

Messing about on the river with Bob and Paul

Rachael Davis visits Bob Mortimer and Paul Whitehouse as they fish from the banks of the Thames to find out more about *Gone Fishing's* fifth series

We were terrible. We thought, "what have we done?" Paul Whitehouse grins as he recalls the first ever day of filming for *Mortimer and Whitehouse: Gone Fishing*. "I caught a fish, and while I was trying to land it, Bob fell over in the mud. And as he fell over, he took me out as well. So the pair of us was sort of lying in the mud.

"I remember thinking in those few seconds, 'The angling world is going to hate us, but this is funny.'"

Four years on, the wholesome and hilarious BBC2 series is about to return for its fifth series – and those jokes, japes and silliness are intrinsically part of the programme's DNA.

For the uninitiated, *Gone Fishing* follows comedy legends Bob Mortimer and Paul Whitehouse as they fish some of the UK's most beautiful waters, talking about life, health, angling and nature with a healthy dose of slapstick silliness.

I catch up with the pair as they cast a line for perch on the grassy banks of the Thames, a river that they both fondly remember fishing when they were young, as they reflect on the success

of *Gone Fishing* and reveal what's to come in its fifth series.

Their faces often feature cheeky grins, their conversations peppered with sincere laughter, but considering the very serious origins of the series, it's clear that their relationship is about far more than just fooling around.

"We've known each other for over 30 years now, and we've always threatened to go fishing," explains Harry & Paul and *The Fast Show's* Whitehouse, 64.

"Always threatened," Mortimer, 63, repeats.

"Never managed," returns Whitehouse.

It took decades – and Mortimer undergoing triple heart bypass surgery – for the pair to actually get the tackle box out, as Whitehouse, who'd had his own heart health problems, "came along and ruined (Mortimer's) peace and quiet" to get him out of the house and help his mental health after his operation.

"I'd already had some stents, but Bob got there and was competitive as ever, outdid me in the heart disease stakes," says Whitehouse.

"You thought you were going in for stents," he adds, then adopting the voice of a



↑ **Bob Mortimer and Paul Whitehouse in the new series of *Gone Fishing***

gameshow host: "But tonight, Bobby Mortimer, your lucky night, let's play: bypass!"

"It's very traumatic, open heart surgery, isn't it Bob?"

"It's always easier not to go out," Mortimer says of life after the operation.

"You're so scared of using your body after the heart stuff. But it's the very best thing for you. So I'm very grateful for that."

It's been seven years since his surgery, and four since the pair turned their hobby into a television series. While *Gone Fishing* was never intended to be a show that particularly discussed men's health, Mortimer says he found that "unbelievable to us, people had really enjoyed that discussion", and it became a theme of the programme.

"I think the show, it's about so many things, but one of them is just the friendship," he says.

"As much as showing people about talking about their health and showing people the benefits of getting out and about and that, I think one of the big messages is showing people the benefits of keeping close friends and, actually, not just meeting once a month to eat or something. "Spend some time together,

you know, and nurture the friendship."

"The problem is, now, because I spend so much time with Bob, I've neglected all my other friends," says Whitehouse.

"There's something about old men wittering on in the beautiful countryside that's quite appealing," Mortimer adds, considering the show's enduring popularity.

"But also, there's something to be said for two old men shutting up," says Whitehouse, "because actually we do spend a lot of time being silent."

"We often wish we'd been more silent. When we're putting the show together in the edit, it's like, 'can we have some more sequences where we're not saying inane rubbish?'"

As well as being a celebration of friendship and encouraging men to talk more, it's also a celebration of the countryside.

Mortimer and Whitehouse have fished across Great Britain and Northern Ireland, from the Norfolk Broads to the Lake District, the Welsh mountains to the Scottish rivers, but this series will see them head to new waters – including leaving the UK for the first time.

"We've pushed the boat out a bit," says Mortimer.

"Yeah, we went to Ireland," adds Whitehouse.

"We've gone deep into the Scottish Highlands. I think probably, maybe more than any other series, the environment where we're fishing, the locations, I think they could be some of the most stunning," Mortimer continues.

"Devon looks so good, and the Highlands. Really sort of dramatic."

Before I leave the pair to enjoy their evening of searching for perch from the riverbank, I wonder, after four years of fishing across the British Isles, which are the surroundings that really give them goose bumps.

"I always like it when we're on a littler river, and we're lost in the undergrowth, squirreled away, away from everyone," smiles Mortimer.

"Sometimes we get a little glimpse, the sun sort of comes dappling through the trees there and you think, you wouldn't be there, would you, for any other reason other than if you were fishing," adds Whitehouse.

"Some rivers, you might be on a boat, or you might be canoeing. But when you're on those little, tiny streams and rivers like that, it's the only reason you'd be there."

"That is lovely. We get these little views you wouldn't normally see."

● *Mortimer & Whitehouse: Gone Fishing begins today, BBC2, 9pm*