

# TROUT, SILVER STREAMS AND WATERFALLS

GORDON MACLELLAN

**Gordon explains how, as artists, he and his colleague, Steve Brown, worked creatively with schools that were participating in a biodiversity project hatching trout for release into local rivers.**

## River source

*'There is a silver stream, so cool  
and fresh as can be...'*\*

We did not have sparkling mountain spring water, running fast and shallow over the beds where eggs lay, golden pearls between the stones, but we did have fish tanks with chilled and filtered water in schools across East Lancashire. One hundred Brown Trout eggs sifted down into the gravel of each tank and, across the Ribble River catchment, pupils watched their progress anxiously and eagerly.

Over the last few years, various projects have improved water quality and widened biodiversity in the Ribble catchment. Since 2014, as part of a community engagement strategy, the Ribble Rivers Trust (see web panel) has been hatching trout in local schools before asking the pupils to release the fry as fingerlings into rivers within walking distance of each school (including rural as well as urban areas like Burnley). Within this context, my colleague, Steve Brown, and I worked with participating schools to explore the hatching process and its impacts creatively. More on our work can be traced in The Hatching postings on my Creeping Toad blog (see web panel).

With the creative work, we set out to use music, poetry and visual art to:

- provide an opportunity to integrate The Hatching work with wider learning
- use The Hatching process as a focus for river work generally, looking at river geography, water purity and pollution issues
- promote close observation and understanding of the fish and their ecology
- offer teachers hands-on experience of activities they might take up for themselves on other occasions

- offer pupils creative opportunities where (as individuals, small groups and whole classes) they can consider their own feelings about, and reactions to, the hatching process while incorporating their emotional responses with river knowledge.

Feelings ran high. In all our schools, we were hugely impressed by just how involved pupils (mostly year 6 classes, but sometimes younger) became in the growth and survival of their young charges. There were triumphs and disasters. If filters failed, refrigeration units switched off, or lights left on for too long, casualties ensued and we were writing epitaphs to fish. Lessons were learned, techniques improved and, in the second year, fry survival rates increased.

And us? Steve and I bounced in with instruments and card, microphones, oil pastels and images, our heads full of rivers and hearts full of fish.

## Singing rivers

*'Rain pours down to wash the sky...'*

With the pupils, we composed songs and soundscapes. Charting rivers as rhythms and pace, pupils created patterns of water movement. Splashing around for an opening line, with Steve, groups would start to build songs. Steve is adept at finding a rhythm that suits that opening line and encouraging a group to decide: Blues? Rock? A rousing Trout Anthem? A tragic folk ballad?

*'A pike is on the loose, I'd better  
swim away,*

*Hiding under pebbles, that's where  
I'll lay'*

(Heasandford Primary, 2015)

With all our sessions, time was always pressing, so half the class would work with Steve: talking, sharing, arguing rhymes and swapping dilemmas. The other half would be with me, reciting rivers and creating trout. An hour each, before an exchange: the song would be handed over, the river poems see a shift-change of bailiffs. For us, it was a great exercise in distilling activities down to an essential set of fish bones.

For us, this was not teaching about rivers. The classes were exploring river knowledge in their formal lessons: our

role was to help pupils integrate that knowledge, experiment with it and apply it creatively, really helping the learning to bed down in pupils' understanding. We came into this as artists, but our role was to make this sort of creativity accessible to pupils and to offer teachers new ideas that they could incorporate into other geography themes. To this end, our activities generally used readily-available materials and often involved encouraging pupils to look at a subject from a slightly different angle: seeing rivers as stories and songs, and river processes as voices to listen to, resulted in long rhythmic poems. I have carried out similar projects with other topics, especially geology. There we have told of the long slow lives of mountains through dance and created puppets that embodied the qualities and attributes of different rocks.

Between visits to schools, Steve and I edited songs and my blog sprouted 'The Hatching' posts. This included links to songs to allow classes to visit their own work (they all got copies of the songs directly too) and see and hear what other schools were doing. We wrote up activities as worksheets to provide a resource pack for future school sessions. (Hopefully, not depriving ourselves of future work at the same time!) The worksheet pack can be downloaded (see web panel). While these activities are focused on rivers, any teacher could give them a shake and use them in other subjects.

## Speaking rivers

*'Trout blend in brown as sand,  
as stone, as shadows...'*

With river pictures as starting points in my sessions, we 'built' rivers across tables with pupils shuffling a series of images to decide on the course of their own ideas. Positions of rapids and meanders, floodplains, estuaries, fast and slow waters were all decided by the groups. Drawing the feel of chosen stretches of water gave us patterns, movements and then words to work with. We played with the river in words, discarding rhyme for rhythm, assonance for alliteration, revelling in the cascades and ripples of rapids and waterfalls, the stillness of deep pools. Speaking and editing went together and presentation offered more opportunities for improvisation until the pupils had rivers

that rippled as pictures and spoken words across classroom floors.

'Slowing down, running wider,

The river slips into a pool,

Dark, ice-cold water

Deep water, calm water, ripples meandering,

Slow carp in deep pools'  
(Stoneyholme Primary School, 2015).

'Waterfall drags the river,

Over the edge,

And drops it,

Rushing,

Racing,

Rapid,

Dashing,

Smashing,

Crashing'  
(Holy Trinity Primary School, 2015).

## Folded rivers

A more personal option had pupils building individual pop-up river landscapes, creating moments in the lives of our fish (Figure 1). Using quick card-sculpture techniques ('chairs' and 'benches' were instantly adopted as technical jargon), pupils used their own aquatic knowledge to build 'golden eggs in a gravel red' or 'While little fish swim in weeds and shadows, Safe from otters and pupils with nets', or the glory of a leaping trout. The pupils found pop-ups easy to create and they are a readily transferable skill.

The pupils produced pieces of work that stood as individual creations and (with a bit of co-operation) could be lined up to unfold as a whole set of river scenes. In one memorable and spectacular extra session, three classes worked together to create a pop-up river with each folded section being about one metre long: the finished work ran for 30 metres along the school hall.

## Rivers on heads

In celebratory carnival mode some groups built rivers on hands and heads with fingers full of tiny puppets: fry, frogs, crayfish and mayfly nymphs (pupils grew suddenly exacting and technical in deciding just what invertebrates they were going to wriggle). Crowns on pupils' heads held bigger trout, great crested grebes and the occasional swan. (Side-tracking into sharks, dolphins and crocodiles we tried (not always successfully) to discourage.)

## Ceremonial rivers

Most of our sessions were indoors, but as release of the fingerlings approached in 2015, second visits to our Hatching schools provided pupils with opportunities to polish songs and write farewell poems. The 'Release' became much more of a celebration with Troutsingers to sing the fry on their way and a Troutspeaker to recite our poem – words of advice to a fingerling trout.

'Inhale the future, exhale the past...'

Overall, the Hatching was a great success. Fry-raising techniques improved a lot over the two years and the integration of the project into wider schoolwork increased as teachers became more familiar with

the opportunities and excitement that the aquaria offered. And us? The half-day art workshops did not contribute a whole lot of time to each school, but in talking to pupils and teachers it was clear that our visits had a great impact. Songs were remembered weeks and months later, pop-ups were displayed, poems recited and the creative techniques used again and again.

'Think I'm gonna cry now, teardrops

Run like rapids down my face

Reflecting on the river, all these

Memories will not float away'

[closing lines of the song of a trout released into the river]

(Ightenhill Primary School, 2015).

\* All quotes throughout are from school poems and songs.

## WEB RESOURCES

Rivers worksheet pack: <http://ures-burnley.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Creative-worksheet-pack-for-RIC-Final-version-May-2015.pdf>

Creeping Toad blog: <http://creepingtoad.blogspot.co.uk>

Ribble Rivers Trust: <http://ribbletrust.org.uk/>

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Figure 1: The pupils built individual pop-up river landscapes, creating moments in the lives of our fish. An easy-to-learn and transferable skill, the pop-up pieces of work stood as individual creations and could be lined up to unfold as a whole set of river scenes. Photo © Gordon MacLellan.