

Indelible memories

by Tony Aylmer

Numeracy and the dates of outstanding events in my life have never been my strong point a situation aggravated by my not having kept a diary, so the landmark and watershed moments of life tend to be described as having occurred around the early forties – or whenever. Friends seem to start their recollections with the date, and often with the time, coupled with the afterthought, “...no. I lie, it was a Tuesday”.

My memory remains crystal sharp however around the events that led to my lifelong interest in fishing. I was approximately six years old, which would place this episode in the very late twenties.

At that time we were living in central London, which by any standards is not the best location to introduce a youngster to the noble art of angling. My father and an uncle were both ardent fly fishers who felt that the time was ripe to at least offer me some encouragement. As a result of their efforts I must be alone in claiming to have caught a herring in the Serpentine. Let me explain.

It was over breakfast that the plan to try our luck at fishing was revealed. The hall became an assembly centre for a stoutish sea rod, a reel, a cast complete with champagne cork as a float, some buttered dough, and several elderly salmon flies were given a short back and sides. Our house was well sited and in keeping with the estate agent's cry of location, location, location. But, when you are within a stone's throw of Harrods, the nearest sheet of water happens to be the Serpentine, in Hyde Park, and that is where we were headed. As excitement increased, the walk up Exhibition Road seemed unending, but we finally arrived at the one and only road bridge over the Serpentine and opted for the open bird feeding area beside the bronze effigy of Peter Pan. The hook was baited, the rig professionally cast out some distance, and with unending instructions I was handed the rod and told to keep my eyes on the cork.

It was at that point that Uncle Lance decided to take a walk whilst Dad remained with an excited and optimistic son. Some half an hour later Uncle Lance returned distracting my attention. Moments later the rod, ably assisted by Dad, seemed to come alive, and with a stream of directions I finally reeled into the bank a fine looking fish.

This was promptly seized by Dad and heartily beaten over the head with his Malacca cane walking stick, and the admonition: “Always despatch your fish quickly and cleanly.”

The fish was duly bagged, taken home, cooked, and declared an excellent table fish. From that moment in life, it was “T” who had been hooked. Years later Uncle Lance admitted to having hailed a taxi, and buying a herring from the nearest “MacFisheries”.

With hindsight, I think the shop only sold herring ready-filleted.

Since my introduction to fishing, some seventy-five years seem to have slipped by. It was



Tony Aylmer with the salmon he caught on the River Wye.



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only last year that a second fish of a lifetime became an indelible memory. The two events seem almost like a fishing alpha and omega in life, but like all fishermen I am eternally optimistic in hoping for even better things yet to come.

Last year, I was most kindly asked to yet again accompany a friend for a few days in a timeshare fishing lodge on the River Wye. I had done this for the previous twelve years during which time we had witnessed the decline of the river, and what had been a fishing lodge, has become a pleasant bankside holiday cottage. From this we now view the occasional otter, fleeting kingfisher, swans and wildfowl. Sadly too we had seen the one-time ghillie reduced to rectifying faults and shortages in the cottage, and cutting the grass. In pre-war days, this two mile beat once yielded over 1,000 salmon in a season. The River Wye had then been the finest and most sought after salmon river in England. Last season the beat yielded three fish.

Our arrival in early July last year showed the lowest level of water we had ever seen, and what appeared to be much reduced birdlife. Not exactly the best start for the week to come.

Some three days after our arrival the ghillie/handyman appeared and suggested we might care to try our luck for trout in the evenings, and named a couple of possible pools where he had seen trout movement.

Having little else to do other than watch some of the Wimbledon tennis on the boobey box, that evening I set off with a lightish, six-rated trout rod for one of the pools he had suggested. This particular pool is known as "The Boils". It is well named. The river either side of this pool is approximately eighty yards wide, but in really low water conditions the pool narrows down to a white water chasm little more than fifteen feet wide. The pool stretches a good eighty yards long before the river widens out again.

Starting in at the top of the pool with a heavily weighted nymph it must have been little more than the fourth or fifth cast when a surface commotion and firm take clearly indicated that this was no trout, and shortly after that verified by an aerial display worthy of the Red Arrows. This fish appeared to be reasonably fresh run salmon, but from the head shaking and aerobatics, probably lightly hooked. As my situation became clearer I really felt there was virtually no chance of landing the fish. I was alone and out of sight of the lodge, I only had a trout landing net. I was attached to a fish in white water moving at probably eight to ten knots, and with a rod and tackle thinning down to a tippet of four pounds breaking strain. There was no possibility of applying side strain, a normal salmon fighting tactic, as the channel was too narrow, whilst heaven knew what underwater obstructions lay in its eighty yard length. There was little option other than to get downstream of the fish, and keep a constant pressure on it.

Following the aerial display the fish bottomed in fifteen to twenty feet of water and sulked for what I reckoned to be some eight minutes. It then did something that I have never witnessed nor, indeed, even heard of a fish doing. With no warning the fish shot out of the water like a polaris missile clearing it by some three or four feet and came down with a sickening thud on the rocks on the far bank. As if in shock, it's frantic efforts of flapping and wriggling took it across the rocks to the edge of the field where I had mental visions of

trying an impossible long-jump to the far bank, and heading it off at the gate. Steady pressure by me finally got its head facing towards the river by which time humour had got the better of me, and I was feebly chuckling and trying to accept that this was a reality, and not a dream. The fish, respite its shock, seemed to realise where the river lay and assisted by me, regained it. Time is difficult enough to assess, but under such conditions I can only guess that it was clear of the water for at least two minutes, however the episode had weakened it. I found after a further ten minutes that I was able to lead it downstream before it's dislike for this became evident and it regained its original holding position. After several downstream walks, and surface thrashing, two things became evident. Firstly, it was more firmly hooked than I had initially supposed and, secondly, that I was in with a chance of banking it. Against this was the reality that I was shaking at the knees with nervous exhaustion, that steady attrition and pressure were going to be necessary, and that as there was no suitable landing area below me, the fish would somehow have to be hand lifted or gripped around the tail and lifted from the water.

Time had now extended to some twenty five minutes since the original take, and the fish, like me, was exhausted and showing it's flanks when pumped to the surface. I now felt I had just enough control to reel in tight and risk the ten foot tippet coming through the top ring, get on my knees beside the channel, and attempt to get the fish within reach.

After several heart-stopping attempts I found I couldn't reach the tail, but finally got two fingers into the near gill slit, at which point the fish became mine

I was then faced with the obvious dilemma; should I release it? Notices asked you to do so and added a supposed incentive by offering a "T" shirt. I am biased in that I don't like "T" shirts, added to which I was holding a totally exhausted fish that I genuinely felt was very unlikely to survive. Notwithstanding this, I was all too aware that this fish had given me the fight and experience of a lifetime. I think and hope sanity prevailed when I heard a ringing in my ears of "Always despatch your fish swiftly and cleanly" and brought the "Priest" down smartly on its head.

With trembling hands and arms I found my scale, and noted with satisfaction that it registered a good 11 lb 8 oz, and that it was a cock fish. The walk back to the lodge was a tiring one, but worth the surprise and pleasure shown by my host.

I was too tired that night to photograph the fish, hence the frozen appearance when it was held aloft the following morning.

Somehow I feel that any further visits to the Wye can be little more than an anti climax, but the memory of my "Boils" fish will remain as clearly etched as the fresh water Serpentine herring.



And if the angler catches the fish with difficulty, then there is no man merrier than he is in his spirits. Juliana Berners.