

COTSWOLD LIFE

INCLUDING OXFORDSHIRE, WARWICKSHIRE, WILTSHIRE & WORCESTERSHIRE

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Cirencester's
fashion model
**RESTORING
OUR RIVERS**



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£5.75



Debbie clearing algae from the natural pond she and her husband had created in their garden

River GIRL

Having traded runways for riverbanks,
DEBBIE CAMPBELL is using her
platform to protect our waterways

WORDS: Katie Jarvis

England; the Cotswolds; the River Windrush. It's an early summer's day; the kind of day where nature itself seems a-fizz with the sheer joy of being alive. Blue skies, chlorophyll-green grass, rustling trees, piping birds; floral pollen tickling the nose; oxeye daisies, bird's-foot trefoil, foxgloves dotting the ground with egg-white, yolk-yellow and bacon-pink temptation: a full English.

But, in more ways than one, all is not as it seems.

This is a Covid lockdown, and Debbie Campbell – like many people – is feeling the stress. By 2020, she and her husband Neil have lived in the Cotswolds (decamped from London) for nearly eight years, and both love it.

Now, with young two children, life is good: but there's no getting away from it – enforced home-schooling can be very, very hard work.

She needs a break.

For Debbie, relaxation equals water. Riding the waves on a surfboard; swimming for charity; dipping in the natural pool she and Neil have dug at home (even at -1°C: there's a photo of her daughter holding up a sheet of ice they broke for Debbie to go in one Christmas).

So, inevitably, when she needs a fillip in lockdown, she knows what will soothe and restore. A friend has pointed her towards a wild-swim app: put in your location and you'll get a list of safe places.

When she gives it a go, the Windrush flashes up.

'I felt really excited,' she says, as she recalls the moment for me. 'Got into my yellow Jeep with Dude, the dog, and left my husband to look after the kids for a bit.'

She parks up, walks a couple of miles through beautiful woodland, and thinks: 'This is great. No one around – literally just me, the dog, and the trees.'

In fact, once in the water, she doesn't even notice (to begin with) the plastic bottles floating alongside her.

Or that the river has swapped its usual clear blue for a murky grey; its pure waters, that should run off skin like liquid silk, for a clingy slime.

'Afterwards, I got changed, walked two miles back to my car, and felt weird. I decided maybe it was being in the cold water or the thought of going back home!'

Once in the shower, though: no getting away from it. A smell of raw sewage.

'As the day got towards early evening, I went to the loo and threw up. I was so ill, I couldn't do anything for four days.'

England, the Cotswolds. The River Windrush...
Our River Windrush.

OH MY GOSH, it's cold!

Bone-chillingly, teeth-rattlingly cold.

Debbie Campbell – AKA River Girl – in bobble hat and padded coat opens up the back of her smoked-haddock-yellow Jeep with the registration H2O.

(Ha! How hard was it to get that?)

'Easy, believe it or not. On the internet.'

Inside is a tangle of wellies, waterproofs, jam-jars. ('This is what my Jeep looks like most of the time'.) Impressive-looking boxes emblazoned with HANNA: 'Testing-kits: the green one for phosphate, yellow for ammonia: we use these if we think there are any issues in the rivers; generally above and below a sewage works or agricultural land.'

What's a good reading?

'Almost zero, basically.'

Does she ever get that?

'Yes, which is always great.'

'But it's a real shame we have to do this job because the Environment Agency should be doing it...'

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PHOTO: JOHN WOOD

Forever a water baby

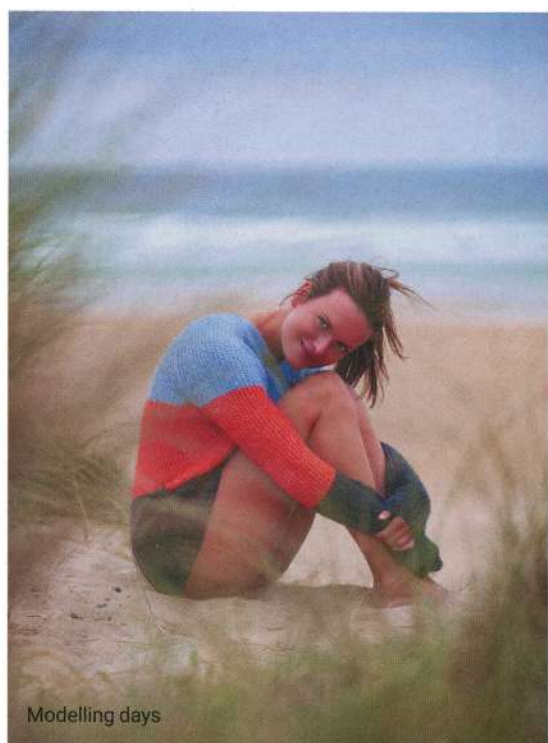


PHOTO: JOHN WOOD

Modelling days



Debbie and the Cotswold Flyfishers, clearing the river near Lechlade: improving the flow and cutting down overshadowing trees

‘It’s a real shame we have to do this job because the Environment Agency should be doing it’

She pulls on a huge pair of trousers ending in boots: ‘I stand in rivers pretty much every day. I’ve size four feet and, I can tell you, it’s very hard to find wellies small enough. When they’re too big, it feels like walking on the moon.’

And we walk along Abbey Way in Cirencester, down a small grassy bank to the River Churn. A few feet from us, incessant traffic is streaming over a small bridge, busy with intent. In front of us, the clear waters of this Thames tributary stream past, equally committed to their task.

In the cars above, it’s worryingly easy to forget this little river of life is even there. On the banks where we crouch, it’s delightfully – surprisingly – easy to forget the rattling traffic, filtered out by the scene in front of us.

Loveliness in an unlovely setting.

IN SUMMER 2025, the lack of rain in Cotswold rivers – the lack of rain everywhere – meant levels were very low; with so little water for dilution, pollution was high. Then came the storms.

‘And it’s great to see the rivers coming alive again, being free, but it doesn’t mean health.’

High Cotswold hills and deep secret valleys attract visitors and admirers all year round. They also signal water run-off: from farmland (though we are generally very lucky with farmers in this area), roads, tyres.

‘So many of the drains are blocked and the water has nowhere to go. It gushes all the way down, straight into the river and breaks banks. When we have heavy rainfall, I’m often quite emotional. There’s a sewage map, which I’m always looking at. Sewage works are allowed to dump when it’s heavy rainfall.’

So ‘heavy’ means...?

Hmm. ‘They can never tell us... Or they sometimes make an excuse out of a quarter-of-a-millimetre of rain: That is how weak regulation has become.’

Debbie’s current job is as community engagement officer for the River Coln; she and her 40 trained volunteers, ‘river guardians’, are constantly at the ready with their HANNA test kits: ‘Thousands of chemicals, microplastics, phosphates, nitrates, ammonia.’ Pollutants that suck up oxygen until the river is suffocated to death.

‘Some people think: “Oh, it’s clear” – but clear doesn’t mean clean.’

Recent readings have been especially high. In Andoversford: 'Ammonia and phosphate: sewage-dumping for three or four days.'

Burford and Bourton too. Bourton, FGS! Once known as the Venice of the Cotswolds for its similar beauty; now the synergy also lies in filth.

Today, the stretch of Churn in front of us looks as a river should. Gin-clear; vibrant green weeds that fish love; gravel for spawning; stones for shelter. A good height; free-flowing; bank frilled with watercress.

'We're right by a road but there's three metres of weed in between: it tends to filter any run-off.'

It does look good – but the flashes of orange I see turn out to be leaves.

Debbie nods: 'Really, there should be more going on in there. Some of my best memories with my grandparents and my parents were catching amazing-coloured sticklebacks: there would be thousands!'

We peer into the surface.

'So a lack of fish: this is another indicator that our rivers are slowly dying... but,' she adds, determinedly, 'we are trying to do our absolute best to improve them.'

She pulls out a waterproof leaflet showing gloriously-named waterweeds to identify – sweet-grass, canary grass, white water lily, duckweed, bladderwort, frog bit,

fennel, water crowfoot... submerged plants, floating-leaf plants, reed swamp.

And another showing riverfly, carefully pictured with 'easy-to-identify' hints.

'Shall we see what the river's like?' she asks, wading in.

Under the first stone, we (I use the term loosely; I'm staying on the bank) find a wriggling cased caddis that Debbie transfers to a water-filled tray to study: 'I love these guys! They collect all the little stones or leaves and make themselves a case. Caseless caddies come without the dress.'

Another is harder to identify.

She pulls out a magnifying glass: 'Does it have three tails? Does it have small leaf-like gills? OK, that's an olive.'

Her favourite are mayfly: 'You used to see swarms of them with their beautiful, beautiful wings. Sadly, their lifecycle means they're in the rivers for a few years: then they get their wings, mate, and die.'

She points to another section of the leaflet: 'These guys, on the other hand – freshwater shrimp – in great conditions, I find hundreds because they can be very tolerant of some pollution; but, in some of the worst places, the numbers can drop to tens... or worse.'

'It's great because fish eat them but they're not a good indicator of health.'

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Debbie's children, Summer and Sandy, are also water babies



Debbie with her famous yellow Jeep, water-testing kits always at the ready



Ice doesn't stop Debbie going for a swim

'I didn't sit there thinking, poor me. I instantly thought about the wildlife, the fish'

SO LET'S GO back to that day in lockdown: the source of Debbie's river story.

A keen surfer – the result of childhood holidays, as well as a spell living and studying in Cornwall – she was already taking part in Surfers Against Sewage when she took her disastrous dip.

During a meeting with Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, her local MP, she related her horrific Windrush anecdote.

'He said to me: "Have you seen the *Panorama* programme? You've got to meet this guy called Ashley".'

He was referring to the BBC's *River Pollution Scandal*, first aired in 2021, which uncovered – on national TV – how much the public had been misled over the country's river pollution levels.

'I sat there watching it, crying; thinking: "This is not OK. "We pay our water bills – this money should have been going into the infrastructure long ago!"

And Ashley?

The amazing Ashley Smith – one of the key figures in the documentary – from campaign group Windrush Against Sewage Pollution (WASP).

A man who dedicates his life to trying to improve rivers. When he and Debbie finally got to meet, she told

him, too, about her post-river sickness. 'He said: "Where were you swimming?"

'So I gave him the location.

'He looked into it and found out that, four days before, there had been a sewage dump.'

Debbie's anger was instant.

'But I didn't sit there thinking, poor me. I instantly thought about the wildlife, the fish. I love wild swimming; it makes us feel great. But it's a luxury. We have a choice: "You know what – this is dirty; I'm going to leave". The fish don't have a choice.'

She began volunteering with WASP, leading to a two-year contract to help police the rivers.

Today, her work on the Coln is funded by local residents. Wading through freezing-cold rivers is a far cry from the modelling career she used to have in a previous life (and still does when she can).

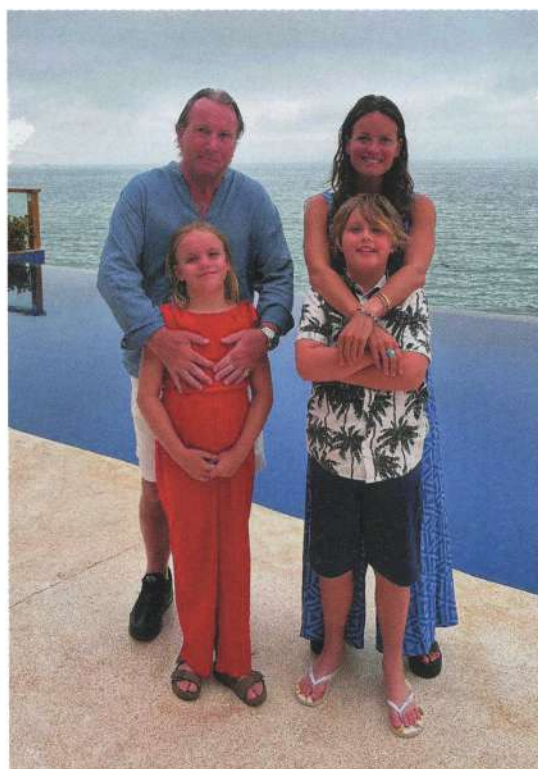
But this is a calling.

'I see rivers as alive. I sometimes wonder what *they* are thinking right now. But I don't want doom and gloom. We've seen otters, water voles, kingfishers! Let's really enjoy the rivers and remember that this is what we're doing it for. We want more of this.'

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A blocked drain sending filth into a natural water-course – a not-uncommon issue



Debbie, husband Neil, and children Summer and Sandy

‘We need to give the rivers a voice; to educate people and schools’

SO WE KNOW there are brilliant people such as Debbie and her volunteers; Ashley, of course; Professor Peter Hammond, a retired lecturer in computational biology at UCL, who works alongside him. Withington parish councillors, including Margaret Wright who founded the River Guardians, the volunteers who work with Debbie. Cotswold Flyfishers, a club contributing to excellent river restoration.

Freshwater UK; the Rivers Trust; all the willing volunteers who collect data that can be used to prompt campaigns; to try to hold water companies to account. And many more river heroes besides.

But is that enough?

Because we know there are the ‘baddies’, too. Pretty powerful ones.

The River Severn – and the UK in general – has just recorded its lowest-ever salmon numbers. No single stretch of river in England is in good overall health.

And still the water companies discharge sewage at an alarming rate.

Why isn’t this illegal?

‘Well, a substation amount is illegal. They say they haven’t got the money, the resources. But pollution has become profitable. Last year, Chris Weston, the boss of Thames Water, was pictured on a fishing holiday [in Argentina]... We’re paying for that.

‘Then there are more and more houses being squeezed onto floodplains; more and more new-builds being

served by already-inadequate sewerage systems. We need to give the rivers a voice; to educate people and schools. We need the next generation to know about it – because this is the mess we’re leaving for our kids...

‘Sorry – I get...’ She pauses, lost for words.

How would she like offending polluters dealt with?

‘Prison – for four or five years,’ she says, without hesitation. ‘They keep fining [the water companies]; they can pay the money. They don’t care.

‘I’d just like to see the money from our bills going into the infrastructure.

‘There are problems with agricultural run-off too. And, yes, we can probably blame a few farmers and landowners.

‘But, on the whole, when I meet these people, they want to do the right thing. There was one issue I had where the landowner didn’t even know about it. He said: “I’m so sorry. Let’s farm it this way, instead”.

She looks around her, at this unbeautiful, beautiful spot: a river by a road, hemmed in by buildings.

A tiny stretch of river that still exudes a rare peace and tranquillity so missing in our everyday lives.

England. The Cotswolds.

Our rivers.

‘Do you know,’ Debbie Campbell says. ‘Everyone I’ve ever met around the Cotswolds...

‘They all care.’ ●

