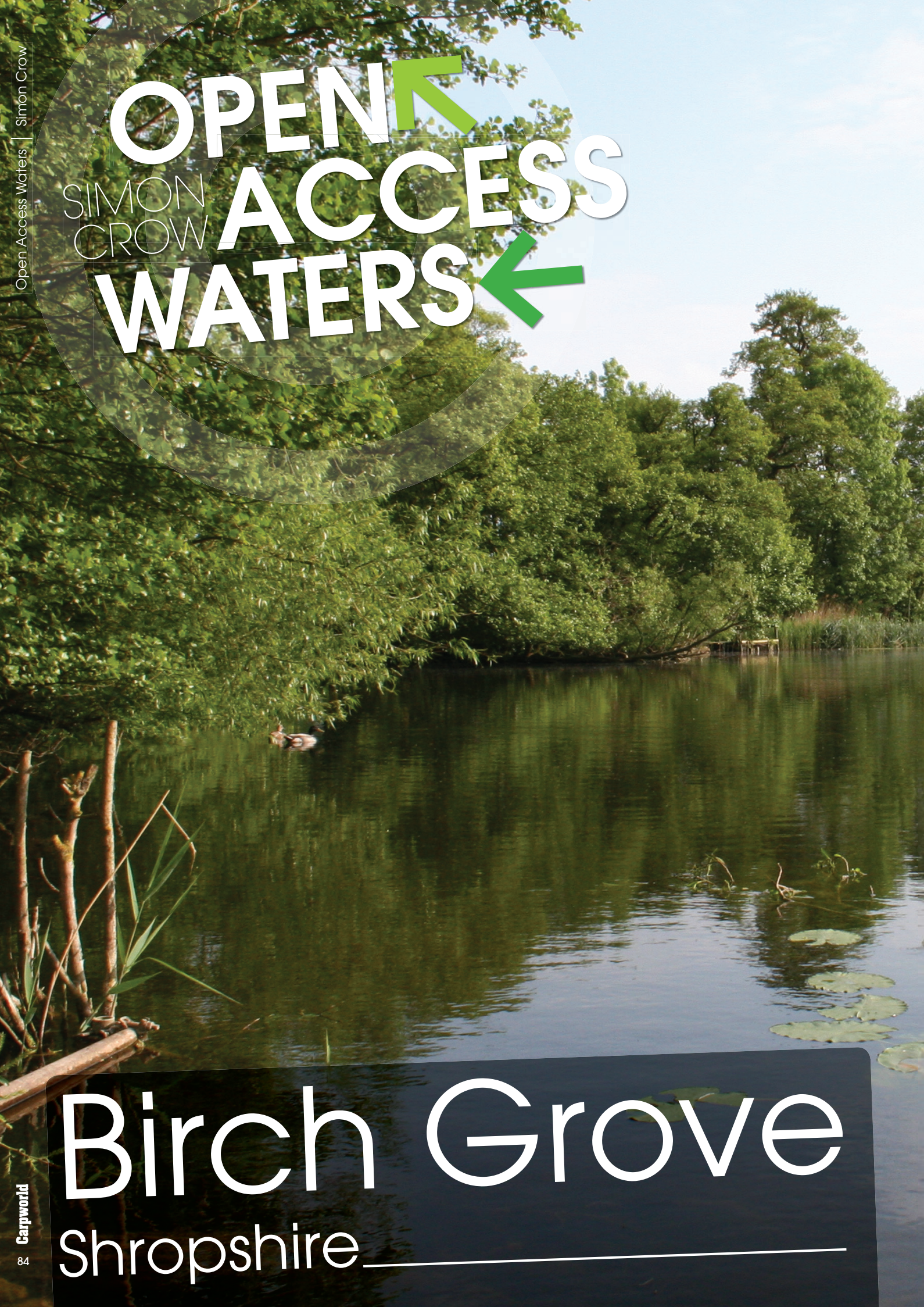


# OPEN ACCESS WATERS

SIMON CROW



## Birch Grove

### Shropshire



**Birch Grove** has a long history with Carpworld readers, having been extensively written about over the years by our own Tim Paisley. Although run with a winter syndicate in operation, very few people know that the lake is also available on the open access ticket at other times of the year. Here's a look at how you can fish one of the most famous waters of its generation...

### A Walk Around the Lake

Beginning at the main base, which is the lodge, there is one swim 50yds to the left of here, known as Bouncing Bobbins. This offers some access to a set of pads to the left as well as some overhangs to the right. Out in front there are some bloodworm spots at varying distances up to halfway across the lake.

The lodge itself has a swim (known as The Caravan Swim) in front which controls a lot of water. The left-hand margin is the most obvious, with some terrific spots under bushes and on a shelf that drops away from about 5ft into the deeper water. There are also some open water spots, which are fantastic at all times of the year.

The next one to the right is The Compound, perhaps the most productive swim on the lake. You can control most of the water from here when there's no one in The Caravan Swim or Bouncing Bobbins. Open water is fantastic at all ranges, as indeed is the far marginal shelf. You also have a great spot to the right along the marginal pads, or even further to the right off the bushes.

There used to be a swim next to The Compound which was known as The Cattle Drink, but this area is no longer available to fish from as it is now part of the owner's garden. The Helipad is now the next one to the right, where open water is the best, with several spots to the right and left that regularly show signs of carp activity. There are thought to be springs coming up from the lakebed in front of here because when the lake freezes over these are the areas that are first to defrost.

The Main Boards is next along, where I fished during this trip. The margins to the right and opposite are fabulous all year round because of the pads and trees dotted about. Don't ignore open water at about 50yds where there's a spring which attracts the carp all year round.

Lastly, there is Tag's Swim, which is nowadays more of a stalking swim as it's right amongst the pads. It was named after Tag Barnes who used to fish the lake a lot with Tim.

Tag probably isn't someone known to younger readers but he was not only a successful angler during his time, but also a war hero who served in the Desert Rats in the Second World War.

### My Trip – Two Enjoyable Nights

I had the pleasure of being a member of the Birch Grove winter syndicate for five happy years, leaving at the end of March 2002

The smaller of my two fish from my trip in May, a 22lb mirror.



if my memory serves me correctly. I have fond memories of a very beautiful lake and some exceptional fishing which saw me finish my campaign with a session to remember, when I caught three of the then biggest fish in Birch in two days, including The Video Fish at 36lb, The Lovely Common at 35lb and Starburst at 34lb 12oz. The following season tragedy struck when around 30 fish mysteriously passed away in the space of a couple of weeks, including most of the biggies and fish that had become famous through the writings of Tim Paisley. At the time I felt sick, but deep down I knew that Birch would come again as it is one of those waters which, for its size, is rich enough to produce good carp time and time again.

Until Tim invited me for a session for this feature, I'd not stepped on the banks since I helped with the netting of the stock ponds to introduce a further injection of 30-odd fish to supplement those that were lost. I think that was around the spring of 2003. When I arrived in late-May this year it was obvious a great deal had changed. The new lodge had been built and a great deal of work to fell old trees and build new paths had also been carried out. Much to my surprise, a new swim had also been constructed. In the days when I was a syndicate member, there



## BIRCH GROVE, SHROPSHIRE

**History:** The northwest is littered with old meres like Birch, which is said to date back centuries. Birch is stream-fed, with several springs coming up from the lakebed, and has been run on behalf of the owners by Tim Paisley and Angling Publications since the mid-1980s.

**Lake size:** About five acres.

**Lake features:** Lots of silt with plenty of bloodworm beds, overhanging trees, lily pads, snags, reedbeds, and deep margins.

**Location:** Somewhere in Shropshire. The exact location will be revealed at the time of booking. This is an exclusive venue and anglers are not allowed to just turn up and walk round.

**Owned by:** The lake is owned by the Gwilt family and run by Tim Paisley and his Angling Publications team.

**Fishing details:** There is a winter syndicate in operation which runs from November until the end of March each year. The rest of the season is open for bookings from the beginning of June, whereby the whole lake is booked by the week for a maximum of four anglers. Anglers can bring non-fishing guests who are able to stay on site.

**Contact details:** Telephone Angling Publications on 0114 258 0812 and ask for Philippa or Jemima. Alternatively contact Philippa on 07808 741158.

**Price:** On application.



**Fishery rules:** Four rods can be used, as can remote control boats. A rod pod is essential for use on the boarded swims.

**Fish stock:** Rudd, roach, eels, pike, perch and of course, carp.

**Carp stock:** It is estimated there are between 100-150 carp in the lake, of which the vast majority are 20s. To give you an idea, the last winter syndicate saw more than 30 fish on the bank, of which only two were doubles, the rest being over 20. There are currently at least four different 30s in the water, although regular

sightings of uncaught fish are reported. The best fish to date is a common of 32lb 4oz.

**Best tactics:** For open water look for bubblets and cast PVA bags to them. The far margin is also a great area to try. Use top quality bait at all times as the carp have seen everything.

**In the words of the owner:** "These fish are riggy and pressured most weeks of the year, so you need to be really on your game. Anti-eject rigs are a must, something like the 360 Rig or a Long Shank Blowback Rig are strongly recommended."





View of the fishery from the top of the hill where the entrance lies. Simply stunning!



Looking from The Caravan Swim out across the lake in May – simply glorious.



The newly reformed Bouncing Bobbins Swim covers some great spots.



The Helipad swim in the centre of the lake has produced many fish from open water.



The view to the left of The Main Boards Swim where I fished during my recent trip.

were only five swims on the lake, with the far bank being completely out of bounds. I knew from talking to Tim that when he fished the lake in the early days, the far bank used to have several swims on it, and one in particular was a very productive area, known as Bouncing Bobbins. After negotiation with the owners and much hard work by the syndicate members, this particular swim had been reinstalled.

### Arrival

I had two days to complete the feature, arriving at the lake at 7.00 p.m. on the Friday, pulling off on the Sunday at around 10.00 a.m. When I arrived the weather was very mixed, with the sun out one minute and then hidden behind clouds the next. It was one of those days when the jumper was on and off every few minutes, although the air temperature remained constant due to the

Straightaway I saw a few good chunks drifting under and close to the boat. I saw at least three nice commons which I would have said were close to, if not over, 30lb, as well as a mirror which was not far behind.”

lack of wind. The lack of ripple meant it was easy to spot fish, and after an hour of looking and walking, I knew exactly where I wanted to be. The Main Boards is the shallowest end and boasts some lovely marginal lily beds amongst which I could make out the odd cruising and basking fish. I had a drift over the area in the boat and straightaway I saw a few good chunks drifting under and close to the boat. I saw at least three nice commons which I would have said were close to, if not

over, 30lb, as well as a mirror which was not far behind. Among them I also caught sight of several nice 20s, so where I needed to be wasn't a difficult choice.

Half an hour after making it back to shore I was all set up, with the aim being to put all three rods along the lily margin at 30yd intervals. I was armed with a variety of different baits, but knowing how good tiny seeds are amongst pads I knew each rod was going to be fished over a bed of hemp, with which you're allowed to bait up from the boat. I didn't want to cause too much disturbance so I drifted ever so gently along the margins of the lilies looking for some nice clear areas for a hookbait to be placed. The right-hander was an obvious choice as there was a small clearing between two sets of pads with 4ft of water below. I scattered three large handfuls of hemp here as well as a handful of Solar Quench pellets and a light scattering of BYT 18mm freebies. I'm not a great fan of fishing boilies only over the top of hemp as the carp can become so preoccupied on hemp that they leave the boilies alone. However, with a few pellets of a similar size amongst them they seem to pick up anything around the immediate vicinity.

The middle rod went in a much more isolated spot in the middle of a set of thick pads. From the surface you wouldn't have noticed the clearing that was below the

The carp love to cruise the margin to the right of Bouncing Bobbins.







What a lovely water to be at. All set up on The Main Boards, with no one else in sight.

water, but thanks to a bit of intermittent sun, my Polaroids, and some perseverance, I found a firm clear patch about 6ft wide that looked as though it had been cleaned by the fish. There were pads covering the surface but below it looked lighter on the bottom and it just screamed fish. I used exactly the same approach here as I used for the right-hander. Not wanting to put all my eggs in one basket, the left-hander I fished differently. I could make out the odd fish topping close in to the far margin, and when I say 'close', I mean right in the edge. I didn't want to create a very obvious man-made pile of bait for these fish, instead just going for a single hookbait fished alongside a stringer, which I'd roam around, depending on what activity I saw during the trip. I had two days in front of me so there was plenty of time for experimenting.

I fished all three rods with 18mm BYT hookbaits Snowman-style, and, knowing that Birch has a history of rig-shy fish, I had to make a few adjustments to my normal presentation. There were several times when I was a member of the syndicate that I knew the fish had 'done me'. A single bleep lift of an inch, followed by a drop-back of about two inches was known amongst the syndicate members as being an aborted take. Single bleeps had, on several occasions,

## RECOMMENDED TACTICS



Hemp, boilies, and pellets, my simple-yet-effective approach for the two-day session.



I had to switch to Long Shanks for the trip as I know the Birch carp can be very finicky with rigs.

been converted into takes too, so anything with any anti-eject properties needed to be used at all times if you were to succeed. I remember seeing Frank Warwick do extremely well on the water with his Long Shank presentation. He wouldn't always land fish, the odd one would occasionally fall off, but it was obvious that his rigs were frequently turning what would normally be aborted takes on my rigs into confident pick-ups. With this in mind, I decided to go for Size 4 Solar Long Shanks with the line-aligner, alongside 10-inch 25lb Super Nova hooklinks. The turning properties of this rig when I did the palm test were much better than when I did the same with the shorter

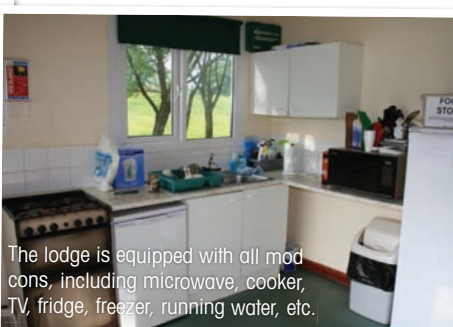
shank hooks I tend to prefer. You may well wonder then why I don't use long shanks all the time, well, the answer is, I don't like losing fish, and I do think long shanks lose more fish than shorter shank hooks, but the difference is that at Birch I know you can get away with losing the odd fish and not spooking the others. At a lot of other waters I think if you lose one fish, your chances may well have been completely lost altogether.

## Great Start

Anyway, back to the session. I was all set for about 9.30 on the Friday night and I was buzzing with enthusiasm. Here I was, set up at Birch Grove all by myself. Wonderful! I soon drifted off to sleep, hearing the ducks every now and then as they climbed into the boat to pick away at the odd grain of hemp that was around. For a Friday night the road behind was very quiet, and at 2.30 a.m. the middle rod broke the silence when it just roared off. I scrambled out of bed, throwing the mozzie shroud attached to my sleeping bag to the floor, and hooping the rod up as soon as I was on it. I held on tightly as the fish tried to battle amongst the pads. The rod was bent full and I made the odd bit



The new anglers' lodge, built by John Lilley.



The lodge is equipped with all mod cons, including microwave, cooker, TV, fridge, freezer, running water, etc.



of ground in between it going solid. I knew the fish was still there as the tip would flick every now and then, the secret to getting them out of pads being to just let them find their own way on a tight line. I did exactly that and a short while later the fish was plodding up and down the margin. It was pitch black so I couldn't see what I had on the end, although it did feel heavy. The fish came up to the surface on several occasions and I tried to steer it to the net, each time without success. I remember talking to myself while I tried to coax it to the net and I think I made about three unsuccessful attempts. I just couldn't see what I was doing because of the dark. I kept chuckling to myself like John Wilson does, and in the end I had to go back to the bivvy to get my headtorch, which I usually don't like to do. Once I was back to the water's edge I flicked it on and caught sight of the fish. It didn't look as impressive as I first thought it might be, and it continued to charge from left to right up and down the margins. It was a right battle. Eventually I coaxed it to the net and she was mine. It was only then, when I drew the net towards me, that I knew I had a decent fish. Had the hook pulled at any moment I would have thought I'd lost a double, but in the torchlight it looked very wide, and certainly close to 30. The scales shot round to 35lb 4oz, but the net was dripping wet and needed to be deducted from this. I settled on 32lb 4oz, and I sacked her up, intending to take some photos in an hour or so when the light would be better. I also re-did the rod which had just produced the fish, and settled back down for some more shut-eye.

### Liners

An hour later I was woken by some single bleeps on my right-hand rod. The bobbin wasn't moving at all, but during a period of 10 minutes I had four bleeps and rod twitches, which could only be down to



Looking towards The Cattle Drink from out in the middle of the lake.

movement in the swim. I expected it to burst into life at any moment, but as it turned out I had to wait another hour, until 6.30 a.m., for it to go off. The fish had gone sideways into the pads and needed some lengthy persuasion to come out. Eventually, I had it free and in open water, when it decided to give me a proper good battle under the tip. This fish felt much better and I was really surprised to see a 22lb mirror in the net.

By the time I was all sorted again it was 7.00 a.m. so I texted Tim to tell him I had a 32lb 4oz in the sack. I knew he was due to come down to the lake to see how I was getting on, and, knowing how much of an early bird he is, I expected him at any time. He arrived at 8.00 a.m. and duly fired off some

lovely shots of the biggie for me. I'd returned the 22-pounder by the time he arrived, having taken some half-decent self-takes.

Tim departed about 10.00 a.m. and I was back to being alone on one of the most tranquil lakes I know. It was lovely just being there and walking the banks, let alone fishing the place. I spent most of Saturday mooching around in the boat looking for fish. The majority still seemed to be around the pads end, although I did see a couple of good 'uns on the far margin to the left of Bouncing Bobbins. I could tell from their movements that they were spooked and they knew anglers were on the lake, and I wondered if my chances were all but gone. I contemplated going home because I had a



Carpworld editor Martin Ford with a nice Birch mirror from this time last year.



This awesome scaly mirror fell to Shaun Harrison during a stalking session.





To be fair to Tim, he's not covered up the sad loss of most of the biggies. He's simply just got on with running a venue which is very dear to him, knowing that the course of time would dispel the rumours and this amazing venue would once again be very much in demand.”

the water in the late-'80s/early-'90s. They made compulsive reading, as indeed did Tim's book *From the Bivvy*, which focused on his winter fishing at the intricate little water in the season of 1992/93. Basically, Birch was one of those lakes that everyone at the time wanted to fish. Being on the winter syndicate was as good as it got, and getting a space in the summer when it was run as open access was like finding the end of the rainbow.

Set in beautiful countryside Birch is very much a dream venue to be at, but it's fair to say that ever since the fish-kill, the public's perception of the place has changed. All sorts of rumours were bandied about regarding

what stock remained, which resulted in it losing its hard-earned top flight status. To be fair to Tim, he's not covered up the sad loss of most of the biggies. He's simply just got on with running a venue which is very dear to him, knowing that the course of time would dispel the rumours and this amazing venue would once again be very much in demand.

It has a history of containing tricky fish, some of which only get caught every few years. From talking to Tim, and from what I saw during my trip, besides the 30s, which are now regularly showing, there are still some others mixed in with them that are playing hard to get. There are also plenty of other backup fish which are definitely making their mark, showing at upper-20s, which are heading in the right direction.

As a fishery, Birch is stunning and exclusive. It's been very much out of the public eye for five years but it's going to be right up there back at the top very soon. My advice is to get in there quickly whilst there are still spaces remaining as I'm certain it's only a matter of time before demand for places is as great as it was in the 1990s. It's almost as good as Redmire, and it's certainly one of the best available waters in the country that is open to all. **SC**

lot of work to do, but it's not very often you get the chance to fish Birch by yourself in spring, so I stayed put. The rest of Saturday passed by uneventfully, as did the night, before I departed at 10.00 on the Sunday morning, a very happy man. Birch didn't owe me anything, but I left with yet more happy memories of a lake that has given so much joy to many anglers all over the country.

### Overall Opinion

There's no denying that Birch Grove has its own little place in modern carp fishing history. If you were a reader of the early *Carpworlds* then you'll remember the ups and downs of Tim Paisley's years on



My biggie at 32lb 4oz, almost certainly one of the older fish in the lake.