



Homer Jennings selects a mature bamboo pole, from which several rods can be made.

I WAS born too late. Actually, this is not true. Whenever the conversation gets round to living in another time or place, I let others yearn to have sailed under Nelson, to have fished the clear, pre-industrial streams with Walton and Cotton. I was born in 1950; I was seventeen during that crucial six months between the arrival of the mini-skirt and the subsequent invention of tights. It is enough. I am content.

What I mean is that I was born too late to start my fly-fishing with cane.

My first fly-rod was home-made on a fibreglass blank, sifted from a raffle of multifarious sticks in the back of a tackle shop in the Lincolnshire Fens, constructed in a weekend and abandoned almost as quickly. At the Game Fair you will see people casting with broom handles. It can be done, I don't deny it — but it is no way to learn.

I bought a branded fibreglass blank and tried again. Better. I added a sweet little seven-foot rod with a lovely soft action that I used, despite the acquisition of a carbon replacement, until finally I trod on it. Gradually, carbon replaced fibreglass under such natural wastage, each blank a little lighter and slimmer than the last. There seemed no place for split cane in this progression.

Worrying about the damp and “setting” the thing in a curve, seized ferrules, the extra weight to be waving around — why do the things come with a spare tip if they don't break from time to time? — I couldn't be doing with it.

As time went on, I found myself fishing more and more on the small brooks, tree-infested becks

# First buy your bamboo

*Split cane may be old-fashioned, but for fishing small streams there is no better rod-building material, reckons JON*

*BEER, who visits a master cane craftsman*

and cluttered streams that are, sadly, the last outpost of fishing for wild trout in England and Wales. Not the sort of places to be thrashing around with a delicate cane wand. And then I met Homer.

Homer Jennings came round to my house, and we pushed our way up through the overgrown reeds and bushes of the upper Cherwell. He put a Lilliputian, six-foot slip of a thing in my hands and urged me to whack out some line over the grayling. Now, the upper Cherwell is not classical fly-fishing. Short casts and backhand flicks are what is

required. The upper Cherwell is my sort of fishing and, to my astonishment, this delicate cane wand felt more at home there than my own featherweight carbon seven-footer. The explanation dawned on me as I waved the thing around.

A rod works best with the correct weight of line out beyond the tip. That is the point of the AFTM rating. But some of the weight that is “working” the rod is the weight of the rod itself. In small-water fishing, the length of a cast is extremely variable, sometimes no more than a flick, with just a few feet of line beyond

the top ring — nowhere near the ten yards of the AFTM rating. The top section of a light carbon rod is featherweight. If the cast is abnormally short, the rod has no weight to work it into a bend and throw the line.

The top section of a cane rod is significantly heavier, allowing it to “work” even with much less than the “correct” weight of line in the air. This is no bonus with casts of over ten yards, where the optimum weight of line can be aerialised. Then, the extra weight of the rod material is just an additional burden. On a stillwater where long casting for hours on end brings success, it is a serious disadvantage. But on a tight little stream, the cane had a life and “feel” that could flick a short line into the crannies and corners where small-stream fish lurk.

Homer Jennings is a quiet, gangling American, buried deep in a small village on the Oxfordshire/Northamptonshire border. He came here originally as an electronics engineer with the Air Force, before running first a rod and gun club, then an hotel. But always he has been building exquisite rods in split cane.

If you have not heard of him here, it is because the Americans, who have always appreciated the finest cane rods, buy up all of his trickle of hand-planed blanks and superbly finished rods. Gradually, the British, too, are rediscovering the life and beauty of cane, now that melamine impregnation has rid the material of some of its vices in our damp climate. One or two of Homer's rods are staying in this country. And there are never going to be many more than one or two: each rod is the slow result



of many hours of patient craftsmanship.

If you really don't think you can wait, then there is another way. Anyone can do it. You will need a piece of bamboo, about five feet long, a newspaper to put on the floor, and a long, long time. This is what you do.

First buy your bamboo. There are one or two importers who specialise in importing the best available Tonkin bamboo direct from China. It is grand stuff, this bamboo. It resembles a load of rustic scaffolding poles, each about two inches or so across, and it is hard to see how anyone ever hit on the idea of making one into a willowy fishing rod.

I once visited Homer on the day a batch of the stuff arrived from the port. He was sorting it in his garage. He was muttering, and the gist of his mutterings was that he would prefer it greatly if the Chinese bamboo-cutters would refrain from carving graffiti on their work. Pole after pole, bearing elegant characters and designs slashed into the bark, joined the heap of discarded bamboo. Others had been crudely straightened by heating the nodes, leaving ugly scorch marks. In others the walls were too thin, the nodes too close together. The muttering continued as two thirds of the poles were tossed on to the reject pile. The remainder were stored under the garage roof to mature over the coming years and months.

A mature pole is selected, and split in half by pulling a bluntnish blade down from one end. The split pole is baked in an oven for 12 minutes at 350 deg F (gas mark 4).

The half-poles are split down again, until each section is between a quarter and a fifth of an inch across (depending on whether this will be a butt or a tip section). The nodes (the nobbly bits that occur every foot or so down a bamboo pole) are filed down, and the pith removed. This is to speed up the heating, which allows the nodes to be straightened.

These nodes are the couch-grass in the lawn of a rod-maker's life. Splitting the poles allows the sections to follow the natural line of the fibres; but these kink off-line at the nodes, requiring much straightening, muttering and, often, rejection. Sawing is quicker and easier, but the continuous fibres are lost. Sawing just at the node is better, but very fiddly. One solution favoured by Dutch builders is to cut the nodes out and splice the short lengths together, but again, the continuous fibres are lost at the splice. Homer has tried all these methods, but now favours the time-consuming splitting and straightening.

Straightening is simple enough: the section is eased into a straight line by hand and eye after heating

over a paraffin stove: a fraction too little and the section will not bend, a fraction too much and it will scorch — and be rejected.

The sections are now ready to be planed down to an equilateral triangle that will allow six of them to be glued together to form a single rod. Each section will taper along its length, from the swelled butt to the fine tip. The taper is determined by adjusting the gap along a V-groove that holds the section as it is planed. This allows tapers to be formed, accurate to one-thousandth of an inch.

Just how much tapering goes on at any point will determine how, and where, the finished rod will bend in casting — the action of the rod.

The greatest of all rod-builders in split-cane, the American Edmund Everitt Garrison, developed a range of tapers in the 1930s which have been followed by rod-builders ever since. The taper can be made to suit any angler's whim, but some years ago Homer found that an accidental thickening of Garrison's taper 15 inches down from the tip produced a rod with a faster tip. This rod cast like the dickens, and this is now his preferred action.

When six perfect sections of split cane have been planed, they can be glued together to form the butt — or tip — section of the rod. In the planing, the nodes were staggered so that now they will not coincide and form a weak spot. I

# First buy your bamboo

will not attempt to describe the contraption that Homer has constructed to perform the trick of binding the six bits together while the glue sets. String is spiralled around the rod in both directions under even tension, to prevent any twist in the rod. There are wheels, and pulleys, and elastic bands, and crank handles, and drive belts, and everywhere there is glue.

When all is set and secure, the string is unwound; for the first time there is a recognisable rod section. The excess glue is painstakingly sanded off, and the section straightened with gentle heat. At this point, nowadays there is the option of soaking the rods for several days in melamine, to impregnate and waterproof the structure. The cane is again cooked in the oven (250 deg F, for

30 minutes — like reheating cauliflower cheese, say) and then polished with finer and finer grades of glass paper.

Once again, the sections are straightened over heat before the ferrules are fitted. We are getting on to familiar ground now: from here on, the rod-building is much the same as for any of the rods I have built from carbon blanks — adding the reel seat, handle and rod rings. I say "much the same" — in truth, about the only similarity I could prove in a court of law is the number of the rod rings. Our standards of perfection, Homer's and mine, don't seem to touch at any point. The acid-etched snake rings (the acid-etching reduces the garish stainless glint to a mellow, antique glow) are held by silk whippings

and finished with four coats of varnish. The whippings will be lightly sanded and polished before a final straightening. The whole rod will receive a further three coats of varnish before it leaves Homer's garage.

Simple.

In *Blue Peter* they always had one that they had made earlier, so we could see how it ought to look. A couple of Homer Jennings's rods will be on the Caudle & Rivaz stand (D140) at the Game Fair, Margam Park, from August 2-4. Down, Shep.

● Readers wishing to contact Homer Jennings can reach him at 9 Allen's Orchard, Chipping Warden, Banbury OX17 1LX. (Tel. 0295 86488).

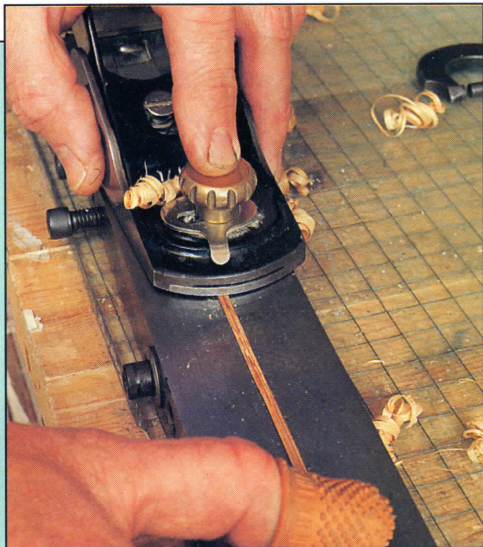


The split poles are baked in an oven for 12 minutes.

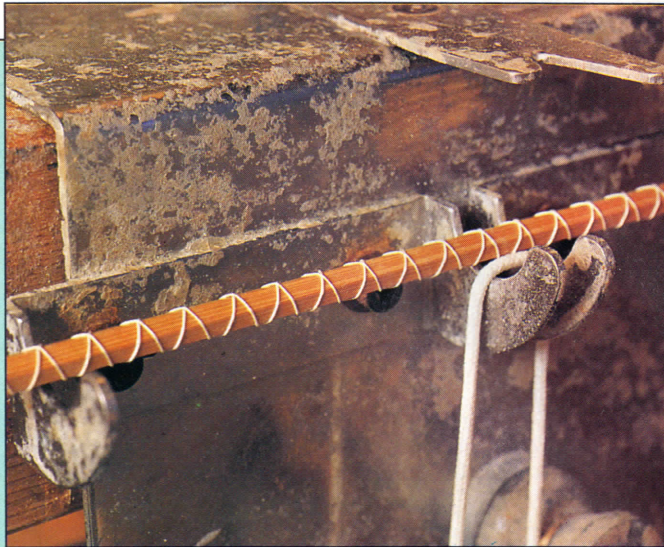


Having been baked, the poles are again split with a knife.





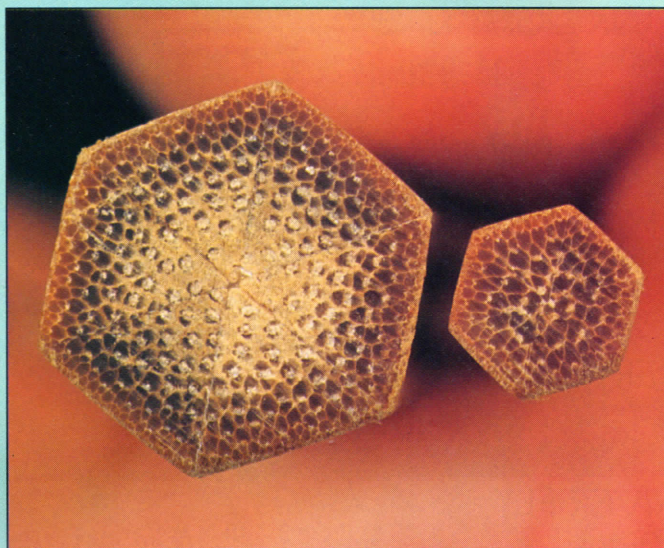
**LEFT:** After heat-straightening, a section is planed to an equilateral triangle.



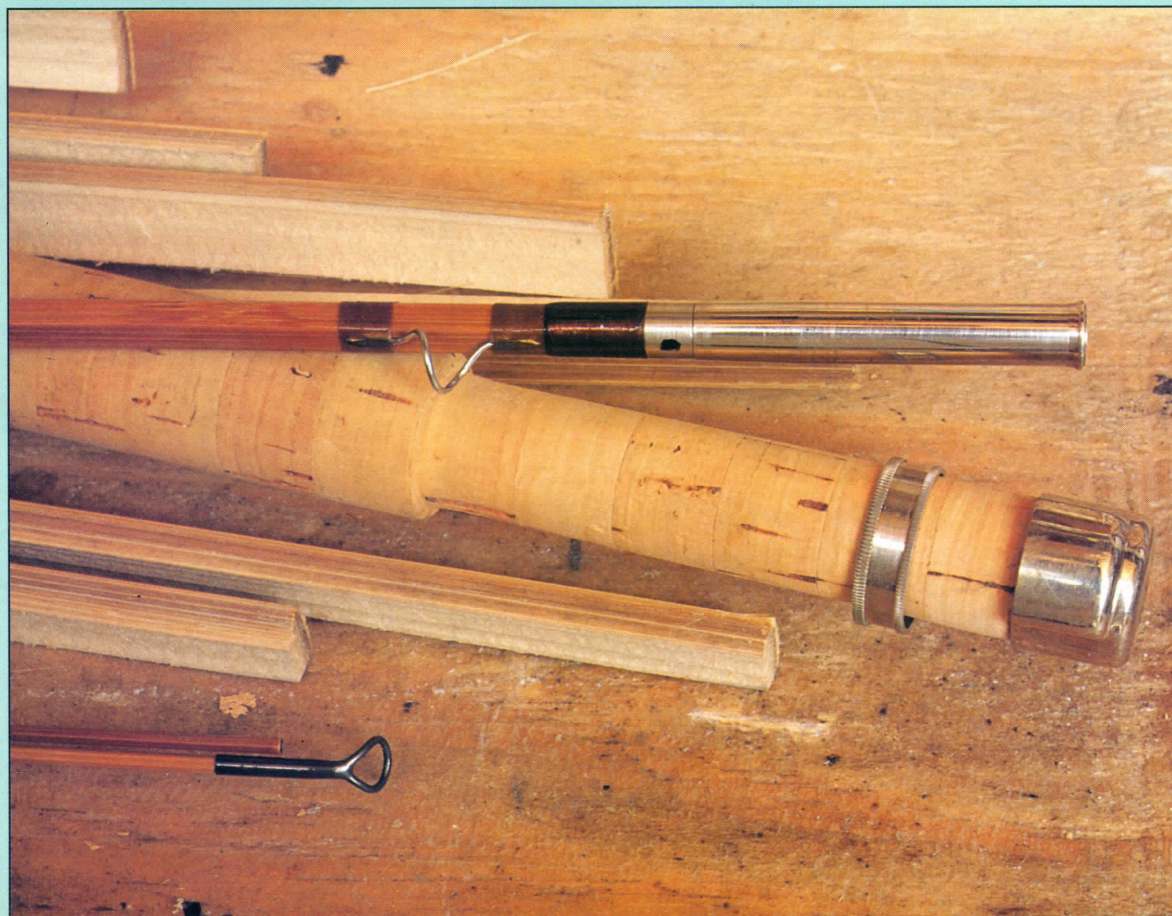
**RIGHT:** Having been glued together, the six sections are bound with string to prevent their twisting while the glue sets.



**LEFT:** When the glue has dried, further heating, over a paraffin stove, irons out any kinks.



**ABOVE:** A cross-section of both butt and tip sections.



**After hours of painstaking labour, the rod is finally finished.**