WHEN WHALES PLAYED A

When we fish with modern rods, we take for granted their lightness and forgiving nature. But early anglers used woods that weighed a ton and broke at the most inopportune moments. Stuart Shepherd looks at those early days of rod-making

We take a light, whippy action on today's rods for granted. But pick up an old greenheart or yew rod, and you have to marvel that our ancestors managed to catch anything — especially fish like salmon, pike or tuna that needed a lengthy battle to subdue.

The early rods were largely made from native woods, such as blackthorn, crabtree, ash, yew, deal/fir, with hazel, cane, reed or whalebone used at the tip.

Whalebone is recommended by many writers right up to Victorian times, but I wonder how often it was actually used. I have seen a good number of rods dating back to 1800 and very few had whalebone tips, most having the tip made of cane.

If it was as widely used as the writers suggest, why have not more survived? Likewise, comparatively few early cane rods are still in existence. This may be because they are less robust than solid wood and have been destroyed, or that they were not as popular as angling authors of both the 18th and 19th centuries would have us believe.

Thomas Barker in *The Art of Angling* has little to say about making rods, though he gives what I think is the first description of a rod adapted so a reel can be fitted to it. In the first edition of his book (1651) he describes a 12ft hazel trolling rod with a ring in the top for line to run through, and a hole in the butt "for to put in a winde to turn with a barrell". This is an obvious reference to a spike winch fitting.

This passage is repeated in the larger second edition (1659) along with the description and picture of a clamp winch, as appeared in Fred Buller's article in the July edition of *Classic Angling*. The rod used with the clamp winch was for catching salmon and comprised a 10ft stock with a 6ft top "pretty stiffe and strong".

Walton's *The Compleat Angler* has little or nothing to say on the design or manufacture of rods, but Robert Venables gives some useful information in *The Experienced Angler* (1662). Although he does not give dimensions of any rods, he describes how to choose the wood. You are advised to cut your stocks (butts) and tops at around the winter solstice while the sap is in the root. Choose the shoots with the neatest taper and as straight as possible. You must then bathe them in a gentle fire and bind them to a straight pole while they season. How long this takes, he does not say.

Great stress is laid on the importance of a proper taper in a rod, so the line will not be broken when playing a big fish, and he recommends that the tip of the rod be spliced with blackthorn and whalebone if the top be made of hazel. For angling at ground, he prefers cane or reed, again stressing the importance of the taper. To colour cane, you can either cover it with thin leather or parchment, or dye it "as you see daily done by those that sell them in London". A warning is given about weakening the cane, should you scrape it in order to dye it more easily.

In James Chetham's day (1680), when you had selected, straightened and seasoned your timber (seasoning taking at least 15 months), you would take it to the local arrowmaker, who would turn and taper it to the dimensions you required. Regarding the length of your rod, in *The Angler's Vade Mecum* he advises you to use one "full as long as the river will bear", but it must not be top-heavy. He says that although he angles in a small river, the rod he uses is five-and-a-half yards long.

A fly rod is described thus: butt 7-8ft white deal (in one piece), then 6-7ft hazel (in two or three pieces spliced together), then 2ft of yew tipped with 5-6in of whalebone. The splices are bound with waxed silk. Another rod, described as suitable for ground or float fishing, is 5-5.5 yards long, with a 3.5-yard cane butt and a 6-7ft spliced hazel top, again with 5-6in of

A range of early American salmon rods. showing the development Calcutta; split Tonkin; and split Calcutta. Picture taken from AJ (

PART IN ROD-MAKING

t towards cane. From left, lancewood; ash; split bamboo; split
(Campbell's excellent Classic and Antique Fly-Fishing Tackle.

whalebone at the tip. In both cases, the rod sections are 'pieced' to each other, and it is not clear whether this means that they are permanently joined or come apart.

What is certain is that the top was removable, because you are advised that if you get fast on the bottom "to take out the top; and instead thereof, put a stick of hazel, which hath two grains, or is forked; and follow the line therewith, until you come to the hook (the line running between the grains or forks) and it will loosen the hook; then take out the stick, and put in the top again."

To stain a rod, it was warmed by the fire and then painted with 'aqua fortis' (nitric acid), to render it a cinnamon colour. To preserve hazel rods from worm-eating or rotting, you are advised to rub them with "sallet oyl, tallow or sweet butter" and to keep them dry, but not too near the fire. In spring, before you began fishing again, they should be steeped in water for 12 hours.

By the time Robert Howlett wrote *The Angler's Sure Guide* 20 years later, it had become common for rods to be made with several joints. These were known as 'bag rods'. Combination rods were popular and Howlett describes an all-purpose travelling rod with four tops for different fish. The 'stock' or butt is 5.5ft or 6 ft and not more than 4.5in in girth, hollowed out to take all four tops for safe carriage. There are six intermediate joints, each 2ft 3in long, giving a rod of about 20ft.

Two of the thicker joints were bored so that the thinner ones could be stored inside them. He describes the thin ends of the joints being fitted with a "riveted socket", apparently a female metal ferrule, though he does not mention a metal male one to fit into it. There are no rings except a tip ring on the trolling top, and the line is attached to a strong silk or twisted horsehair loop, bound to the ends of the other tops, as was normal at this time, with no reel.

If you went carp fishing with Howlett, your rod would have been 21ft long in five sections, comprising a ground willow butt with a lignum vitae or ivory button on the thicker end, which would be 5.25in in girth. The other four joints were of cane with the ubiquitous whalebone tip, joined with "bras-verrels", and all except the top were bored, so the whole packed into the two largest sections, like a roach pole. Indeed, the description of this rod could be that of a roach pole.

His most detailed description is of a salmon rod. The butt was 10ft long and the top 8ft. The top comprised as many pieces spliced together as were needed to give a suitable taper, with of course a whalebone tip. The two parts were bound together with waxed silk when you were ready to fish (a spliced joint) and a wheel or tumbrel fixed to the stock within two feet of the butt end.

He then gives what I believe to be the first detailed description of rod rings. For the butt, you are instructed to make loops of iron wire and drive them into small holes you had made with an awl, each about 18in from the other. For the top, you should use annealed brass wire and make loops with legs, which are bound to the rod with waxed silk, leaving only the loop showing. The tip ring was placed to overhang the end of the rod and lie straight out, not turned up as were the rest. Great stress is laid on the importance of keeping all the loops in a straight line.

Howlett says that his book is primarily for experienced anglers, which suggests that very few were using ringed rods at this time, or this instruction would not be necessary. This is a considerable advance on Robert Nobbs's advice on rod rings in *The Compleat Troller* (1682). "If you use an ash or hazel rod, you may have a ring fixed to the end: some have two, or more, though I see no necessity for that superfluity."

Rods didn't really change much over the next 100-150 years, although through the 19th century, tropical woods such as greenheart and lancewood became available, and built cane was invented. Nevertheless, rods were sold in the 1920s which Howlett would have found little different from those he used in the late 17th century.

Finally here is advice given by several authors on what to do if you hook a large fish. This quotation comes from Howlett.

"....if he will run out at stretch, nolens volens, and you cannot follow him, then if the place be clear, (not if very foul and weedy) throw the rod in after him, and commend all to fortune, rather than lose hook, line and fish..."

As to how you got the rod back, no advice is given, and on occasion, no doubt you would have lost the rod as well!