

‘IF YOU TAKE UP DOWSING PROPERLY, IT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE’

In the face of warmer summers and drying reserves,
people are turning to the oldest method known to man.

By India Sturgis



India Sturgis: ‘I’m sceptical but want to believe and am hopeful John Baker is the man to convince me of the power of inexplicable forces as yet unbeknown to us’ CREDIT: Daniel Jones

“You could be trying too hard,” comes the verdict from across the front garden. “Relax your shoulders. Reset and try again.”

It’s a broiling summer’s evening and I am standing on a patch of parched grass holding two metal rods out in front of me, attempting to empty my mind and focus on “blue gold” – otherwise known as water – to locate an underground water pipe.

Not much is happening: the metal rods are conscientiously objecting. I try again and this time they swing across each other, hitting me in the stomach. I feel a surge of excitement.

This must have been what Jean de Florette felt in his heart-rending quest for water on his land in the eponymous book and film.

But I am not taking part in a 1980s film revival alongside Gérard Depardieu, nor a historical recreation. Instead, like thousands of modern-day French people – and plenty of Brits too – I am engaged in a genuine search for water using the oldest method known to man.

Divining, dowsing, witching or rhabdomancy. Whatever you want to call it, the improbable technique of searching for something hidden – traditionally water – by moving over an area while holding Y-shaped wooden sticks or two rods is millennia old.

In the Tassili caves in northern Africa an 8,000-year-old cave painting appears to depict a diviner at work, Europeans used the technique in the Middle Ages to hunt for mineral and metal ore, and a soldier called Sapper Kelly is said to have found remarkable water reserves for British troops in the First World War using only a piece of copper.

Now, in the face of warmer summers and drying reservoirs, people are turning to dowsing once more. Pouilloux, a small village in Burgundy, eastern France, had record numbers of attendees at its annual divining course last month, according to French newspaper Le Figaro. As France’s government predicts over half of the country will face drought this summer, farmers are, quite literally, taking matters into their own hands to secure steady supply and reduced water bills in the face of climate change.

On this side of the English Channel, we had the driest July since 1935, with a record-breaking week of heat. Parts of the UK, including London and Lincolnshire, reached 40C. Forecasters have warned of another heatwave next week. South East Water has become the second company to put a hosepipe ban in place as we prepare for a hot, dry August.

With reservoirs in the region running low of stocks, South East Water is going to be implementing a hosepipe ban CREDIT: Andrew Matthews/PA Wire

However, despite the ancient and romantic appeal, no good scientific evidence exists for dowsing. There are no double-blind studies or lab-controlled bullseyes. Under repeated testing, according to science, dowsing fails. Still, for just as long as it has existed, anecdotal evidence has pointed many towards success, spending thousands of pounds digging hundreds of metres down at the swing of a twig of hazel.

John Baker, a UK-based water diviner, archaeological dowser and author of *Adventures of a 21st-Century Dowser*, believes those who learn the art might strike more than “blue gold”. “If you take it up properly,” says Baker, from his home near Dartford in Kent, “it will change your life as well as your outlook on life. It did for me.” How, I ask?

“You start seeing in Technicolor,” he says gnomically, “rather than black and white. It’s like the blinkers coming off.”

Baker adds with sincerity: “We are all born with the ability to dowse.”

Today, I am visiting him in his home in the south east for a lesson. We have fairly extensive drain issues at home in Suffolk and the thought of coming up with a solution without digging craters in our garden is tantalising. I’m sceptical but want to believe and am hopeful Baker is the man to convince me of the power of these inexplicable forces.

Things start promisingly. When I arrive, I am greeted by a blue plaque hanging beside the front door with Baker’s name, job title (professional water diviner) and an engraved Y, the latter to signify his affinity for forked sticks. “I had it made at Timpson’s,” he chortles.

John Baker: ‘You have to open up your unconscious mind. We all have access to it. I just know how to tune into it.’ CREDIT: Daniel Jones

For 35 years, Baker, a member of the British Society of Dowzers, has dowsed for private landowners, local authorities and farmers, and even the Forestry Commission and National Trust employees, who want to minimise costly investigative work and disruption to land. Typically, he is called to help establish the best places to drill for boreholes, and find springs, aquifers, leaking water pipes or old wells, although he has also had jobs searching for sunken ships and Saxon plague pits.

Baker’s greatest successes, he tells me, include finding a piece of grit in the diaphragm of a tap, exceedingly difficult given the size of the system into which it is incorporated, and distinguishing a 16th-century and seventeenth-century wall. On the day we meet he has just returned from mapping out a potential water supply for a woman building a bungalow in Henley.

He can, he says, find anything, not just water, including man-made items such as lead pipes, flint, electrical cables and even skeletons. He just has to hold the right question in his mind. He can learn how deep the search should go plus, in the case of water, its flow rate and even potability (drinkability), by running through different options in his mind – and waiting for the rods to cross at the right answer.

I practically fall off my chair at this revelation so Baker shows me reams of happy customer testimonials thanking him for locating features that were found by subsequent excavation. There is also a YouTube video of him (*below*) dowsing in his front garden, which has garnered 1.3 million views. Although he declines to give me his official success rate, Baker says “you wouldn’t bet against me” with enough feeling that I believe him.

He is more than happy to share how dowsing actually works. I am to begin by holding out a pair of bent rods – either metal or plastic – in front of me in a relaxed fashion and parallel to the ground, like a pair of six-shooters.



Then Baker tells me to walk at a slow and steady pace, stopping when the rods cross over, which means whatever you are looking for is nearby. If you step backwards the rods should uncross as you get further away from your target. With practice, you can become more precise.

You can also use a forked wooden stick, shaped like the wishbone of a chicken, which is apparently more precise when it comes to locating water. It works similarly but flicks upwards when it finds something manmade and downwards for something natural, such as water. Baker holds his Y pointing upwards at a 45-degree angle with palms facing up (as though holding a pen with its tip facing the sky) and maintaining tension between the prongs.

He demonstrates this in his sitting room with a glass of water on the floor – and his piece of 12-year-old cherry dogwood pings down with such speed it thwacks him in the legs.

“It is quite dangerous,” Baker says. “And that’s just for a glass of water. If there were 500 gallons of water an hour rushing through 200 feet beneath me the stick would move even faster, to the point where it would, and has, taken the skin off my fingers.” - How does he think this is happening?

“The information superhighway,” he says, confusingly, before adding, “You have to stop thinking. You have to open up your unconscious mind. We all have access to it. I just know how to tune into it.”

Science – the killjoy – explains the involuntary movement of dowsing rods or sticks using something called ideomotor theory. This is the psychological phenomenon of muscle movements caused by subconscious mental activity; it has also been proved to lie behind movements of objects on a ouija board.

Chris French, emeritus professor and head of the anomalistic psychology research unit at Goldsmiths University, describes dowsing as a very good illusion.

“It is an unconscious muscular movement,” Prof French says, “based on expectations or suggestions from others. By nature of the instruments used, a very small movement produces a very large effect.

“So if you are dowsing for water in a natural setting, successes are probably explicable in terms of unconsciously picking up on natural clues such as changes in vegetation patterns or the lie of the land.” If you dig deep enough in the UK you are bound to come to water eventually because of the consistent water table here, he explains.

Baker refutes this. “The idiomatic reflex is part of dowsing but there is more to it. It doesn’t explain how I am able to find certain materials over others or know about depth. It’s being driven by something else, too.” He expands on his theory, quoting Albert Einstein. On Feb 15 1946, in a letter to Dr Herman Peisach, Einstein wrote that dowsing “shows the uncanny reaction of the human nervous system to certain factors which are unknown to us at this time”.

As I wield the rods in Baker’s front garden they do keep crossing a metre or two after the location of his water pipes. I am pretty convinced that I am not making it happen. And I feel something too: a weight change, a heft, a transfer of something.

“Strange, isn’t it?” says Baker. “You’re picking something up but it’s happening a bit late.” At least he is right about the strange part.

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