" 50lb 9oz to be precise and barely able to take it all in I just grinned some more! With the weighing done it was time for me to do my bit and after a typical Heather tantrum eventually managed to hold her up once she had calmed down as my crew clicked away with the cameras.

Once the pictures were done we all watched in awe as she slowly powered off into her home again. Benny summed it up perfectly "no matter how many times you see Heather she always takes your breath away!" I was breathless alright and spent the next couple of minutes pacing round the swim as the lads helped themselves to a brew. At last I was the right side of the lens and I couldn't have picked a better one to start with!

Watch this space for the next chapter in Phil's 'Car Park season.'