

## HOW THE R.A.B. WAS BORN

By Tony Biggs

Throughout the fly-fishing fraternity one finds both fishermen, and fly-tyers who are almost totally dedicated to a particular type of fly or to a style of fishing. An example was the late Mark Mackereth. Mark particularly favoured the dry-fly and although he would occasionally deviate into brief flirtations with nymph or wet fly-fishing, he would unfailingly revert in but a short while to his beloved dry-fly.

In tactics and presentation with the dry-fly Mark knew few equals astream, having used a fly rod from the age of 4 ½ years. The only factor one could possibly fault him on was his casting, in that it was “too good”. On a number of occasions whilst fishing on the Smalblaar, Witte and Holsloot rivers, I watched him cast the full length of a fly line, plus backing to a trout rising in the middle distance. However, on such occasions the fish was invariably missed on the strike simply because there was too much line on the water.

I will never forget my first sight of Mark’s dry-flies. In appearance they were reminiscent of bottle brushes and had a twist of pink lurex wound them over their well dubbed bodies. They were devastatingly effective, particularly on the rainbow populations of our local rivers. After examining one of these flies closely, I commented favourably upon their appearance. Mark’s response was to offer me two of these creations and I, in turn, graciously accepted. I was asked to test their effectiveness and report back on my findings. I fished with one of these flies on the stream that afternoon and enjoyed no small measure of success taking, if memory serves me correctly, a full bag of rainbows and eventually losing the fly.

That evening whilst sitting at the fly-tying vise – which I had recently been given by a retired member of the CPS, Gavin LeStrange – I pondered on the manner in which my sole remaining Mackereth fly might have been tied. During the course of our conversation at the riverside that afternoon, Mark had not been at all forthcoming on this issue. Having never utilised the intricacies featured in the various fly-tying manuals and magazines available to club members in the CPS library – I have always had a marked aversion to the reading of most publications of a technical nature – I was experiencing a great deal of difficulty in forming an opinion on this score.

There was only one thing for it, to systematically dissect this last remaining fly. The reservations felt as the first cut was made to sever the tying silk at the head of the fly are well remembered. I had not the least idea what to expect. I realised however, that if my ministrations were incorrectly performed I could be in serious trouble – there was little hope of acquiring further examples of Mackereth’s art at that stage. My luck held however, and what was revealed to me in the following seconds was the fact that the fly had been tied in the simplest of fashions, in what I now know as a palmered style. From then onward there was no hesitation on my part,

and within a short space of time I had mastered the tying of these basic and very successful patterns.

During the course of these initial attempts at fly-tying, a most important factor became apparent, this being, that there was ample scope for a great deal of experimentation beyond the so-called classical style of fly-tying. Here was an area of where, in giving reign to the imaginative and creative instincts, great things might be accomplished. I had to come to this field of endeavour with a completely uncluttered and open mind. Now all that I had to do was produce the goods. Unfortunately it was not quite so simple, and many months were to pass before I developed an awareness of the magnitude of the task which I had set for myself. Incidentally here I am, 30 years later, still not much closer to tying the ultimate fly. Over the years there have been one or two minor successes. These have however been counterbalanced by the setbacks. At this game one certainly becomes one's own worst enemy at times.

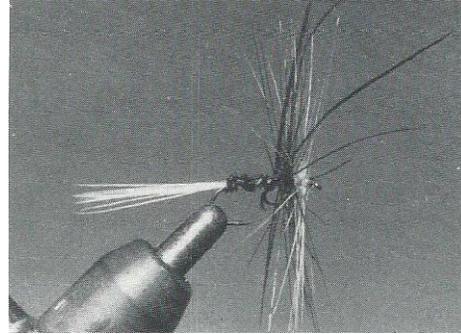
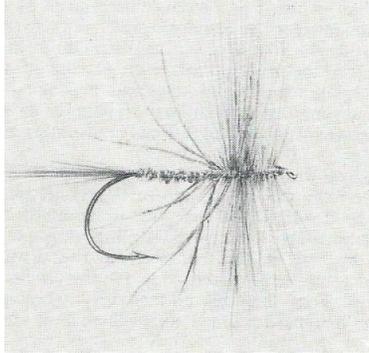
The development of the RAB was initiated during the course of an extremely concentrated period of effort in my early fly-tying attempts. Necessity had driven me into a situation where I would arrive at home in the evening, have supper, and immediately retire to the tying vise. At this juncture of my life I had to tie flies and sell them commercially. For, without this additional source of income, my beer drinking would have been severely curtailed.

In the tying of the RAB various factors influenced by choice of colours and materials. For example, the colour red, which is utilised both for the tying silk, and as a body, was chosen for completely illogical reasons: I had recently completed a re-reading – my fifth in four months – of Negley Farson's magical book "Going Fishing". In one particular chapter the author waxes eloquent about his preference for a fly which embodies the colour red. As I was at that time a confirmed convert to Mr Farson's dictums, this was one of the major contributing factors which influenced my choice of thread colour.

The other was a somewhat nebulous treatise by some long forgotten author which detailed, chapter and verse, the advantages of using large amounts of red materials in the tying of a wet fly primarily because of this colour's long range visibility to fish under water. I subsequently learned, whilst experimenting with various coloured materials in the swimming pool, that my blind acceptance of the accuracy of these statements was completely misplaced.

At that stage of the game however those considerations were of little or no consequence, for the simple fact was that the fly worked – and very successfully other materials which were used in the tying of the RAB, such as the initial bi-visible white and brown red hackle combination, were chosen purely as an optimum sighting factor. The white hackle-fibre tail created a colour balance, apart from looking good. The dark butt section and the "legs" were formed by tying in 4/5 fibres (the ones with the shiny dark green hue) from a primary wing feather of an Egyptian goose. Incidentally in a high proportion of the RAB's which I now tie – I ring the changes in the tying-in of these "legs", using such materials as pheasant-tail and blue crane.

At the time of the first tying I considered the use of these “legs” in the design of the fly the single most important concept. With the passage of time, the advantage of hindsight, and having incorporated this device in the design of a number of other flies – such as the BTF and HOS series – I find no reason to vary this opinion.



*The RAB as sketched by Tom Sutcliffe and tied by the editor.*

Whilst on the subject of the RAB, I have in the past come across a number of dissertations in journals and periodicals, some of which lay claim to being definitive descriptions of the tying and origins of this fly. In an attempt to lay this matter to rest once and for all, I present the following for consideration:

The composition of the fly has been detailed above. As to the naming: This occurred during the course of a visit to the Smalblaar River some time in April 1965. Mark Mackereth, a friend and I had fished for most of the day with no great measure of success on the lower reaches of the river. It was one of those days when the trout were not at all forthcoming. Try as we might throughout the day, varying both flies and tactics in a continuous assault upon the river’s finny populations, the nett result by 4 o’clock that afternoon was two brace of 10” and 11” trout taken by Mark and myself. Mark’s friend, who had found the going even more difficult, had only seen one fish. In pausing to consider our options, and after a short discussion, it was decided to drive upstream to the quarry parking site, situated above the Amphitheatre run, there to park the car, and then to fish until sunset.

The proposed change of venue could not possibly be any worse than what we had experienced till then, and this upper water invariably fishes better in the later afternoon than the lower reaches. Mark and his friend opted to fish from the Granite Basin pool upstream, and I decided to walk up the road a way and enter the stream below the hotel water.

In inspecting my tackle prior to commencing, I discovered that a change of fly was necessary, having recently broken the hook point on the one of my tippet. Perusing the contents of my fly box – which in those days was an old and battered “Craven A” cigarette tin – I discovered one of the original prototype RAB’s which was looking decidedly the worse for wear – on second thoughts “moth-eaten” would probably be a more apt description of its appearance. Attaching this well-worn remnant to the end of my tippet I proceeded upstream towards the hotel.

For the following hour and a half it fell to my lot to have fish after fish accepting my fly, and by the time the light started fading I had kept five good ones of between 12" and 16", and released a number of others.

Returning to the vehicle I found my two companions waiting for me. Both had changed into dry clothing and were ready to depart. The surprised looks on their faces when I showed them my catch was something to behold. It appeared that during their recent spell on the water only one trout of 9" had been taken and that no other fish had been seen. Although I personally did not place too strong a reliance upon the prognosis, it was Mark's decided opinion that it could only have been the fly I was using which had contributed to this difference in our catches.

Mark examined the by now disintegrating fly in the beam cast by the headlights of our car, and his studied response will forever be remembered. "It's a red arsed bastard", he said.

In that day and age definitive language of this type seldom if ever appeared in print and never in the hallowed pages of "Piscator". There thus appeared upon my catch return – this after rather a lengthy debate with our secretary ACH – the letters RAB to designate the type of fly used. When taxed by various members as to the interpretation of these letters AC's reply was that they were purely an abbreviation for the words "Rough and Buoyant".

From the use of these letters in designating the fly some interesting situations arose. One of these was a telephone call which I subsequently received from my later father – whose initials bore a close resemblance to those given the fly. He commenced the conversation by graciously thanking me for the honour which I had bestowed in naming the fly after him. I had best not give you a verbatim rendering his comments after I had advised him of the correct interpretation of the letters!

I must here confess that my approach to fly-tying would probably be termed heretical by purists of the classical school. I believe however that when one sits at the fly-tying bench, as much time as possible should be spent on the furtherance of creative ideas. I personally have never tied a fly to any commercially designated pattern. After all, how is one to progress if one does not experiment?

Simplicity in my opinion is the most relevant and important factor to be considered in the tying of effective flies – the simpler one's methods the greater the degree of control can be exercised.