

THE ORIGINS OF THE FLY TYING VICE

By Ian Cox

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(With thanks to Ed Herbst for the invaluable assistance with source material and advice)

No one knows exactly when fly fishing started. Dr Andrew Herd whose excellent book on the “History of fly fishing” and its companion web site www.flyfishinghistory.com says it is anyone’s guess. The earliest reference to what might be the use of an artificial fly is Chinese and dates to about 400 BC but this is controversial. The Roman poet Martial also may have made passing reference to the use of a fly in about 100 AD but again this is uncertain. The good Dr Herd goes with the orthodox view that the recorded history of fly fishing starts in 200 AD with Aelianus’ book “On the nature of animals”.



Ken Middlemist ties a Green Highlander by hand



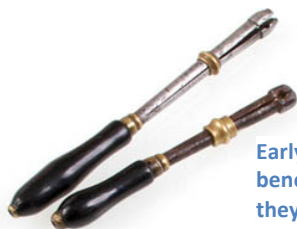
Lee Wulf demonstrating tying by hand on his visit to South Africa in 1989

The recorded history of the fly tying vice starts much later. In 1800 Samuel Taylor made a passing but nonetheless the first reference to the use of a vice in his book “Angling in all its branches”. He wrote

“For the better convenience of making these larger flies, you should be provided with a very small vice, for the purpose of holding the hook, that you may have both hands at liberty to put in your materials, which will enable you to dress flies that more neatly as well as more perfectly.”

So why did it take mankind 1 600 years of fly fishing to come up with something as obvious as a vice?

And why did it take another 100 years before the vice became even remotely popular. Why did professional fly tyers in Britain take so long to use them? And why was Hardy’s still hand tying flies when it closed its fly shop in 1969? These are all questions that



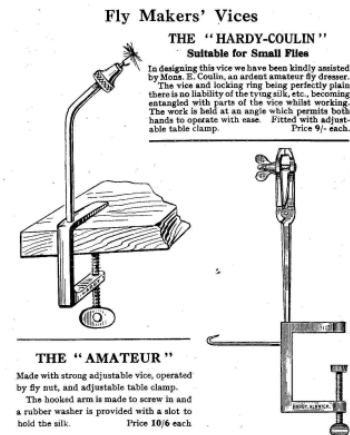
Early 19th century hand vices. Hardy's were using bench mounted versions of these vices in when they closed their fly shop in 1969. Salmon flies were still tied without a vice at that time.

have still in my view to be adequately answered.

Dr Herd advances a number of reasons for the delay. He says the late entry of the eyed hook onto the fishing scene may have had something to do with it. Although the eyed hook is first mentioned in 1660 it did not become popular until the 19th century. Before then hooks were bound directly to the cast (original tippet made of horsehair and later of gut silk). This made tying on a vice unwieldy or so he argued. Though eyed hooks and vices became popular at about the same time I don’t see why the

presence of a cast (tippet) would make it any more difficult to tie a fly using a vice. If anything a vice should make it easier.

He also says that the conservatism of the British fly tyer was a problem. He observed that fly tying techniques were not book learnt in days of yore but were passed down by from one angler to the next. He says that techniques that were used in hand tying flies did not readily adapt to tying a fly on a vice. Anyone who took part in the clubs hand tying of a woolly bugger will agree that he has a point. However I don't think this is provides complete answer to the question why the fly tying vice took so long to become popular. After all it can't be that difficult to switch from a one handed tying technique to the much easier process of tying with two hands on a vice mounted hook. Amateur fly tyers seemed to have mastered the knack fast enough. Thus while some of the earliest vices were hand held affairs Taylor was clearly referring to a table mounted vice and that was in 1800. The amateur fly tyers of the mid to late 19th century also largely used table mounted vices.



Extract from the Hardy's 1937 catalogue. The Amateur was first advertised for sale in EG Meseena's 1871 catalogue and sold for 5 shillings. This vice was also known as the tacklemaster



It seems to me that with the advent of the vice you can increasingly draw a line, at least in Britain, between the professional who did not generally use a vice and the amateur who did. Professional fly tying was a skilled occupation A Hardy's fly tying apprenticeship lasted five years. One can well imagine the reluctance of professional fly tyers to give up what were well paid skills for what was an easier and thus potentially less well paid skill of tying on a vice. This bloody mindedness was not unique to Britain. The Catskills icon Lee Wulf famously refused to use a vice but he was unusual for American tyers most of whom a vice of some sort or another. .

The Hardy Norab circa 1911. The vice that converted Theodore "Quill" Gordon from hand tying.

I do not therefore think that the bloody minded conservatism of a few largely British professional fly tyers impeded the development of the vice.

I think one has to draw a line between fly tying after the industrial revolution and the advent of cheap manufactured goods that came with it and what took place before. A fly tying vice is, or at least should be, a precision instrument. Now precision instruments were hand made before the industrial revolution by highly skilled and thus expensive craftsmen.



The Dama Seal vice on top of its presentation case

I think that we can accept that this would have put vices beyond the pocket of most if not all pre industrial revolution fisherman. By way of example Jay Smit's friend Faruk Ekich will hand craft you a Dama Seal vice for about \$2 500.00. (The presentation box will cost you another \$500.00.) True the jaws are made out of Damascus steel but for well over a thousand years that was the only steel that was truly up to the job of making a quality fly tying vice. I don't think fly fishermen were prepared to pay or even consider the possibility of paying that kind of money. Hand tying was the only solution or if

you lacked the time or ability to develop those skills yourself then you had to buy your flies from a professional.

But why the delay in the use of a vice or the development of a quality tool? The industrial revolution should have changed this. The new alloys and mass production techniques that the industrial revolution brought meant that it was possible to mass produce good quality precision fly tying vices. But this isn't what happened. The British vices that were produced in the late 19th century were rudimentary contraptions. What is also surprising is that these vices remained in production for decades. For example The Halford and the Hawksley vices were still being sold in the 1950's some seventy or so years after they were invented.



The Tacklemaster or Amateur, the Halford and the Hawksley vices. All developed in the late 19th century. The Halford and the Hawksley were still being sold in the 1950's.

The situation was better in the United States. The Americans invented the first modern vice. This Thomson model A vice, which incidentally is still sold today was invented in the late 19th century. The modern version of Thomson is awful. The older versions were reputedly better but I wonder if this is a case of nostalgia rather than hard fact?



I think the answer lies in the price that fly fisherman were prepared to pay for a vice. Early vices were cheap even by today's standards. Hardy's were selling the Tacklemaster (they called it the Amateur) in 1937 for 10/6. It cost 5 shillings some 65 years earlier which give you some idea on inflation in those days as well how slowly the vice developed.

The Amateur was the more expensive of the two vices it sold. The Coulin, which is very like my first Veniards vice bought in 1975, was a lot cheaper. The Hawksley was the epitome of fly tying vices cost a great deal more. It was sold for a whopping £1/15/6 in 1911. That equates to £141.00 in today's money or R1603.00.



The Hawksley

fly tying vices cost a great deal more. It was sold for a whopping £1/15/6 in

The Thomson Model "A" vice, introduced in the late 19th century Halford gave up the Hawksley vice for a Thomson. Skues used a Halford!

10/6 was about two thirds of the weekly wage of a farm labourer in 1937. (By way of comparison a fully dressed salmon fly on a 2/0 hook cost 2/6.) In today's money 10/6 works out at about R360.00 which is about what one pays in South Africa today for an entry level vice. That is just a little more than the current minimum weekly wage of a South African farm labourer which should make one think! A Thompson Model A cost \$6.00 in the early 1950's. That's about R412.00 in today's money.

The modern version retails for just over \$14.00 (excluding shipping) in the USA today which might explain the alleged drop in quality.

The situation was not much better when I started fly tying in the early 1970's. My first vice was a Veniards collet style vice. This vice was based on the Hardy Coulin which was developed in the 1930's. It did not hold a hook very well either. I resorted to tightening it with a wrench when tying larger flies. Peter Brigg modified his to make it easier to tighten. Veniards offered a number of vices at the time. The collet style Vice that Peter and I started with was the cheapest. The best was a cam locking vice very similar to the Thomson Model A. It also was not very good at holding a big hook. None of the vices that were available at that time were.

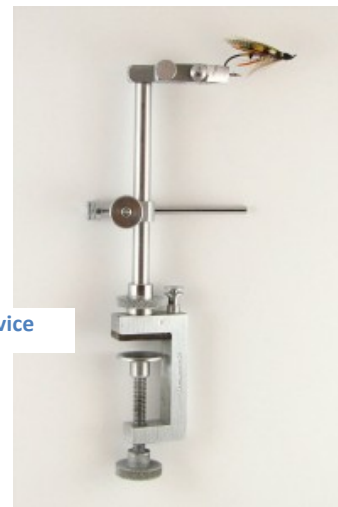


An early top of the range Veniards cam locking vice

HMH and the Renzetti in the 1970's and more recently the J Vice.

Ripley who taught me to tie flies either built his own vice or modified one he had bought to better hold a hook. So while I think Dr Herd is right in saying the poor hook holding qualities of early vices did not discourage their use, I also think it fair to say that this was because fly tyers did not have any choice. The inability of these early vices to properly hold a hook was a major source of frustration and, I think, the reason for the development of the

I did find one mid-20th century vice that offers a glimpse of what was possible. This was the Hallows vice. This was made by the outfitter Farlow of London. I think that with a bit of imagination one can perhaps see in this vice the early genesis of the Law vice and indeed some aspects of the jaw of the early J Vice. Unfortunately I have not been able to find out too much about this vice other than it was used by Tom Stewart in his 1973 four



The Hallows vice



The HMH Spartan

volume series titled "Fifty Popular Trout flies".

I think the problem is that it is only very recently that fly tying vices have become any good. I think this is because that it is only very recently that fly tyers have been prepared to pay the kind of money that makes the manufacture of top quality vices financially viable.

The first truly well engineered vice is only 37 years old. I refer to the HMH Vice. This vice has become the preferred vice of the American production fly tyer. However, this sort of quality does not come cheap. I don't know what an HMH cost back in 1975 but you will pay \$200.00 for one today and that excludes shipping costs. (Frontier fly fishing will sell you one for R2020.00)



The Renzetti Presentation 3000 arrived on the scene shortly thereafter. This is the vice that has for decades defined what one can expect of a top end vice. It has never been cheap. It originally cost what \$195.00. It currently retails for \$365.00 excluding shipping.

The Renzetti Presentation 3000 which, like the J Vice, was invented in a

The other iconic vice, the Regal arrived a little later. It wasn't cheap either. A basic regal vice will cost about \$165.00 today excluding shipping. It does not stop there. A Petijean vice will set you back \$792.00 without the trimmings and a basic C&F Reference vice will cost you \$800.00 again excluding shipping. (R6 800.00 from Frontier while stocks last!) A Law vice will cost at least \$900.00 that is if you can still find one.



The Regal

Finally it would not be proper for a Durban Fly Tyers Club member to finish an article on vices without mentioning the J Vice. Jay's vice is not cheap but nowhere near as expensive as most of the vices it compares with. The basic vice kit starts at \$410.00 excluding shipping. I do not think anyone in the club will disagree with me when I say that in the J Vice we have one of the best fly tying vices in the world. If one takes into account that the Pro Jaw will handle anything from a size 32 hook to a 4/0 with equal aplomb then we also have the most versatile vice in the world. The midge jaws are still, I think, the stuff of magic. That Jay Smit has achieved this out of his garage is a testament to both his inventive genius and what can be done with these days with computerised milling machines.

Even so and Jay must forgive me for saying this. These are crazy prices when compared with what fly tyers were prepared to pay for a vice 40 years ago. This is not to say that the modern top end vice is overpriced. They are not. Their price is what you pay for excellence. And that is really it. If enough people are prepared to pay for excellence then excellence is what you will get. Whether excellence is necessary or even affordable is another thing entirely.

And how is it that mankind can suddenly afford to pay so much more for a non-essential item like a vice? I think we are seeing the buying power of the baby boomers at play. 1975, which is when the HMH hit the market, is about when the first of the baby boomers began to earn the kind of money that pays for expensive toys like a top end fly tying vice and indeed all the other accoutrement of a materialistic lifestyle. Think I'm wrong? Just look at the age profile of the Durban Fly Tyers. Then there is fact (Wikipedia) that in 2004 baby boomers accounted for about 80% of Britain's luxury spending. What's more baby boom spending was expected to go into decline during 2007 to 2009. Now don't those dates ring a bell! So the reason why fly tying vices have got so good is that many of us are profligates who are squandering our children's future on jollies like fly tying. If I am right then we are currently at a developmental apex both in respect of fly fishing generally and in respect of the development of the vice. So enjoy it while it lasts because it may not get any better.