

# Chapter One

It all began with a phone call in the spring of 1973. It was David Forrest, a good friend from university days whom I hadn't seen in a while.

'Why don't you come down to Somerset and see these things called elvers – they migrate up river at night on the high tides and the locals fish for them – it's called elvering. If you've got a bit of time, come and see.'

Time was something I had a great deal of. After university where I'd read languages, I had joined the marketing department of ICI in London. They were a good company to work for, though I never quite understood what marketing was all about, but this was the early Seventies: restless, exciting times, Carnaby Street, the Hippy Trail and mini everything. I was itching to get out. Below, through the windows of the Knights-bridge office, swirled exotic and colourful sights while inside everywhere I looked were men I could see myself becoming if I stayed: grey-suited family men whose daily lives travelling the same train, going home to wives and families, seemed honourable but monochrome; lives of quiet desperation. I wanted more, I wanted to be free and to travel, I wanted to be outside in the open air. Apart from that, I hadn't the faintest clue what I wanted.

I left, pompously telling friends that I wanted to have a go at being a writer. This was as much to justify to my poor parents who had invested considerably in my education the lunacy of leaving a solid career with great prospects, as they saw it, as having anything to do with a talent to write. But I had learnt the importance of a label: it made things plausible, allowable. To say, 'Mum and Dad, I'm off travelling' didn't go down as well as, 'I want to travel and write.' It gave it a greater sense of purpose and acceptability; it was easier for them to sell on to their friends.

I travelled overland roughly in the direction of Australia and very soon discovered that I was not a natural writer, I had very little to say, and I was excruciatingly slow: most of what I wrote I seemed to cross

David now revealed another side to his character, turning overnight into a kind of forensic loss adjuster and sleuth. Through chatting to staff at the cargo bay where we'd loaded at Heathrow and listening to conversations, he soon pieced together the real story: a fork lift operator had carelessly driven the stacks of boxes at such speed that they'd tipped over. They were all talking about it. The shipment was insured and eventually, after many months, compensation was paid.

This episode marked the end of another season, which had more than dented David's enthusiasm and highlighted for him the unreliability of the business of elvering. Furthermore the timing and commitments of the elver season were beginning to clash with projects he had become involved in. Through international funding he had managed to secure a grant to carry out a study on eel populations worldwide, looking at their distribution, exploitation and cultivation. This was taking up more and more of his time. Moreover he had been commissioned by Fishing News publication to write a book on the subject. It was all happening for him. I could sense his interest in the Somerset venture beginning to wane.

One evening when we'd been fishing to make up the elvers for the Haas order, we talked over the possibility of my taking over from him – if the Langs were agreeable. He would then be free to get on with his new life. Later, alone with my net on the river, I went over our conversation and felt hugely excited as I realised in a rush of clarity that it would be the perfect solution to my quest. Elvering seemed to provide all the ingredients, the things I was looking for: to live and make a living in the country, to run a small business which was seasonal and which would give me time to travel and perhaps to write. Little did I know that the only thing I'd ever write would be cheques.

Meanwhile, as we set off over the summer in separate directions, we decided to remain working together in a loose partnership until plans were clearer. It was agreed that I would look for other elver rivers and attempt to secure a market for the following season.

Two things had recently happened which were indirectly linked but which were to have a big impact on future events. Listening to the radio one day, I had heard a programme about the way writers observed nature. They talked of Gilbert White, and of Graham Williamson's Tarka the Otter, but the piece that really caught my attention was when they turned to Gavin Maxwell and a passage of writing in the Ring of Bright Water

something more: it was their straining, their longing to reach their goal, that touched something deep within us all, perhaps from long, long ago when we were nomadic people moving over the face of the earth drawn, too, by the moon and the stars.

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On those big spring tides I first experienced the mixture of feelings, part relief, part panic, I came to know so well over the years. Half of me welcomed the elvers because they were so obviously essential to the business, but part of me knotted in panic as we ran out of tanks to hold them or frantically searched for a market to sell them. In that first year, with eight tanks, we could only hold around 400 kilos safely. You could put more fish in the tanks, get away with it if it was cold because cold water held more oxygen, but the key was to find a market fast, better still have it ready and waiting, and get rid of them quick. The biggest elver tides had a curious habit of coinciding with a weekend or the Easter Bank Holiday: no possibility of cargo flights for three days; the tanks already full and more big nights to come. It was at times like these, as I watched our entire combined assets, such as they were, swimming round the tanks, losing weight, that I wanted to creep into a quiet place and hide. At such times too I used to envy Hancock, my opposition on the river, who could hold eight tonnes in clear stream water, gravity fed, and who had a collection by truck almost weekly from the continent.

Friends to whom I confided my worries would say, well, the most obvious decision would be to stop buying. But only in the most dire circumstances did you ever do that because it broke the trust in you. It showed weakness. And it was part of elver lore that any catch the fishermen weighed in was then yours, to be paid for at the end of the tide – later, even at the end of the season. Effectively you were as trusted as a bank: if there was the slightest whiff of anxiety about your ability to pay, fishermen would melt away like snow on a roof. You had to keep smiling, maintain the face of confidence, express forced delight as yet another catcher unloaded tray after tray of elvers to weigh in, while inwardly you groaned, desperate for them to have missed out.

Anthony had been through it all before, and stowing elvers wasn't all that different from finding space for grain during busy harvests. He'd

## Chapter Six

Over thousands of years the elvers had seeded the rivers of Europe. In Somerset, barely touched by commercial fishing, the migrations that Ernie saw each spring as a young man on the Parrett were massive: the river so full of elvers, clogged by their sheer numbers, 'so thick that you could walk across them'.

By our standards, though not on the same scale, the late Seventies and early Eighties were also vintage years. Three of the four seasons that followed were outstanding. The elver run of '81 was prolific, but '79 and '82 were colossal, the stuff of legend, larger than life, ones that anyone involved, here or on the continent, would remember, like all great natural events, like floods or snowfalls. Their sheer weight and numbers were staggering; once the elvers came, they seemed to keep on coming in wave after wave almost as if nature were showing off, demonstrating her boundless supply.

The fact that the eel farms were now fully on stream was perfect timing; if they had not existed, faced with these huge seasons, we would probably never have survived. They were our lifeline, as Rosengarten was. Certainly at the start of the '79 season our order book looked as it had never done before with firm orders for well over two tonnes between RHM and Maurice Ingram at Marine Farm, all of which could be delivered easily without the use of airfreight. On top of this, Rosengarten had booked another half tonne. In fact, the orders looked so good, my main concern at the start of the season was whether we would get the elvers to fulfil them.

The elvers were late that year; spring well underway when the first catches arrived. They were from new fishermen I had met the previous season; from Bridgwater at the mouth of the Parrett river, 'Bridgie' as it was known affectionately by its dwellers. I'd had never bought from the area before and it was the start of a long association. H and G were an unlikely pair, classic contrasts, one big and burly with several teeth

I dropped in to see John Leach, the potter, who lived just down the road from us and showed him the leaflet I'd sent out in the mailing. Very diplomatically he suggested that it might be an idea to improve our design and image. He put us in touch with his PR lady, Marian Edwards, who came to meet us at the house. Wearing a smart white suit and dark glasses, very chic for Thorney, she was business-like, not one to pull punches. It was a chastening exercise; she didn't flatter, but challenged our ideas, made us stand back and look with new eyes at our fledgling smokery business: the price list we'd just shown her was fine for a village fete or a wholesale butcher but not for the market we were trying to reach. It needed to convey something much more professional, to lend weight to our identity and to the name 'Brown and Forrest'. It was invaluable feedback, and we took heed, but her justified criticism stung just the same.

Marian put us in touch with a young graphic designer, Neil Lumby, whom we met and briefed. What he came up with a few weeks later was a completely fresh look, a reinvention. The 'Brown and Forrest' had become a brand, quietly confident, the typeface suggesting old-fashioned values of the well-established purveyor, supplying quality and service. In the weight and feel of the paper there was friendly reassurance. Below the Brown and Forrest name and between the sections of the mailing list were woodcuts, images of rural scenes by the eighteenth century wood engraver Thomas Bewick: a boat drawn-up on a beach, an old mill and waterwheel, all suggesting links with fish and eel, with water and river. For us, for the business, it was like being given a new set of clothes; it gave a huge boost to our morale and confidence. In autumn '86, when we sent the redesigned mailing in its new format, there was a marked response, a buzz and



*The Mill at Thorney*