

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF Harold Sharpe

He's made rods for the Queen Mother, the Prince of Wales and Billy Connolly.
And even now, at the age of 80, he's still fishing and climbing...

I THINK THE best day in my fishing life was the one before I joined the Army in May, 1943. I set off about five in the morning on my bike and fished the Peterculter beat of the Dee. The water was beginning to rise, but until then it had been fairly low. The pool was obviously holding fish waiting to go upstream and by lunchtime I had ten on the bank. The beat belonged to the firm at that time so I hid the fish, got on my bicycle and phoned my father, telling him I had ten fish. Very unwillingly, because petrol was rationed in those days, he brought the car. We fished the rest of the afternoon but got only one each because the water had risen. The best fish that day weighed 23 lb and the rest were 15 lb-18 lb. And the next day I was in the Army.

Now I live near Cheltenham, and there's basically no trout fishing except in expensive streams or ponds, which I don't like.

Salmon fishing on the Welsh rivers has been pretty ghastly for the past four or five years. I've made several trips to the Usk, but I've been very lucky to get one fish in a dozen visits. It's been very poor.

I started as a youngster fishing a worm on the Don for trout, but we'll gloss over that! And I got my first salmon when I was 11. In those days owners of the



Harold Sharpe, grand old man of fishing and climbing, on a trip to Canada.

most important beats on the Dee let them to people from the South, and owners depended on both the rents and the fish caught by their keepers or anyone else they invited. Guests fished from Monday to Friday so I might get a phone call asking 'Do you fancy a day on the Dee on Saturday?' The first seven fish went to the estate but every eighth was yours. You didn't have to pay – they were only too glad to have the river fished and to keep the fish.

During the war I spent most of my time in Palestine as an officer in the Gordon Highlanders and towards the end of my service I was adjutant in a military special

unit. Some of the bright sparks thought they could get some fishing in the Bitter Lakes, but this was only for Nile perch. They're nice big fish and they look good in the water but when you get them ashore they deflate and they're practically inedible. I made rods for the Nile perch fishers from the bamboo canes used to stake up the bottom part of our tents.

After the war I went straight into the firm – J. S. Sharpe (Fishing Tackle) Ltd of Aberdeen – learning the rod-making side. This involved glueing strips of bamboo cane to a wooden former then, when the wood was dry, planing the piece of cane to the shape of the

former. If you dug into the former you'd be given hell. Six sections of that made a fishing rod.

During the war we didn't make rods but we did a lot of work for Rolls Royce. My father was friendly with Mitchell, who designed the Spitfire. During the Battle of Britain they realised there was only one major factory making Spitfire fuel pumps – and this was the part of the Spitfire engine that wore out quickest – so five firms each made one or more parts for the fuel pump and every day during the Battle of Britain a plane flew that day's supply of pumps south.

My grandfather had started the firm in 1920 with capital of £25 – you couldn't do that sort of nonsense nowadays – but he managed to get up early enough in the morning to catch a salmon before he went to work.

Our most famous customer was the Queen Mother. She always had more than one rod – all exactly the same – so if she had a guest she favoured she'd give them a rod to keep. At one Game Fair in the '70s Prince Charles came on to our stand and said: 'I've got a rod like that' and I replied, 'I know – I delivered it to Balmoral.'

For his wedding we made 100 Royal Tribute rods. I'd told him what we were proposing and he said it was quite acceptable so long as

they were split cane, so we made an 8 ft-odd staggered-ferrule fly rod. We later found they used the rods at Broadlands on the Test. I still use mine. It's 8 ft 7 in, two piece, and a five/six weight. It works wonderfully. The Duke of Edinburgh has one of our rods, though I don't know where he got it from.

Then Edward Heath got us to make one – a 14 ft spliced rod for the German chancellor Willie Brandt, who was keen on fishing in Norway. And then there's that comedian lad who tells crude jokes – Billy Connolly. He's a very good fisherman and he's not as daft as he looks. He got a 14 ft spliced rod but instead of putting the usual markings on it we called it The Big Yin.

Another customer was Charles Ritz. We both designed what we considered the perfect dry-fly rod and interestingly came up with virtually the same measurements. Later on, Sharpe's made the rod – eventually known as the Fario Club – which was named after his club in Paris.

Over the years there's been a lot of buying and selling of tackle firms and our original firm was sold in 1964.

I think people like split cane so much because its predecessor was greenheart. Those rods were very hard work to make and they were liable to have faults in them called 'shakes'.

After you've planed up a rod the boss would come along and he'd whack the rod down on his long flat bench. About 50 per cent of them would just split at that point because there had been a shake that he couldn't see. And you'd just spent hours planing it!

When split cane came along it was the new 'in' thing, slightly more expensive – just as the first carbon-fibre rods were more expensive than cane – and that made them the thing to have.

I did try a carbon rod once

on the Park beat of the Dee, pulling about three fish, but I couldn't set the hook with it. So I said 'Oh blow this' – and that's the only time I've ever used one.

At one point Orvis were having difficulty getting bamboo poles because America didn't recognise Communist China, which supplied the poles. We agreed with Orvis that we'd machine sections slightly oversize and send them over.

Later on they discovered a system for impregnating sections of ply in synthetic resin so they'd become one solid block. Then they registered a patent to use it in split cane and we agreed that for a small royalty on every rod we sold we could use it in the UK and Europe. The trouble was it was a hot-water process and the snag was that the sections became badly twisted and bent.

So I settled down with a friend who was a chemist and he came up with a cold-water process that didn't bend the cane. After that Orvis came over and looked at our system and that was the end of us having to pay them any money.

Nowadays I occasionally go up to Aberdeen for officers' reunions and get a bit of fishing on the Don or the Dee. Last year I went for trout on the Don and later I went to Canada. I fished down on the Crowsnest Pass through the Rockies but there was a howling downstream gale that day, which made casting a hell of a job. We then moved down to the Oldman River, which had a bit more shelter from the wind. My son lives there and he got us a few days at a lodge which was handy for the Purcell and Selkirks mountains. I've climbed since I was about 11 years old. OK, I'm 80 now but if you like it and you're keen on mountains you do it. I go into the Welsh hills occasionally but most of my climbing now is under 3,000 feet."



Interview by Graham Mole