

# All greased up and ready to roll

**Bill Currie** looks at the brilliance of  
A. H. E. Wood, the father of floating-line  
fishing for salmon





Then and now: a Logie, tied Wood-style on a low-water single, together with a modern Munro Killer double and along-winged Garry Dog treble.







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continued



**B**Y FAR THE greatest part of our salmon season is spent fishing with a floating line. What we may not fully realise is that, until A. H. E. Wood and his followers pioneered the technique in the 1930s, sunk line was the main method.

There are good and bad reasons for this. Sunk fly was not just an immovable convention — the dressed and undressed fly lines used in those days would not float without a great deal of effort. Wood, in an act of genius, as usual marked by extreme simplicity, having noticed that salmon wanted flies presented high in the water decided to grease his salmon lines.

That single act revolutionised the way we fish for salmon today. I love the remark made by Ernest Crosfield in one of his letters to Wood. Crosfield, an excellent and innovative fisher, had also discovered that flies fished near the surface were far more successful than those allowed to fish deep, so he developed a fast-fly technique to keep them up in the taking zone. He wrote to Wood after his conversion to greased-line fishing, “I hadn’t the brains to tumble to grease”.

We are extremely lucky today with our floating lines in that they do not need to be greased. I am just old enough to have fished for salmon in the 1950s with lines which had to be greased to make them float. I used to carry two separate greased lines and, as one got a bit soggy, I would

run it off, usually along a fence, and let it dry, fishing the other until it got soggy. Then, re-greasing the dry line, the cycle would start again — drying, greasing and replacing. It was all go! And, if you happened to drop any part of your greased line on sand, it was sheer hell.

The interesting thing about greased lines, however — and their successors from the late 1950s, the permanently floating fly lines — was not just that they floated. It was that they changed our view of salmon behaviour. We have benefited as much from Wood as an acute observer of salmon behaviour as we have from the techniques of fly-fishing which he advocated.

When we talk about classical greased-line fishing, looking back at it with our

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## “The brilliance of Wood’s original idea still dazzles me as I fish”

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experience of at least 40 years of modern floating fly lines, I think we can see that the technique had a big bang — Wood’s work — and a lot of evolution following. Floating-line fly-fishing has evolved interestingly, and I believe we have added to its efficiency with modern tackle, but the brilliance of Wood’s original idea still dazzles me as I fish.

Wood did not write a book on his technique, although he intended to. He wrote a fascinating, long chapter on greased-line fishing, which is included in Eric Taverner’s Lonsdale Library *Salmon Fishing* and he intended this to be the hub around which his book would be built. The freshness of that Lonsdale piece, with

all its italics

— as if Wood were wagging his finger at you as you read — is memorable. The Wood book was finally brought together from his papers by Jock Scott — *Greased Line Fishing For Salmon* — and he had the wit to include much of Wood’s correspondence, in which the true voice of the master fisher is heard. Anthony Crossley, in his *The Floating Line For Salmon and Sea Trout*, published on the eve of the Second World

War, also referred extensively to the correspondence.

Physically, Wood was a very strong fisher. He cast 12 ft and 13 ft cane salmon rods with a single-handed overhead technique, and he regularly put 30-40 yards out on the water. These are not just record-book facts — they throw light on his method. He gave short lines and heavy flies a bad press. In his view, short lines and heavy, stiffly dressed flies were not only a great limitation on how the fly could be controlled in the water, but he claimed this tackle produced imperfect contact with fish and caused anglers to miss masses of salmon.

Wood believed in long lines and sensitive control of them during fishing. There is a lovely story told of Ernest Crosfield fishing opposite Wood on the Dee in the early days and watching him closely. He saw Wood casting out long lines and making a strange circular movement with his rod arm which Crosfield could not understand. He kept wondering what he was up



to. Crosfield was a very experienced fisher, yet at that stage he had no concept of mending the line. Later, as a convert to greased-line fishing and a great friend of Wood, he became a skilled exponent of the new techniques, including what Wood called "mending the cast".

In a nutshell, Wood cast slim, sparsely dressed flies on long, floating lines and fished them just under the surface. He controlled the pace of his flies to give them absolutely minimum speed. Indeed, he advocated "dead drift" for the initial part of the fly's travel, and he mended his greased line assiduously to make such a pace possible. He admits that the stream itself would be bound to make a fly swim a little, and he does have techniques to change the pace of the fly for certain types of water, such as leading the fly round with the rod, but his credo is to fish a fly without drag as slowly as possible and to be alert to every tiny signal of fish interest.

He is a control merchant, but a most subtle one. His knowledge of where and how his fly enters the water, how it moves and how to react to takes indicates that his concentration on the behaviour of the fly itself was extraordinary. He once said that he knew very few fishers who could bring the right degree of concentration to their fishing.

His views on salmon takes and how to hook them must have been unbelievable in his day. Wood had the great luck to fish in an age when there were spring and summer salmon in great abundance, and I dare say he saw more salmon moving to his fly than most other mortals. He taught us that, large as they are, salmon do not necessarily take the fly with a great pull. On the contrary, he believed that the tiny touches we get to our flies as they slowly fish the lies are not from parr or trout, but salmon.

He became passionate about those who talk about salmon coming short. We, ourselves, produce short takes, he said. "Either the current or we ourselves have tightened on the hook before the fish has turned or closed his mouth".

I am a keen advocate of the "do nothing" hooking school, as readers of last month's *Trout and Salmon* will have noted. Wood, however, took this to extremes. He described feeling the small touch of a fish taking and he would let the stream slowly pull the line down until it was alongside the fish. Then he raised his rod and hooked the salmon. There is no doubt that his long floating lines contributed to this method. He thought slim, single-hooked flies were needed for an efficient hooking technique.

Wood had the reputation of being able to choose a precise location for the hookhold in a taking salmon's mouth. He told Crosfield that doubles, which Crosfield advocated, would be ejected before the line was properly in the hooking posi- ➤➤➤



This 15-pounder fell to a Stoat's Tail dressed on a double hook. Wood disliked such hooks, much preferring longshank singles.



May on the Aberdeenshire  
Dee, Wood's home river.  
Modern floating lines have  
made salmon fishing an  
easier operation.



## All greased up and ready to roll

*continued*

tion. Was he right about that? I do not think he was, entirely. Salmon seem to take doubles and small trebles into their mouths and hold them there for long periods.

Well, I wonder what Wood would have thought about the way we fish floating line on the Dee (and a hundred other good rivers) today. I think he would have been quick to recognise that modern floating fly lines are absolutely superb. Wood was both vastly helped and restricted by greasing his lines. I think he would have recognised the rich choices we have in floating lines today. We can specify low float or high float. We can fish a variety of sink-tip lines; we can select neutral lines which just settle into the water. Indeed, if we really want to, we can grease a floating line and

part of the leader to give a very high ride indeed. Given modern choices of line, Wood would have (perish the thought!) fished even more successfully. As it was, the records show that he was capable of taking more than 200 salmon in spring to his own rod at Cairnton. It makes me want to go off and hide my head in a bag! I mentioned earlier that Wood inspired me. Interestingly, it is not when I am fishing high floaters that I feel closest to Wood. It is when I am fishing a true neutral line. I read about his days out on Cambus or on Cairnton, where he refers to a degree of inadvertent sinking of his long line in the streamy water. I feel that what happens when I am fishing a neutral line must be very close to what happens to a long, greased silk line beginning to sink a little. True neutral lines have the same density as water and they settle into the stream, but do not go on sinking, or can be prevented from doing so. I have stood on the point of the Aboyne Jetty Pool and have imitated Wood fishing a long line. I have cast a longish line and set a dead drift going, then pulled off the remaining line and some backing and have taken fish to a very slowly drifting fly 40 yards away

down the stream. These fish take with a little surface splash.

I think classical Wood-style floating-line fishing has benefited enormously from light carbon rods. His specifications for rods are revealing. "I use 12 ft rods at all times and fish them single-handed", he wrote. In fact, working with the great L. R. Hardy, he designed three 12 ft cane rods: Number three — a heavy rod for sunk line in early spring weighing 13½ ounces. "A powerful stiff rod", he calls it. Number two — a medium rod "light in the hand", "my ideal rod", which weighed 12¾ ounces, and Number one — at 12¼ ounces, which was a light summer rod.

Most 15 ft salmon rods today weigh under ten ounces, and the best weigh under nine. Lines for all his rods were silk double-tapered, from the heavy sunk line (a Hardy 4a Corona) to his most used medium-weight rod (a 5 Corona) and his light rod (a Corona Superba 1 .B. 1). I find it difficult to give today's equivalents for these, but let me guess. He would use the equivalent of a No 10 line for both his sinking and greased-line work and I suspect a seven or eight with his light rod.





I owned one of these L. R. Hardy rods in the 1950s and caught a number of salmon on it. I found it soft in action by today's standards. Wood specifically asked L. R. Hardy to bring the balance further back into his hand. He liked the feel of certain American cane rods which did this. Hardy agreed, and the final designs were put on the market as "A. H. E. Wood Rods". Any fisher who wants lightness with strength and who wants to use overhead casts with salmon rods and lay more than 30 yards out on the water would find today's high-modulus carbon rods a dream. In my view, our lightweight, but very powerful, 15 ft rods have taken floating-line fishing forward in technique. First, they have brought long casting well within the range of the ordinary fisher. Second, they are wonderful rods for mending the line. The extra three feet over Wood's 12-footers is significant. I suppose I should add that it is a pity A. H. E. Wood did not Spey-cast. The pictures of him casting, and the diagrams in his writings show him to be an overhead caster with a very powerful forward cast. Jock Scott recorded that, shortly before his death, he witnessed him casting a 16 ft

Grant Vibration rod single-handed! He was not much of a wader; indeed, he seemed to fish from the path at Cairnton most of the time.

Classical greased-line fishing popularised shooting the line. With long, double-tapered lines, Wood achieved this, partly because his grease made the line shoot smoothly. He was always in a forked stick about floating and grease versus shooting power. He hated new lines because, as oil-dressed silks, they were shiny and had low friction. Thus, they would shoot well, but not hold the grease well. He said he liked his old lines, because they were rough and held the grease but, of course, they would not shoot quite as well. Had he fished in our age, he would have been able to put this problem behind him. Modern fly lines shoot and float well and are mercifully free from grease.

Finally, a word about Wood's flies. He liked fine-wire, long-shanked single hooks and small flies dressed with soft fibres. To achieve this seemingly impossible combination, he had his flies dressed as small as he required on the long shank. I can remember first seeing these flies and thinking that they were faintly ridiculous. Some of them reminded me of a tiny jockey perched on a long horse. Wood claimed that the protruding hook behind these smallish flies did not seem to put off salmon at all.

He experimented continuously with fly design, working with Kilroy to produce tiny wisps of flies, which he called his "toys". These were the first minimalist salmon flies, as far as I am aware. Most of them had no wings or hackles. They did have a slim body and a cellulose head, and in one or two patterns had a wisp of fibre tied in at the end of the shank. Wood pushed his notion of the minimal fly to its extremes; he fished hooks whose only gesture to dressing was a painted shank. He used to say he had caught salmon on entirely bare hooks using the greased-line method.

I fished the extended shank patterns Wood advocated and caught fish on them, but I think I was a poor disciple. I tended to revert to small flies tied on small hooks for my summer work. A major breakthrough for my greased-line fishing came

when the late Alan Sharpe gave me my first Parker tubes and "a new planet swam into my ken". They were tiny, lightly dressed plastic tubes which fished near the surface (often irritatingly on it) and they carried the finest little size 14 and 16 trebles. I saw these long before I saw Drury trebles, and I believe these little Parker tubes were a formative influence on my

present taste for small, lightly dressed trebles. Longshank fine singles do have wonderful hooking abilities, an advantage which Wood exploited with his expert setting of the hook. But they never looked right to me. Am I pressing A. H. E. Wood into too modern a mould when I say he would have done wonderful

things with Parker tubes and with fine-wire dressed trebles?

Conventional greased-line fishing was our great modern fly-fishing revolution. It changed our view of salmon entirely and it increased the pleasure of fishing for them with the fly. We should never forget that this way of fishing brought the whole drama of the take into closer view. Greased-line techniques were infectious; they have spread from salmon fishing into all manner of other nymph- and wet-fly fishing for trout and sea-trout.

Let me list some extremes. A friend just back from fishing for the big sea-trout of Tierra del Fuego decided to fish his week entirely with floating line as an experiment. The numbers of fish he landed were significantly higher than his sunk-line colleagues produced. I know of two people who insist on fishing floating line for salmon from early spring on, and they reg-

ularly catch March fish. On the Tweed in autumn, I have seen the floating line wipe the eye of sunk-line fishers in November. Now I am not saying that these unusual cases are patterns for us all to follow — I am merely saying that the idea which Wood brought to us is a

powerful one with all sorts of advantages and, perhaps within it, all sorts of things yet to be discovered. It is a powerful tactic based on close reading of salmon behaviour. We have all grown up into a world of fly-fishing whose techniques we accept as normal. Without Wood's original idea, and his remarkable dedication to following his approach through, I believe a main element of our sport would have lain undiscovered for years.



Wood's cottage at Cairnton.

**"Some of the flies reminded me of a tiny jockey perched on a long horse"**