

FISHING TACKLE dealers gave me up as a lost cause long ago. Unlike some people I know who collect vast amounts of piscatorial paraphernalia, my tackle purchases have always been strictly practical and utilitarian. My fly lines last for season after season. My reels go in for repair when eventually they fail. I tie most of my own flies. And I have acquired only about half a dozen rods over the past forty years, all of them relatively inexpensive and four of them still being in use today.

You may imagine my surprise, therefore, when I found myself recently cracking open my piggy bank, sorting the pennies from the old buttons and safety pins, and sending off an order for an expensive but absolutely stunning, built-to-order, two-piece, leather-cased, 7 foot, bamboo fly rod rated for a #4 line.

It came about like this.

While interviewing Simon Cain for his profile in the March issue of *Fly Fishing & Fly Tying*, I asked him who he reckoned to be the best cane rod builders in the world. Unhesitatingly, he listed the top three as Lawrence Waldron, Tommy Dorsey and Tom Moran. By pure coincidence, and almost at that moment, Tom Moran walked in through the door and, after twenty minutes' or so's chat, he suggested I visit him to see how he sets about building a rod.

I took him up on the offer and drove down to his home at Totton, on the outskirts of Southampton, on a bleak, grey, late-November day.

Tom is an extraordinary and extraordinarily engaging character - thoughtful, philosophical, quietly spoken, self-effacing, a craftsman to his finger tips, humorous, witty and wise. He was born in Penang in what was then Malaya, where his father, serving with the Army, had met and married a member of the local Filipino community. When his parents decided to stay on in the Far East, Tom was sent home to Lancashire where he was brought up by his Scottish grandmother, attending prep and secondary schools in Southport.

He began fishing when he was seven or eight, initially on Kew Lake in the grounds of what had been an ornamental garden and zoo. He was bewitched by Bernard Venables, *The Anglers Companion*. It conjured up for him an idyllic, pastoral world in which he longed to live and to fish. But reality was different and success did not come easily. The tench and crucian carp in the lake were wary and, with a short, solid glass rod and an aluminium centre-pin reel, he simply could not cast far enough. He envied other youngsters who were allowed to stay out fishing all night, fulfilling the Venables fantasy. And, like all the other youngsters, he envied the adult anglers with rods of Spanish reed and Allcock "Felton" cross-wind, fixed-spool reels with which they caught tench to die for.

As the years went by, Tom ventured further afield, pedalling miles on a rusty bike, occasionally as far as the Ribble. He longed to be able to get out into the main stream and to stalk the huge chub that lurked there but, lacking the necessary tackle and experience, had to make do with catching gudgeon in the margins. Riding home through driving rain and sleet, chilled to the bone, he would swear to give up fishing for ever and to give all his tackle away. Then Venables would cast his spell again. And so it went on.

Throughout Tom's life, it has been a consuming passion for tackle that has driven his fishing, rather than *vice versa*. As a boy, when he could not afford complete rods, he used to buy fibreglass blanks from Sid Baxter, who ran the local tackle shop, and attempt to assemble them himself. His bedroom became filled with home-built fibreglass spinning rods. Only when he found a collection of Hardy's fly rods in a closet in the cottage in Staveley in which the family was holidaying one year did he come to realise how crude his own work was.

The first time he actually saw anyone fly fishing was while staying at an uncle's caravan at Ingleton, on the Greta, a delightful river which flows south westwards from the Yorkshire Dales to join the Lune at Tunstall. Here, he fished for diminutive wild brown trout using bread as bait - gentle by nature, he found it difficult to impale worms and maggots on hooks. But it was a Polish ex-airman, a "master angler" and a fly fisher, who captured Tom's imagination. He was fascinated by the magical delicacy of the tiny wet flies in the angler's box, and more so by the sheer beauty of the close-whipped fly rod with which the man could cast to the far bank and catch seemingly enormous trout.

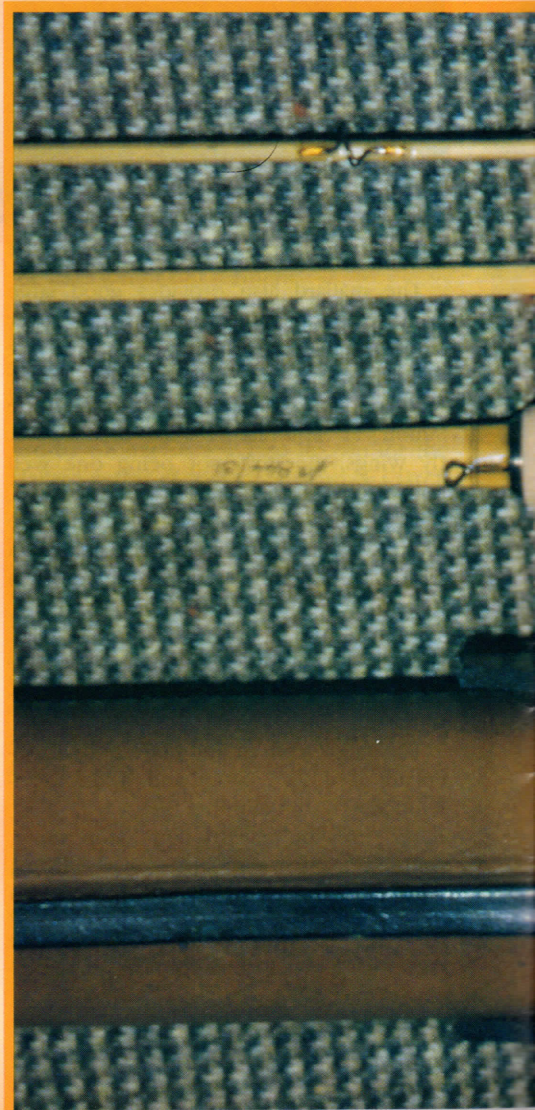
On leaving school at 16, Tom joined the Merchant Navy, working on cargo boats plying from Liverpool to South Africa and New York, and between Australia and Japan. In New York, he haunted the tackle shops and was intrigued particularly by multiplicity and ingeniousness of the pike plugs he found there. He claims to have been the first person in Lancashire to have had an American crank-handled casting rod and a level-wind, multiplying reel, which seemed to him to have far stronger aesthetic appeal than its ubiquitous fixed-spool counterparts. For several years, on shore leave and having left the sea in his early-twenties, he confined himself to lure and plug fishing.

By the time he started fly fishing, in the mid-1970's, on the Rivington Reservoirs in the Pennines, he had already constructed his first bamboo rod. He was completely self-taught and simply set to, using a planing form built with the £60 he had been paid for constructing a 16-door wardrobe for a neighbour.

His fly fishing was similarly self-taught. Indeed, when he began he had no idea how

MAGIC WANDS

PETER LAPSLEY
*gets a lesson in
cane rod-building
from Tom Moran,
and falls in love
with the
finished article*



***"At its tip,
a top joint of a
seven-foot, #4 rod
is a mere sixty
thousandths of an
inch in diameter,
which makes each
of the six
sections thirty
thousandths of an
inch from base to
apex."***

Left: Tom Moran "proving" one of his magic wands.

Below: One of Tom Moran's magic wands. Each comes with two mirror-image tip joints, a rod bag and a beautifully crafted leather case.



BUILDING A BAMBOO ROD

THE FIRST part of the building process is to mark the bamboo (Fig 1) to the widest diameter needed and then to split it (Fig 2). The initial splits in the bamboo can be seen in Fig 3. Watching Tom tapping a knife into the top of a length and then pulling it through makes the process look easy (Fig 4). The trick, he says, is to maintain even pressure on both sides of the wood.

The lengths of split bamboo are now ready for working (Fig 5). Any bends in the bamboo occur at the nodes, which are heated over a paraffin lamp (Fig 6) and then pressed straight in a vice (Fig 7). When this has been done, the nodes themselves are filed down very carefully to avoid removing any more of the strong outer layers of the bamboo than absolutely necessary (Fig 8).

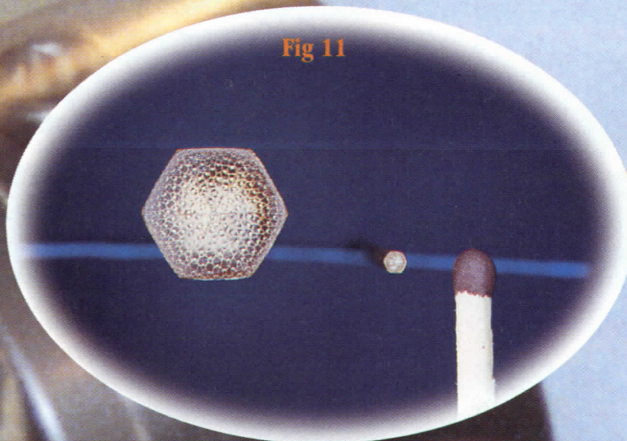
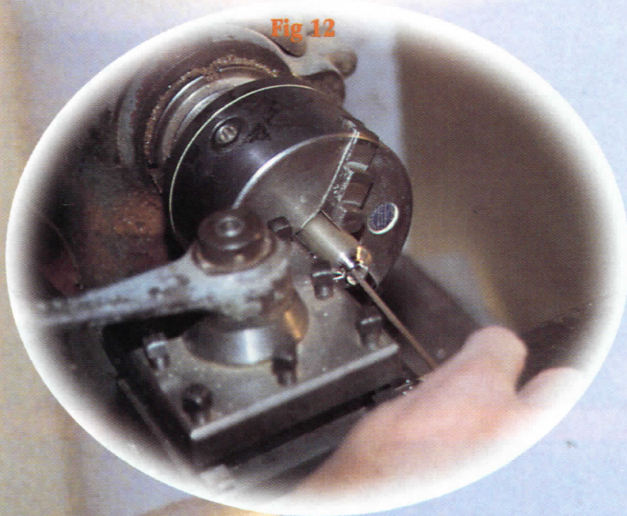
Then, on the planing form, the sections are reduced progressively to create equilaterally triangular-sectioned, tapered strips to tolerances of $\pm 1/1000$ in. (Fig 9). At its tip, a top joint of a seven-foot, #4 rod is a mere sixty thousandths of an inch in diameter, which makes each of the six sections thirty thousandths of an inch from base to apex. In addition, the planing of the bamboo must be planned so that, when the rod is assembled, the nodes will be staggered, each one being supported by the strong, inter-nodal segments of the other five strips.

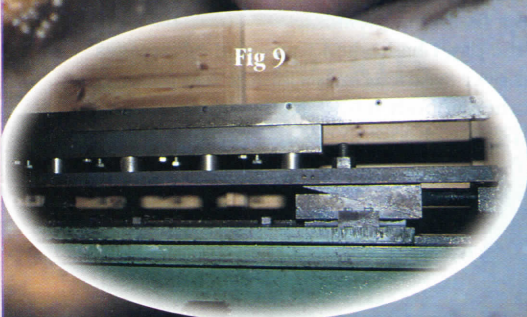
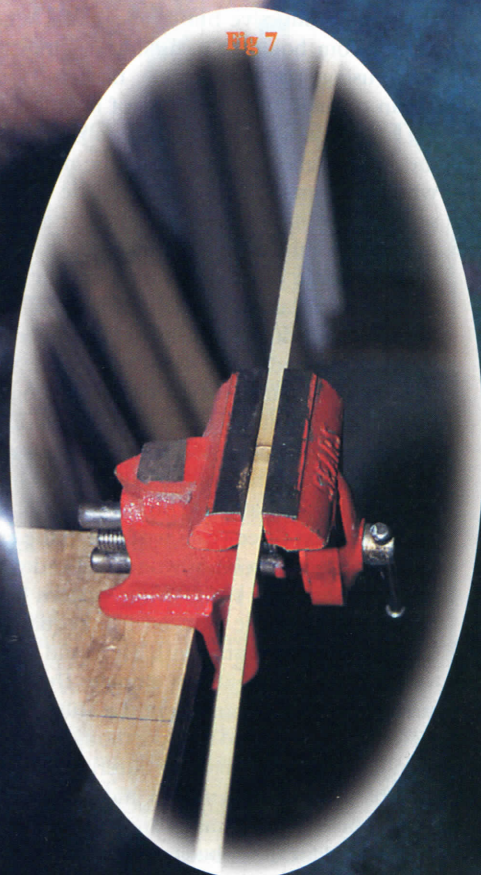
When the strips have been planed, they are assembled, bound together with cord, and the accuracy of the planing is checked with a micrometer (Fig 10). When Tom is satisfied, they are bonded together with melamine urea formaldehyde which is waterproof and stress- and heat-resistant, and which has its own inherent stiffness. Made from six triangular sections of bamboo, the rod tip is $60/1000$ in. in diameter (Fig 11).

Rod fittings are turned from nickel silver bar stock (Fig 12). The ferrules must be fitted carefully so that they do not eat into the vital outer layer of the bamboo. And the rings are carefully aligned to take account of the slight natural "spline" that every rod has.

The handle is assembled from rings of Portuguese cork which are glued into position and then sanded to shape on the lathe (main picture). The maple reel seating is turned, carved and sanded before fitting.

One of the hallmarks of Tom's rods, over and above their sheer quality and accuracy, is the transparency of the whippings securing the rings. He achieves this by using white Pearsall's gossamer silk, which must be absolutely dry to achieve the effect, and then varnishing it with a Tung-oil-based spar varnish. Tom's varnishing room, in one corner of his workshop, (Overleaf) is a high-tech facility using low-tech equipment. Temperature-controlled, it is kept dust-free with a small air pump which maintains the interior pressure at 2 psi above the ambient air pressure. The level-winding equipment which assures evenness of the multiple coats of spar varnish given to each rod is driven by a Ford windscreen wiper motor fitted with a speed controller.





to get the line out onto the water, so he simply laid it out on the grass behind him and then heaved it forward. Only by watching other fly fishers surreptitiously did he learn how to cast.

Having kicked his heels for a while as a carpenter in and around Southport, the urge to make bamboo rods professionally, and the picture of the lifestyle he could build around the craft, finally ensnared Tom. With his wife, Jan, and with a young son and daughter, he moved to Kirkcudbright. Here, he felled trees for a living, fished for trout on the River Ken and, guided by Everett Garrison's seminal work, *A Bamboo Fly Rod*, began to develop his rod-making skills. Before long, he had teamed up with Mike Jordan, a potter who was seeking a change of direction. With Jordan's father's backing, they bought a milling machine from Malcolm Grey at Greys of Alnwick and began to build rods commercially.

Exhibiting at a Game Fair, Tom met Alan Bramley, Managing Director of Partridge of Redditch. Impressed with his work, Bramley invited him to contact him if ever he wanted a job in the tackle industry. Tom's business was tenuous and eventually collapsed. Three days after calling Alan, he was taken on as foreman of Partridge's rod-building division.

Tom spent almost three years with Partridge, learning a great deal about rod making and about the equipment used for it. In particular, he came to understand the important contribution machinery can make to the process. As he says that, for him, hand-planing bamboo is akin to self-flagellation and that he sees planing machines as enhancing the rod builder's skill, rather than diluting it.

Own business

WHILE AT Partridge, he worked also with Homer Jennings, a talented Texan rod builder then living in Northamptonshire. Their relationship was productive but tempestuous. When they parted, Tom bought the milling machine they had been using. Soon after this, he left Partridge and began to build up a business of his own, supplementing his income with carpentry jobs on building sites. At the 1982 Game Fair in Romsey, he met Hoagey Carmichael who gave him the address of a tackle dealer in Tokyo to whom he sent some samples. From this, he got enough work to enable him to become a full-time rod-builder.

Six or seven years later, Tom met Tom Dorsey, the American rod-builder who had taken the craft to new heights and whose work had been such a major influence in the development of Tom's own skills. Dorsey admired Tom's work and, when they met again at Chatsworth, Tom told him of his longing to work in the United States. Three months later, he was taken on as manager of the bamboo rod department of Thomas & Thomas, the legendary tackle company based in Turner's Falls, Massachusetts. With Jan and the children, he took a house on the banks of the Millers River and he spent the next three years working in the epicentre of bamboo rod building, meeting a lot of wonderful and wonderfully talented people and fishing the rivers of the eastern United States in which, as he puts it, even the stocked fish acquire PhDs in entomology if they survive the first month. He could walk out of his front door to what he regards as the ultimate fly fishing experience, a summer's evening spinner fall on the Millers River.

However congenial the job, though, and the friends and the surroundings, New England is bitterly, bone-numbingly cold for five months of the year, and Tom and his family began to hanker for a more comfortable climate. They were considering heading either west, to California, or back to the UK when, quite unexpectedly, he

Centre: Tom's dust-free varnishing room is a high-tech facility using low-tech equipment.

was offered an empty shed at Testwood and the sponsorship to enable him to set up there. He accepted the offer on an impulse and returned to England in December 1994. Some months later, he moved the business to his new home in Totton, where the front room serves as a workshop and his planing form is housed in a shed in the garden.

The most commonly used bamboo, and the one Tom uses, is *Arundararia amabilis* McClure, which is cultivated in plantations in Kwangtung Province in south east China. The dense outer fibres, which are as hard as Formica for planing purposes, give it a higher stiffness to weight ratio than any other natural material.

There is relatively little good quality bamboo available in Britain, so Tom prefers to import his from the United States. When a consignment arrives, he check-splits each length down one wall, to allow it to open as it will, and keeps it for at least a year. On dry, sunny days, he will stand the lengths of bamboo in the garden to help them acquire the warm colour imparted by ultra-violet rays. Before use, and to drive out any remaining moisture, the bamboo is heat-treated in an oven at 360°-375°F until it is just beginning to change colour.

American tapers

SENSITIVE TO the refinements of taper developed by some American rod makers, Tom introduces a slight "check" in the taper towards the tip which damps vibration at the end of the forward cast and therefore allows smooth, accurate fly presentation.

The only parts of his rods that Tom does not make at present are the tip rings and stripping guides, which have to be brazed; he hopes his wife, Jan, may shortly start making them for him. He turns his own ferrules from 18% precision-drawn nickel silver tubing. He turns his reel fittings from nickel silver bar stock and makes the keeper and snake guides from German carbon steel piano wire.

When Tom had talked me through the whole rod-building process, he took me into the garden and handed me one of his completed rods. Eighty four inches long, weighing 3.5 ounces and fitted with an Orvis CFO reel and a #4 line, it felt light and perfectly balanced. I extended fifteen yards of line or so into a stiffish breeze. The loop of the line on the forward and back-casts was extraordinarily tight and precise. I tapped the rod forward. Its tip stopped dead, without a hint of tremor or vibration, and the tiny tuft of wool at the end of the leader dropped feather-like onto the fallen leaf I had selected as a target - again and again. Never had I fallen in love so quickly.

As I drove home, my thoughts kept turning to that rod - to the thought, care and craftsmanship that had gone into its construction, to its beauty as an artefact, whatever its purpose, and to its astonishing "rightness" as a fishing implement.

During the course of the day, I had asked Tom what advantages he believed cane offered over synthetic materials for rod making. "None", he laughed, "but then nobody has to live in a thatched cottage; it's just what some people choose to do".

I am now the proud owner of a 'thatched cottage' of the sort with which George Skues might well have considered replacing his 'World's Best Rod'. Ω

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