

For the love of cane



The rods (l to r): (1) Wolfram Schott, 7ft 6in Lyle Dickerson replica; (2) Tom Moran 8ft for a #5 line; (3) Thomas Maxwell 8ft for a #5 line; (4) Tom Moran 7ft for a #4 line; (5) Thomas & Thomas 'Midge'; (6) Wolfram Schott's WBR replica.

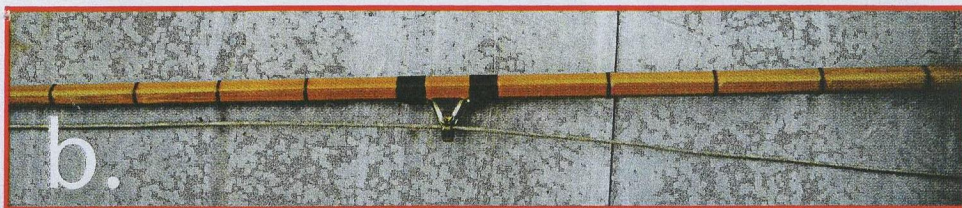
PETER LAPSLEY reports from a meeting of cane rod experts summoned to compare some models, and asks why do anglers still fish with cane?

Very few of those who know about such things would dispute that Tom Moran is in a class of his own. The seemingly unanimous view amongst the *cognoscenti* is that the cane rods he builds are at least as good as any that have ever been built anywhere, and probably better. I was intrigued, therefore, when he rang me at the turn of the year, bursting with enthusiasm, to tell me about a replica 'World's Best Rod' that had been built in Bavaria and about his determination to try it out at Abbots Barton.

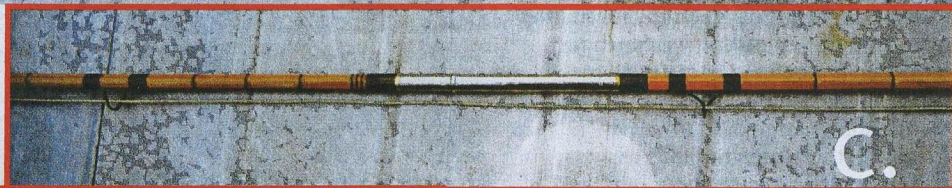
For those not over-preoccupied with angling history, the World's Best Rod (WBR) was the *sobriquet* accorded to his favourite rod by GEM Skues. The masterpiece in question is a three-piece, 9ft, built-cane rod created by the great American rod-builder, Hiram Leonard, and obtained by Skues in 1905. Abbots Barton is the historic fishery on the River Itchen, immediately to the north of Winchester, on which Skues fished for 56 years, from 1883 to 1938, and on which he developed Nymph fishing as a tactic for chalkstream trout.



'The Committee' (l to r): Roy Darlington, Charlie Davidson, Doc (Dick) Nelson, Tom Moran, Lawrence Waldron, Jim McCudden and Hans Weilenmann.



Dr Wolfram Schott's replica of Skues' World's Best Rod: a. the butt ring; b. the guide ring; c. the lower ferrule; d. the tip.



The original WBR has been accommodated in The Flyfishers' Club for many years. As a member of the Club's Museum Committee, the late T Donald Overfield measured and described it meticulously, publishing the details in his excellent biography of Skues, *The Way of a Man with a Trout* (Ernest Benn Ltd, 1977). It was from this account that Dr Wolfram Schott, a Bavarian mineralogist, an avid student of fly fishing history and a keen and accomplished amateur rod builder, had built what Tom assessed as a perfect replica of the WBR, right down to the smallest detail of the fittings.

It has been my privilege to have had a rod at Abbots Barton for the past 15 years and to have become close friends with Roy Darlington who runs the fishery. He is greatly interested in and knowledgeable about Abbotts Barton's history and about Skues, and it was not difficult to persuade him to set a day aside to try the WBR on its 'home water' and to compare it with several other cane rods, both historic and modern. We were keen, too, to discover why some

people continue to use built-cane rods when rods made with modern materials are so much lighter, more accurate and more responsive.

Comparing cane

Thus it was that on a fine summer day at the beginning of June this year, I joined half a dozen or so people with, between them, truly extraordinary combined knowledge of the subject at an informal gathering at Abbots Barton. The dual purposes of the day were to put half a dozen historic cane rods through their paces and to enjoy one of Roy's legendary lunches. The assembled rods included:

- another of Wolfram Schott's replicas - a 3-pce 7ft 6in Lyle Dickerson;
- a 2-pce 8ft Thomas Maxwell;
- a Thomas & Thomas 'Midge';
- Schott's WBR replica;
- two of Tom Moran's modern cane rods: a 2-pce 8ft for a #5 line; and a 2-pce 7ft for a #4 line

The WBR replica had been brought to the gathering by Hans Weilenmann, a Dutch casting instructor and fly dresser from Amstelveen, whose interest in vintage tackle has chiefly to do with its fishability, rather than its collectibility. I asked him why people still fish with built-cane when, for most, rods made from modern materials offered so much more. He said he did not think it was simply a matter of sentiment or of reluctance to abandon the past, but one of practicality. In his view, he said, high quality built-cane rods are better than modern ones for hooking and playing fish, but only in shorter lengths - up to about 8ft 6in, with 7ft or 7ft 6in being noticeably better.

Tom agreed, adding that he has dedicated himself to the building of cane rods because of the craftsmanship involved and because of his love of natural materials, likening his work to that of the potter with his clay.

Casting the WBR replica

Casting with the 9ft WBR replica seemed to bear out the view that cane rods over 8ft 6in become increasingly difficult to fish with. After Tom, Hans and I had all tried it, we compared notes and found ourselves unanimous. Although pleasant to cast with and reasonably accurate, it was inevitably rather heavy and slow, and its weight and inertia made striking tricky,

'A SECOND-HAND GARRISON MAY SET YOU BACK AS MUCH AS £12,000' ➤



especially when dry-fly fishing. We agreed, though, that the problem would not be so acute when Nymph fishing, especially if contact with the Nymph was maintained simply by lifting the rod and keeping a reasonably taut line.

Tom pointed out that the WBR was, of course, built at a time when the mechanics and techniques of casting were being developed and refined at casting competitions, where distance and accuracy were all that mattered. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that rods were designed chiefly as casting tools, rather than for their all-round capabilities, including hooking and playing fish.

Nor should we have supposed, if any of us did, that the WBR would prove to have any particularly magical qualities. It was, after all, no more than a snapshot of rod design taken in the very early 1900's. While it may have been the best available then – in Skues' judgment at least – progress is remorseless, and its taper and design were soon overtaken and consigned to history. It is remarkable as a fine example of an early

One of Lawrence Waldron's inimitable reels.

Right: Hans Weilenmann testing the WBR on the Lower Barton Carrier at Abbots Barton.

early fishing was on the Clyde with cane rods, when solid glass was the only alternative. Over the years, he has developed a liking for hand-built artefacts, especially rods and reels, and is strongly aware of the empirical thought that goes into the creation of a truly superb rod, whatever material it may be built from, natural or man-made. He pointed to the way in which successive generations of American rod designers had refined and further refined their tapers, gradually shaving 25% off the weights of cane rods.

Jim saw as fruitless the endless debate amongst aficionados as to which cane rods are the best, saying he saw a rod simply as a tool for a purpose, the key being to use the right rod on the right water. If people want to use 7ft wands to catch 6lb rainbows or to use cane rods in pursuit of bonefish, that's their choice, but it is unlikely that this is what the rods' manufacturers intended their rods to be used for.

He pointed out also that cane rods, especially high quality vintage cane rods, can cost significantly more than most anglers are able or willing to spend. Prices rose steeply in the mid-1990's, pushed up by yuppie investment in the wake of Robert Redford's 1992 film, *A River Runs Through It*. Although they have stabilised since then, they have not dropped. Modern cane rods from Leonard and Thomas & Thomas cost around £2,000 to £2,500 apiece; a second-hand Garrison may be expected to set you back as much as £12,000.

Jim added that the tapers of Tom Moran's rods, which cost nothing like that, have been greatly influenced by Everett Garrison and that the materials, build

quality and finish of Tom's rods are 'the best', 'pure perfection'.

It would be over-stating the case to suggest that the panel examining so remarkable a collection of rods was dominated by the Scots, but there was certainly a strong Scottish influence.

Charlie Davidson, another old friend of Roy's from Ayr, and a supremely skilful fly fisher and fly dresser, fishes chiefly on the Upper Clyde, but also extensively on chalkstreams such as the Test, the Itchen, the Bourne and the Dever. Concurring with the earlier assessment of the WBR, Charlie pointed out that Skues had modelled his early nymph patterns on dressings from the Clyde and the Tweed.

Perhaps one of the most reticent people at the gathering but one of the most expert was Lawrence Waldron, charming and quietly spoken, his natural modesty masking a wealth of experience. I had first become aware of Lawrence's talents in the mid-1990's when Simon Cain, no slouch himself, had listed him amongst the top three cane rod builders in the world – along with Tom Moran and Tom Dorsey.

Lawrence had begun making cane rods in the 1960's, some time before he met and developed a close working relationship with Tom Moran. The two came together at the Broadlands Game Fair in 1982 where Lawrence was demonstrating hand planing on the Partridge of Redditch stand and Tom was exhibiting separately. Soon after that, Tom was made foreman of Partridge's rod-building division. The pair collaborated closely for several years until Tom left the UK to become manager of Thomas & Thomas' bamboo rod department in Massachusetts, USA, and Lawrence began making reels and vices.



'BUILT-CANE ARE BETTER FOR HOOKING AND PLAYING FISH, IN SHORTER LENGTHS'

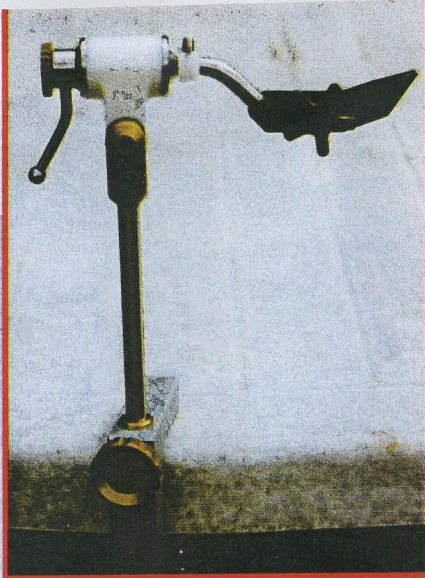
20th Century Leonard and for its historical association with Skues, rather than for any particularly revolutionary aspect of its design or construction.

Amongst the others gathered to compare the rods was Jim McCudden, an old friend of Roy's who had brought with him his 8ft Maxwell, the 7ft 6in Moran and a wonderful 9ft, 2.75oz carbon fibre 'Zenith' built by Russ Peak, the Stradivarius of fibreglass and carbon rod designers.

A tool for a purpose

Jim is hugely knowledgeable about classic built-cane rods and the men who made them. Although he now lives in Southampton and has a rod at Abbots Barton, he was born in Glasgow and all his

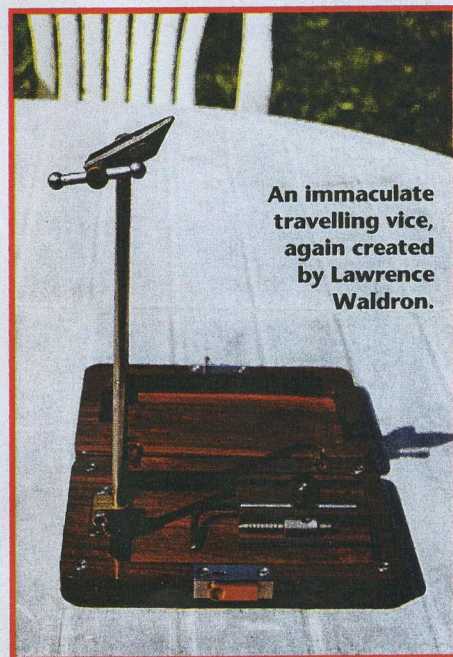
A superbly designed and built table vice by Lawrence Waldron.



The re-baptism 65 years on: Dr Wolfram Schott's replica of the WBR flexes to the surge of a 2lb Abbotts Barton trout.



An immaculate travelling vice, again created by Lawrence Waldron.



Lawrence says modestly that he 'simply makes a few things people like.' I believe his reels and vices set standards of craftsmanship and aesthetics that few if any others can even aspire to.

Mayfly days are well designed for testing fly rods. The mornings, often fresh and bright, allow for much casting, comparing and pontificating with little risk that trout will disrupt the proceedings. The afternoons, warm and languid, allow for long, leisurely lunches and much putting of the world to rights.

Then, just as one is wondering what to do next, the Mayflies enter stage right, the fish start bobbing about in pursuit of them, and the thought of re-baptising the WBR eases from possibility towards probability – and so it was.

It matters not who performed the baptism for this was a day on which all were gathered in a common cause. A 2lb brown trout sipping spinners on the Barton Carrier made the necessary mistake, was quickly brought to hand by the less than delicate rod and then safely released. Others followed.

Would I want a WBR replica? To hang on my study wall, maybe; to fish with, I think not. Another Tom Moran rod (I already have one) and a Lawrence Waldron reel to go with it? Now that's another matter altogether...

Reels and vices

I should have discovered Lawrence's wonderfully engineered artefacts years ago. They are exquisite; quite unlike any others I have ever seen. Given his meticulousness, it goes without saying that they are superbly made. What is also fascinating, though, is the combination of elegance, originality and functionality that is so evident in each of them.

Flawlessly neat and immaculately finished, the reels are a delight. Their originality owes much to Lawrence's keenness to listen to others and to incorporate their ideas and needs into his designs. And their functionality is truly remarkable, with two changeable brake pads on each side offering the ultimate in refined braking, and with a variety of ingenious devices which allow the angler to let the reel to run free, to check it with precisely adjustable drag or to lock it.

The vices are no less handsome, cleverly designed or precisely built. Lawrence said

his philosophy when building them was that the fly tyer should have to think about nothing apart from putting the hook into the vice. It is clear that he has achieved that.

Hans Weilenmann had with him the vice Lawrence had designed and built for him in 1988 or '89. When he had said he wanted somewhere to rest his non-tying hand, Lawrence had produced a model with the head cranked down, which neatly accommodated the need. As ingenious is a friction device to facilitate raising and lowering of the head.

Charlie Davidson was using one of Lawrence's travelling vices, neater even than the table one. An idea of the thought that goes into Lawrence's designs is to be found in the nicely crafted wooden box in which the vice is both housed and mounted. Four padded studs in its base screw out to prevent it both from slipping and from marking the table upon which it is placed.

Information

● Tom Moran may be contacted at 4 Meadow Croft, Chilton Foliat, Hungerford RG17 0UA. Tel. 01488 684197.

● Lawrence Waldron may be contacted on tel. 01902 896315.