Fishing rods

In the second of a series of articles on antique tackle GRAHAM TURNER considers the development of the fishing rod

THE FISHING ROD is known to have been in use from 2000 BC in Egypt and the eighth century AD in China, yet no evidence has been found of its existence in Britain until almost the end of the fifteenth century. This does not necessarily mean that the rod had not reached Britain, or had not evolved independently, until that period. It is more likely that our ancestors were less inclined to record their activities than were the peoples of earlier civilisations.

Generations of these fishermen and women used a variety of methods and tackle much earlier than is generally believed. Traps and nets were used to catch large numbers of fish on a commercial basis, while an individual seeking just a few fish probably used a short, tapered rod or pole with a fixed line. The more ambitious, seeking bigger fish, such as pike and salmon, may have added a loop to the end of the rod to take a running line, and used a larger rod made up of more than one piece. Others may not have bothered with a rod, but used simply a hand-line.

The earliest evidence of the use of a rod in this country was given in the first specialist book on fishing. *A Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle*, published in 1496. It was written by a woman, Dame Juliana Berners, who was believed to have been Prioress of Sopwell, a nunnery near St Alban's. Her book gave the earliest illustration in English literature of a fishing rod, together with details of materials and of the rod's construction. Her 17-18 ft rod was made in three pieces: a top of hazel, a middle of hazel, willow or ash, and a butt of blackthorn, crab, medlar or juniper.

The butt was hollowed out with a red-hot pointed wire, while red-hot spits were used on the ends of the two larger pieces to form sockets into which fitted the next parts. Dame Juliana instructed that the wood from which the butt was to be made should be put in an oven and then seasoned for a month. Later in the building process it was placed in the 'smoke on the roof' (roof opening for the central hearth). The use of ovens and heat treatment was to play an important part in the building of the classic rods of America four centuries later.

Rods continued to be made in the same way for the next 200 years. They were strong and sturdy, but heavy, particularly in wet weather. The quality of design and preparation had greatly improved by the middle of the seventeenth century, and cane had been introduced as an alternative. It became fashionable to treat rods with oil and paint to keep out the water and make them attractive, in the same way as bowyers and fletchers had painted the English longbows and arrows at the time of the military archery period.

Evidence of this was given by Izaak Walton in his *Compleat Angler*, first printed in 1653, with the words, "a right grown top is a choice commodity and should be preserved from the water soaking into it in wet weather to be heavy, and fish ill favouredly and not true; also it rots quickly for want for painting, and I think a good top is worth preserving or I had not taken care to keep a top above 20 years".

HE WENT ON to describe painting the rod in oil, followed by the application of colour. His method was to use first a base coat which was a mixture of white lead, red lead, coal black and linseed oil, followed by a final green coat made by grinding together pink, verdigris and linseed oil.

Fishing reels were first used in the early to mid-seventeenth century. These early reels were simple winding devices made with two types of attachment for fitting them to a rod. One had a clip foot or spring clip-foot, which was a collar-type fitting controlled by a tightening screw. This was the most versatile, as it could be placed at any position along the rod butt and could be fitted to almost any diameter of rod. The other had a spike foot and required the rod to have a fitting with a hole through the butt to accommodate the spike of the winch, which was secured by a wing-nut. The modern type of bar foot was eventually developed and rods were fitted with standard locking rings and reel seats, although the early fittings were still produced by a few makers even into the nineteenth century.

FISHING RODS in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries continued to be made from a variety of woods, including ash, hickory, lancewood, bamboo cane and many others. It was the period of the industrial revolution, when communications and travel improved, and the number of anglers greatly increased and became more mobile. Although the larger, jointed rods continued to be used for fly-fishing or trolling for pike, and the shorter rods and poles for bottom fishing, a new popularity arose for multi-purpose 'travellers' rods'. These were usually made from greenheart or other woods and consisted of several short pieces which fitted

Right: A 17 ft salmon rod in split-cane with a steel centre by C. Farlow & Company. The rod is a three-piece with a spare tip. Circa 1880s.

Far right: A wooden-handled split-cane rod by Hardy Brothers. It is a three-piece with two spare tips (15ft and 17ft). Circa 1880s.

through the ages

Left: The earliest illustration of a fishing rod, featured in Dame Juliana Berners' book A Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle, *published in 1496.*

neatly into a small holder or bag and could be carried comfortably in the pocket. Walking-stick rods were also made, but never became popular and were sold for only a short period.

ANGLERS WERE always trying to improve the top piece of their rods, and all manner of woods were used. Eventually, split-cane was introduced and became generally acceptable, but there has always been speculation as to when it was first introduced into Britain.

The method of splitting cane into strips and glueing them together to eliminate the hollow centre and so increase their strength is known to have been devised 3,000 years ago in China, but the earliest evidence of its use in Britain comes from a book of 1801 entitled *Practical Observations on Angling in the River Trent,* by an unknown author. It describes rod construction, with the text: 'sections of cane are glued together after which they are tapered with planes and fine rasps, finished off with sand-paper and wrapped with silk'.

FURTHER BOOKS which mentioned split-cane for rod tops were, *Young Anglers' Companion,* circa 1820, and *Handbook of Angling,* by Fitzgibbon, in 1847.

Ustonson (1760-1855), the most important of the London tackle-makers, is believed to have been one of the first makers to use split-cane. Evidence to support this view comes from a rod-maker called Irwin, who repaired a split-cane rod for the Earl of Craven in 1851, and confirmed that it had been in use for 20 years and was the work of Usterson (Ustonson) of Temple Bar.

It is clear that glued-up split-cane rods were used in the mid-nineteenth century because leading makers exhibited rods at the Great Exhibition of 1851 which used the construction for both tops and complete rods. These were usually of three-strip glued-up section, which, it seems, never became popular. Similar rods were being built in the USA at about the same time. The earliest known American maker was Samuelle Phillippe, who between 1845 and 1855 built-up rods with three- and four-strip bamboo end-pieces. According to James A. Henshall, in *The Book of the Black Bass,* Solon, the son of Samuelle Phillippe made rods with six-strip end pieces in 1859.

THE NEXT STEP was the introduction of rods in which all the pieces were made of six-strip glued-up bamboo. It is impossible to say with certainty whether it was an American or a British maker who first built a complete rod in six-strip glued-up bamboo. The pioneers in America were E.A. Green, who constructed a complete rod in split-cane, and Charles F. Murphy, who made the first six-strip version in the USA in the 1860s. Leading British makers were in production in the 1870s and manufacture was truly international. The supremacy enjoyed by London tackle-makers for two centuries had gone forever.

Farlow's, Allcock's and Hardy Brothers, together with other makers in the Midlands and Scotland, shared in the booming world markets, while in America, Leonard and other classic rod-makers produced some of the finest built-cane rods of all time.

Fishing-tackle collectors in Britain have up to the present concentrated their interest in reels, and although they are usually prepared to pay a lot of money for fly-cabinets, fly-wallets, and almost any form of tackle, they have shown less interest in old and attractive wooden and split-cane rods. It seems strange that something which possesses the generally accepted norms for a desirable antique, namely the aesthetic patina of aged wood, brass fittings and fine craftsmanship from a bygone age, is not more collectable.

Surely it is an anomaly for an all-brass Hardy Perfect reel from the 1890s to sell for a few thousand pounds, while a good-quality rod from the same period and by the same maker brings less than £100 at the same auction. But things may be changing: a split-cane rod by Richard Walker was sold at a recent London sale for £2,200.

When one considers how few time-served craftsmen with the necessary skills still

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remain, and the fact that a custom-built, finely balanced split-cane rod would today cost several hundred pounds, a price such as that is hardly surprising. Yet many old good-quality rods are still sold regularly at auction for next to nothing.

I wonder whether split-cane rods are going through a phase similar to that which marked the demise of the grandfather clock? When the old case-clocks could no longer compete with modern, cheaper and more accurate counterparts, they became unfashionable. Nobody wanted them at a time when virtually every household had one, and they were of so little value that many were broken up for firewood. Now they are most desirable and sell for many hundreds, often thousands, of pounds. What an investment it would have been if someone's far-sighted grandfather had filled his loft with a few dozen!

THE SAME may happen with the fine, old, split-cane rods. Once they have all 'disappeared', collectors and fishermen will be clamouring to own one, not for use, but as an attractive piece of angling antiquity, from days before the characterless excellence of modern materials and uniformity of mass production. Future generations will no doubt pay unbelieveable prices for the few quality examples which survive, and will wonder why our generation was not more discerning.

Some classic American rods have recently sold for very high figures at the Richard Oliver Galleries in the States, and these may be a guide to what the future holds. The record price paid was $19,250 for a two-piece H.S. Gillum split-cane rod which was only 6 ft long and weighed a mere 1¾ oz. A slightly bigger rod by the same maker, with three pieces and a spare tip, realised $13,200 dollars. Other notable high prices include $9,900 for a trout rod by Garrison, and the same figure for a similar rod by Dickerson. Perhaps the time is not too far off when we will see similar prices paid in British auction rooms for our fine, old wood and split-cane rods with their lovely brass fittings and fine-script engravings. □

□ *In a proposed follow-on series called 'Collectors' Corner' Graham Turner will be offering advice to ST&S readers on their own antique tackle. Graham welcomes information on any tackle, including details and pictures. The more interesting items will be featured in the series. Please write to 'Collectors' Corner', Salmon, Trout & Sea-trout, Meridian House, Bakewell Road, Orton Southgate, Peterborough PE2 0XU.*