

*“Jim designed numerous patterns,
and many were illustrated in
A Dictionary of Trout Flies”*

THE GOOD TEACHER

Duncan Hall has never forgotten who taught him to fish

ALL BOYS HAVE HEROES AND I had the usual list, names like Bader, Brunel and Churchill, to which I added James Nice – or Jim, as he was known. Jim was by profession a postman but more importantly he was an exceptional fly-tyer, an instructor at game fairs around the country. Donald Overfield, author of *50 Favourite Dry Flies*, described Jim as one of the top tyer's in Britain and requested he tie most of the dressings for his book.

My father, Jim's GP in Sidmouth, asked him if he would offer me guidance in fly-fishing and later fly-tying, to which he agreed. I was grateful but in hindsight I suspect he may have found it rather irritating that a 12-year-old boy would cycle round, knock on his door and disturb him as he tried to keep pace with numerous orders for flies from across the UK and overseas. Jim designed numerous patterns, and many were illustrated in *A Dictionary of Trout Flies* by Alfred Courtney Williams.

He taught me to tie dry-flies, many of his own design, for the River Otter in Devon. The Devon Dumpling was my inauguration. Courtney Williams wrote, “This good general pattern, largely unknown outside the West Country, was devised by James Nice of Sidmouth, one of the most original and deft fly-tyers in the British Isles.” It was tied on a size 14 hook with a head and body hackle to represent a number of olives. It was highly buoyant, relatively easy to tie and with it I caught many trout.

A Dictionary lists other flies that Jim designed, including Nice's Favourite, tied in 1967; Otter Ruby, created as an imitation of an iron blue in 1957; Red Spinner, described as “An excellent dry fly that has taken many trout, particularly from the Otter and Axe”; Rusty Blue, Sherry Spinner, Devon Constable and Bloody Williams' Other Mate, a sea-trout pattern used very effectively on the River Axe.

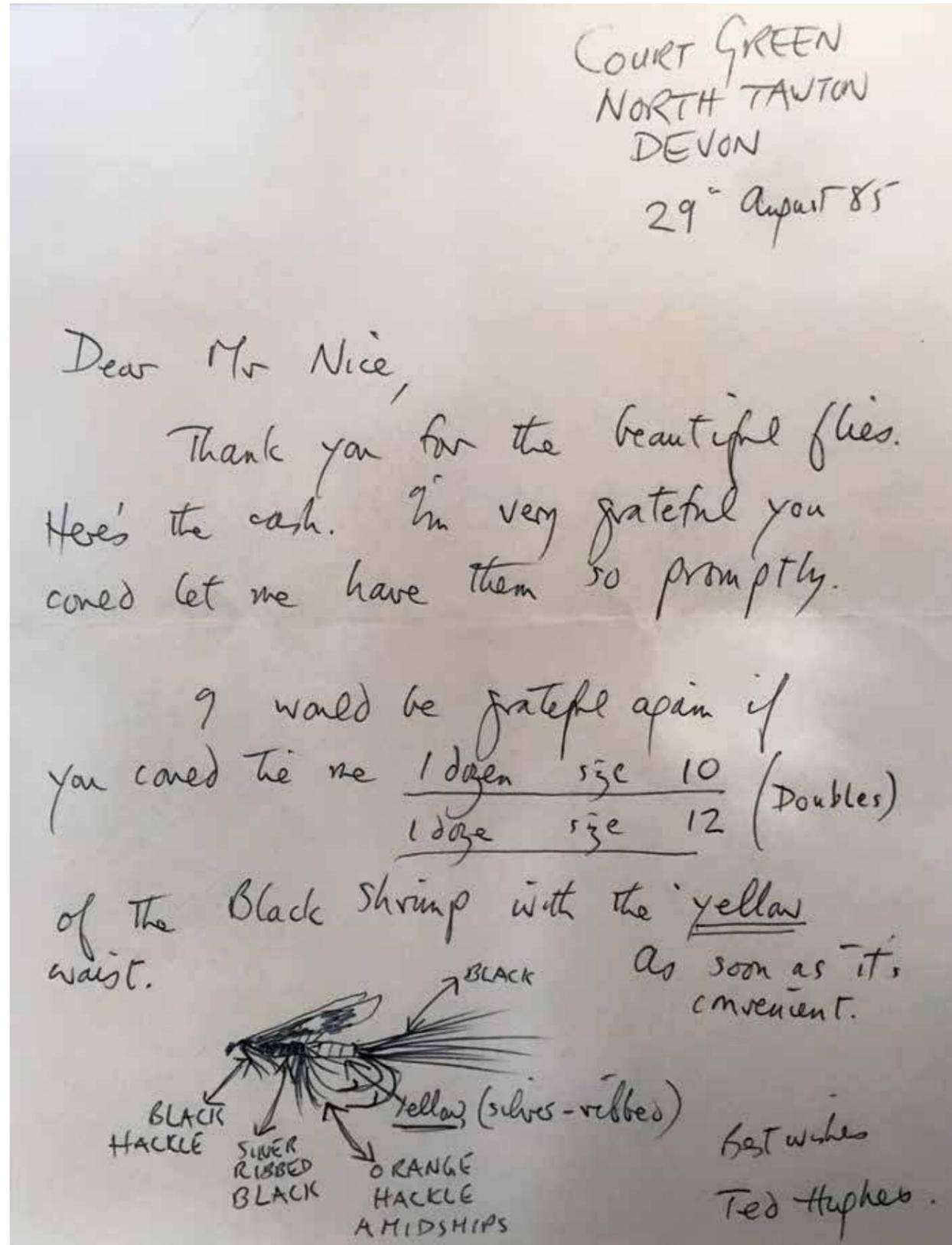
Perhaps the most detailed description is reserved for his Blue-Winged Olive, devised in 1947. Jim describes this in one of his letters: “I have given the b.-w.o. some thought at one time and another and in common with all fishermen I have experienced the frustrations that the little beast can occur. I have studied the living insect for hours on end and if it could blush it would have done so. The pattern is devised to give the general impression on DFM [daylight fluorescent material] being used for good colour and it allows for the shading of the bodies. A simple pattern effective especially in the morning.” ▶



DEVON DUMPLING

Hook River, size 14. Lake, size 12
Thread Yellow **Tail** Blue dun cock fibres
Rib Finest gold or silver wire **Body** Orange or lime DFM.
Alternatively, tying thread **Body hackle** Blue dun cock
Head hackle Blue dun cock

The fly on the top was tied by Duncan Hall 40 years ago. The one below was tied recently by Jim Nice's son Colin.



*"If he were tying a dozen flies,
they would be exact clones"*

Over many years, I would knock on Jim's door and he would sit me down at a spare vice and show me how to improve my fly-dressing techniques. His whole front room was packed from floor to ceiling with fly-tying material and all I could offer was the occasional mole skin or corvid feather that I had trapped or shot in return for his time and expertise.

He was a meticulous fly-tyer. If he were tying a dozen flies to order, they would be exact clones, always neat and well tied – they would never come apart. He was also innovative. Improvisation was essential in that era before mail order catalogues were common. I believe there was only one catalogue then, Sue Burgess in Brecon, long since gone. This was an era when hackles were frequently dyed at home by the tyer to achieve the correct colour. Jim recommended ladies' nylon stocking repair thread for his everyday tying, which was incredibly thin, cheap and strong. I made do, too, and still have at least a foot of rubber tubing bought from a cycle shop, a small piece of which added to the end of hackle pliers ensures the hackle never slips.

One of Jim's regular and discerning customers was the late Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes. Jim supplied all his flies. It's not surprising. Everything Jim did with his fishing and fly-fishing was perfection in the extreme.

He improved my casting so that I could land a fly consistently with my Hardy rod on a handkerchief placed on the lawn. I could then cast a fly competently to a rising trout, but I struggled initially with the force needed to strike when a trout has taken the fly, frequently snapping the cast. Nothing beats a good demonstration of how something should be done and once it is displayed well it is retained, just like watching a good surgeon performing a hernia before the task is passed to

the observer. So, Jim took me down to the Otter in his old Morris Minor and we walked the river. I was there to observe and that's what I did, only seeing a single trout rising at the end of a morning hatch. The river has changed a lot, but this section is much the same today as it was then, with an oak tree on the far bank, under which is almost still water. Back then, between us and the rising trout was the faster main flow. The rod was passed to me, but I realised that even if I reached the trout the fly would be dragged downstream immediately, so I passed the rod back to Jim, who with eloquent style dropped the fly 6in from the fish, which rose and was hooked and landed.

In that brief demonstration I saw how to cast with accuracy, strike, and most importantly, maintain tension on the fish, with the tension felt on the thumb and forefinger of the opposite hand. From that moment on, I have always tried to get all the line on the reel, rather than leave redundant coils on the bank. It has served me well when hooking big salmon when loose line underfoot can easily lead to a lost fish.

Jim's three sons, Ian, Colin and Duncan, all have a fascination for fishing, but it is Colin who has absorbed some of his father's skills and passion for fly-fishing. Like his father, Colin teaches fly-fishing and I have accompanied him on trips to Scotland and Arctic Norway for salmon. He quips at the messily tied heads of my flies, but I recognise that's because he has inherited his father's critical eye and quest for perfection. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE

DEVON CONSTABLE

Hook Size 14 **Thread** Brown
Hackles One blue dun and one dark red cock
Tail Rusty dun cock hackle fibres **Rib** Fine gold wire
Body Two pheasant tail fibres

Jim tied both head hackles in at the start of the operation to result in a more durable fly.



DUNCAN
HALL
has fly-fished
for 50 years,
casting in more
than 20 countries
from Albania
to Zambia.