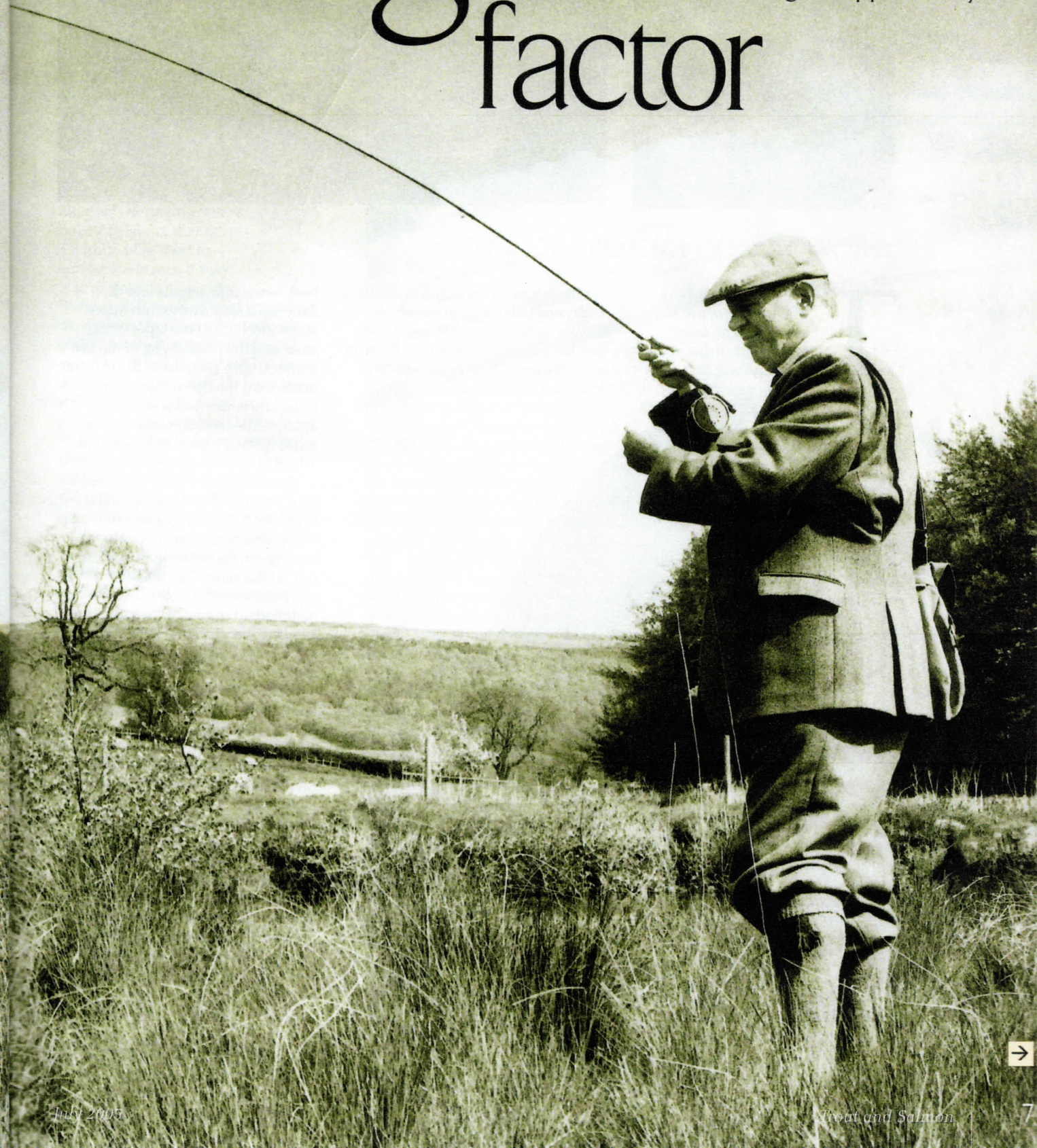


# The feel-good factor

1955 **50** 2005

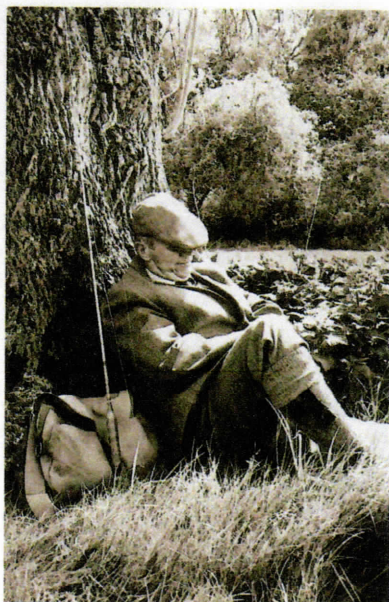
Fishing with cane and silk represents the traditions of our sport. PHILIP WHITE reveals why it still has great appeal today





Right: Cane and silk brings a slower, more traditional approach.

Far right: flies for a greased line.



## THE FEEL-GOOD FACTOR CONTINUED



**T**HE YEAR WAS 1957. The occasion, my 12th birthday. The most memorable thing about that day? My first cane fishing rod. This

particular one was 10 feet long with a whole cane butt and middle sections and a greenheart tip. It was a trotting rod for the River Stour in Dorset, where I was wanting to fish with my friend.

It may be long gone now, but it is not forgotten, as it was my introduction to what has become my entire life. From here, my fishing life progressed through various stages and rod-types.

First, built cane, then fibreglass, boron and now carbon-fibre, or graphite as it is probably more widely known, came into regular use as rod-building materials. Each has its merits but, in my opinion, none has come anywhere near cane for that one important ingredient – the sheer responsiveness and feel when playing a fish!

There is something about the feel of cane that has never been surpassed, despite the enormous amount of technology that has been put into the development of the modern materials. Companies like

Hardy, whose name is synonymous with cane rods, have invested heavily in technology and materials that get ever lighter, and ever faster in recovery time, in order to satisfy an ever more demanding market.

The latest Hardy rods are made of space-age materials that normally grace the bodies of stealth fighter planes and other defence hardware. They may be much lighter and can certainly throw a line further than a cane rod, but who wants to fish at 35 yards all day, when fly-fishing is supposed to be a pleasure?

When I graduated from river fly-fishing for a mixture of coarse-fish and trout, to the wider expanses of Sutton Bingham and Chew reservoirs, I took my cane rods with me. They caught me fish at up to about 27 yards for years. Indeed, all of my early fly-caught trout; sea-trout and grilse came to that 9 ft Sharpe's Scottie impregnated cane rod that I still have and use, although I have it marked up for re-ringing at present.

My largest salmon was also grassed on a cane rod, though this was a spinning rod when I worked as a riverkeeper on the Hampshire Avon. I felt every ounce of its 25 lb-plus bulk – and still do!

Split or built-cane rods are made from a single piece of Tonkin cane, grown in China. This cane is tempered with

heat, sawn into lengths and then hand split lengthways into many strips. Because of the taper of the grain and the positioning of the leaf nodes, the tip sections of the rod are made from the tip section of the cane, where the nodes are wider apart, while the butt section of the rod is formed from the thicker end, where nodes are closer together.

The sections are hand-split rather than sawn so that the grain line is kept intact. Splitting causes the cane to separate along the grain whereas sawing can cause the grain to "run out" at the sides. The selected sections, usually six, are then matched up so that no two nodes are adjacent, because that would create a weak spot. The normal method is to stagger the nodes to alternate sections or to spiral the nodes so that there are no nodes aligned in a horizontal plane around the rod.

The sections are straightened, the nodes are flattened and then the prepared strips carefully planed to a taper, either by hand or on a precision milling machine.

The resulting six sections are then glued together, cross-bound and allowed to dry. Once ready for finishing, the blanks, as they are now known, are cleaned, straightened again and then formed into rods with the addition of cork handles, reel seats and rod rings. They are then



**"There is something about the feel of cane that has never**



carefully coated with a varnish finish before use. In the pre-war era, the glues and varnishes were prone to breakdown and required annual inspection and re-application to protect them and keep them in order.

Many of the drawbacks of the old pre-Second World War rods have disappeared now, with the advent of modern glues to hold the sections together. These glues were developed during the war for the construction of high-speed wooden fighter aircraft like the Spitfire and Mosquito.

If you are going to go for a cane rod, here are a couple of “dos and don’ts”. Don’t stand the

rod in a corner, or near heat, as this will cause it to set in a curve which will never really come out, although re-ringing on the opposite face of the tip was a regular ploy used to correct these sets. It may also dry out so much that the glue will cease to hold it together or allow the ferrules to come loose.

Don’t store it in its bag if the bag is wet. This is bad for any rod but is seriously bad for cane. Do hang the rod up in its bag in a cool dry cupboard until needed. Do check all whippings closely for any surface damage, or damp may get at the structure of the rod. Any such damage must be remedied immediately. It pays to be ultra-fussy with a cane rod, even a modern one made with all the best glues and epoxy finishes.

There is no doubt that modern rods make casting at distance much easier and that they are lighter in the hand. What they don’t do is hook a fish as easily as the cane rod does. Cane rods are heavier than their modern counterparts and take longer to stop, or recover as the modern term is, once the striking movement is started so the hook is set more positively. This extra weight also makes the actual casting of a line easier, for the cane rod “casts itself”.

It flexes under its own weight unlike any graphite rod I know. One of the main virtues of this is that the cane rod will cast a very short line, even a leader and fly only, a tremendous asset when fishing in tiny streams and small rivers, the favoured habitat of the



been surpassed”







A traditional  
cast to a  
feeding fish.

## THE FEEL-GOOD FACTOR CONTINUED

← modern cane rod user. When I hook a fish, even a small fish, in these conditions, I know exactly where it is and feel it's every movement, something I don't get when using a modern tubular graphite rod. Or plastic rods as a cane rod builder I know rudely calls them. Even the casting style has changed with the move away from cane.

I was originally taught to cast with a book under my upper arm, leading to a rather wristy stroke, but this was for short river casts, not the prodigious distances cast today. These distances were scarcely thought of outside of tournament casting back then, when distances well in excess of 30 yards were being cast with cane rods and silk lines.

Silk lines have been dismissed by most anglers these days, but again they have their merits. The original silk lines were braided from natural silk, one of nature's strongest fibres. They are much finer in cross section than the modern plastic coated version, which means they will cut through the breeze better than a modern line. They stretch less and so give more direct contact between angler and fish. Again we come back to "feel". Silk lines pick up better and more delicately than the modern fly line because they are

greased, making them sit higher in the surface film with less surface tension to overcome.

The silk line is also more matt in finish than most modern plastic coatings, making it less likely to flash during casting. Line flash is something that really scares fish. If you don't grease it, a silk line will sink slowly, which makes it the first "intermediate" line, sometimes a boon when fishing traditional river wet-flies early season when depth can be important.

In normal use a silk fly line will stay floating for up to six hours before it needs re-greasing, particularly when river fishing, where repeated casting of a fly is necessary and time spent actually on the water is at a minimum. If a double taper is being used, it is but a matter of moments to take the line off the reel and reverse it, ready for use.

Bear in mind that casts made by most river fishers seldom exceed 12 yards or, put more simply, are less than half the length of a normal silk line. This reversing of the double taper silk line has been turned into a bit of a fallacy on modern lines where people still buy DT lines for economic reasons – so that they get

twice the life out of the line. This is not always so. Modern fly lines do not normally last the same 20 years that a silk line does, nor is a plastic coated line usually much use after being cramped up on a reel for a season before it is "reversed".

By this time there is usually a lot of "memory" and the plasticiser is beginning to dry out, leaving the line somewhat lacking in suppleness. That said, I do love DT lines, of whatever construction, because I can pick up just about any amount of line and put it back down again accurately, something that is not as easy to do with a WF line.

Yes, there are some drawbacks with a silk line, particularly the need to dry it after every use, but a small line winder kept in the car boot is all that is necessary. In the early days the dressing on silk lines became very tacky if not dried out properly after use and could become unusable. I fell victim to this self-made problem and went away from these lines for a long time for this reason. But a little time spent at the end of the day will keep a silk line pristine for years, and the dressings used on silk lines today have fewer

maintenance needs. Lines should still be removed

and stored in loose coils over round wooden pegs in the same cool, dry cupboard as the rod if they are not going to be used for any length of time.

There is one other drawback. This is scummy water, sometimes found in slower rivers, or in front of weed racks and similar obstructions. Greased silk lines just will not float here because the pollutants in the scum cause a reduction in surface tension, which is what a greased line relies on for its floatation. This is a pity because it is often here that big fish sit, sheltered under the scum and feeding on food items – spinners, terrestrials and the like – that get trapped along its edge. Even artificial flies sink here so it is very difficult to fish this sort of water anyway.

I have already mentioned Hardy as a company who are well known historically for their cane rods, and they still maintain a corner in their factory where Callum Gladstone carries on this tradition, but there are many people out there who are doing the same thing in a back room or shed somewhere and it is possible to get fly and coarse rods from several of them. At various





There isn't a more satisfying experience than catching a fish with cane and silk.



## Factfile

Philip White is a guide based on the River Wye in Derbyshire where he offers a cane rods service. Contact Philip on 01629 734639 or philip@flydresser.fsnet.co.uk  
Silk lines and cane rods from Mike Brookes, Les Mortiers, 49390, Parçay les Pins, France. Tel. 0033 241 826 034. The Edward Barder Rod Co, Ham Mill, London Road, Newbury Berks RG14 2BU. Tel: 01635 552 916. Stephen Woolley Rods, Adjacent the Woodyard, Belle Vue Road, Ashbourne DE6 1AT. Tel: 01335 300 095.

to lubricate the ferrules first, by rubbing the male part in the hair on the nape of your neck, or rubbing natural lanolin from the side of your nose on to the ferrule. The line is threaded up the rings then greased with Mucilin. The leader is tied on and the fly selected and, if a dry-fly, treated with floatant.

When I started, gut casts were still the norm, so there was an added chore the evening before. This was to place the casts in a cast damper box which had a couple of layers of felt which were dampened so the gut became softened before use. If this was not done the cast would not straighten, lying on the surface like a corkscrew. Gut is also very brittle when dry and is difficult to knot correctly in this state. If the fish go off the feed during the hotter part of the day, put the rod aside, pull the line off the reel and drape it over a bush to dry while you have a bite, then sit back against a shady tree and have "forty". I always find the fish I catch then are the bigger ones anyway.

When you are ready to start again, give the line a quick dressing and away you go. At the end of the day, make sure you run the line back on to the drier or transfer it back to the wood pegs ready for next time.

There may be a small amount of affectation in using cane but there is a huge amount of pleasure too. Take a fish on a cane rod and silk line and you will be seduced by the "feel".

Thanks to Lord Edward Manners for photographic access to the Haddon Hall beat on the Derbyshire Wye.



## THE FEEL-GOOD FACTOR CONTINUED

fly-fishing shows I have met rod builders like Steven Woolley of Ashbourne, who can make you a rod to suit your needs, from age old favourites to more modern tapers, and I personally use one hand built for me by Mike Brookes, who also makes the Phoenix Silk lines from his home in France. Those out there of my age will remember names like Sharpe's (still made today), Milwards, Fosters of Ashbourne and others whose rods are still in use, lovingly cleaned, re-varnished and hung up at the end of the season ready to do battle again next year.

Most of the old silk lines, from

Hardy, Milwards and Kingfisher have vanished but the Phoenix line has "risen from the ashes" in recent years and Cortland have a line this year aimed at offering the benefits of silk with the conveniences of more modern technology.

Enough of the history. So what is a day with a cane rod and traditional silk line like? Well simple really if just a little more involved than with modern, instant tackle. First the line is removed from the line winder the evening before and put on to the reel. In the morning the rod is taken off its hook in the cupboard and the journey made to the water.

The rod is made up, making sure



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My warmest congratulations to Trout and Salmon. Your support for the work of NASF, especially for your rallying call over the North-east drift-net buy-out has been invaluable. Now, with big changes taking place across salmon conservation, and optimism for future stocks, we can look forward to the next 50 years and to further top-class coverage of the world of game-fishing. We would like to join your readers worldwide in saluting you on this historic occasion.

**ORRI VIGFUSSON**  
CHAIRMAN OF THE  
NORTH ATLANTIC SALMON FUND