

I wrote this article back in 1975. For the benefit of younger members of the Barbel Society who would not have experienced the style of fishing we practiced in the pursuit of barbel in those days, I think it is worth a second viewing. I may be wrong, and if so it is a good opening for members to write something for the magazine and correct me, but I am sure that there are many barbel anglers today who do not venture beyond special baits and night fishing. If you read between the lines of the article you will see that I was of the opinion that the future then, (now) would create a situation like this.

Members will have to bear with me when I wrote something such as "Carp fishing has been gradually revolutionised and specialised in the last 10 years", as that should now be, "In the last 45 years". And when I say I first visited the Royalty nearly 30 years ago, it is now over 50 years.

Despite the references that will follow, I am sure that much that I wrote of barbel

Barbel

By Dave Steuart

The New Thinking 2002

fishing all those years ago still applies today, and if you disagree, that's what the magazine is for.

Some anglers will find it hard to believe that any angler in his right mind would fish down to 1.5 or 2lb line for such a strong fish as barbel. Well, when friends and I used to fish such places as the Royalty where the fish were hammered day after day, often the only way you would get a bite would be fish very fine. It was nothing to do with the fish feeding as they would be all over the place 'wolfing up' loose feed, but they would refuse the hook unless we fished fine. I am of course

speaking of small baits such as maggots, sweetcorn and hempseed and the like. (We used to be able to get really large Chilean hemp in those days and could easily fit a grain to a 14 hook.) We would start fishing as heavy as possible, mostly float fishing. Six or seven pounds stuff would be our choice, and I can remember fantastic days when we would not have to drop down hook length strength as the fish were mad on. But there were many times when even 3lb would not fool them.

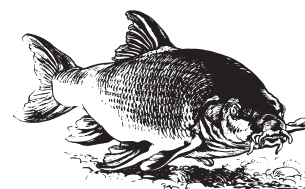
This has now changed. With the super strength of fine modern braids, finer nylon, and fluorocarbons it is no longer essential to fish with such low breaking strains. I also think that you no longer have to be so good with your hands. (No wonder there are more divorces now).

Until I read this old piece of mine I had forgotten that there had been a ban on fishing with maggots on the Royalty

Back in 1975 there were not that many anglers on the southern rivers who fished for barbel after dark as there were not that many places where it was allowed. The opening up of many of the fisheries to night fishing has certainly eased the problems for some anglers fishing for hard fish in well-fished waters. If it had happened years ago I would have been out there with them when I had some free time,

but now I am of an age when I am not so keen to night fish. Also there are now the added problems associated with car thieves and vandals that didn't exist years ago, and as I have twice had my car broken into, I am wary.

I have fished for barbel after dark quite a bit on the lower reaches of the Thames,



below Runnymede, where night fishing was always allowed since Magna Carta. Upstream of Runnymede night fishing was banned until 19...? Anyone remember?

The introduction of barbel to the River Severn is now about 44 years ago. God! Time flies! Never mind, soon be dead so won't have to write this rubbish!

Specialist bait. This has certainly come about. Even the old luncheon meat is being well and truly mucked about with.

Floats such as Drennan's plastic range, virtually transparent, have replaced the bubble float for fish that will shy away from a float in very shallow swims.

Yep! Since 1975 barbel have sure got popular.

Barbel – The 'New' Thinking

I may be forgiven for being





somewhat prejudiced towards the century old writings of that fellow resident of Twickenham Francis Francis. His wide experience of all kinds of freshwater fishing left little room in his 'Book on Angling' for long essays on individual coarse fish, and yet there is a wealth of information contained in the somewhat short chapters.

Back in my youth Francis and the other writers of the day advised clay-ball fishing, or baiting up with 1,000 lobworms. Alas they are ways I have not tried, not that the collecting of 1,000 lobworms posed any great difficulties for me, but few used this approach and interest in barbel fishing was limited to a few, and most of those caught were by accident by anglers fishing for roach and dace.

Although there were undoubtedly a number of anglers who fished for barbel, there certainly wasn't the number that there are today. I think it would be fair to make a comparison with carp fishing and say that as barbel fishing becomes more popular so does much more thinking go into their capture.

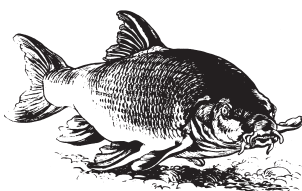
Every angler knows that carp fishing has revolutionized the sport over the last 20 years with advances in rod and tackle design. As the popularity of barbel increases, I think we will see much more and newer thinking going into their capture. Also the very fact that more anglers will fish for them will perhaps alter the feeding pattern of the fish and make them easier to catch.

The barbel fishing that did take place when I was a lad was nearly all with a leger. Anglers were prepared to fish all day waiting for a bite, even at the Mecca for barbel fishing, the Hampshire Avon's Royalty Fishery. When I first visited it nearly 30 years ago, 99% of anglers sat legering



their huge balls of bread and bran and patiently waited – and waited. Bites were very few, as I found out when pursuing the fish upon the same lines. But barbel did come occasionally, sometimes in quantity and always some very big fish upwards of 13lb would be taken each season. They did not always find their way into the press though, for there wasn't an angling newspaper as such and the reporting of specimens didn't appeal.

How much one is prepared to put into one's barbel fishing can dictate the tackle needed. If you only wish to fish occasionally for the fish



you may only require one rod to cover all your needs, but to specialise will demand more. A rod to fish snaggy areas, a rod to fish upstream, a rod for long trotting, a rod for legering etc. I'm not saying you want four or five rods to catch barbel – that's daft, but to fish efficiently you will

want at least two. Let's give some examples.

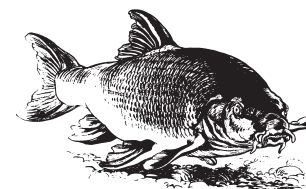
Let's presume you are going to trot the stream between beds of ranunculus that have grown to the surface and formed floating mats. You have located some barbel in the fast mid-river run, but between you and them the weed is thick and covering the surface out for some 20 feet. If it is too deep to wade a long rod of some 13ft or more is a great asset as it will enable you to hold the line clear of the floating weed, this allows the float to trot down without line drag. The long rod can facilitate legering too as the line can be kept clear of the weed more easily.

A further advantage of the long rod comes when playing a fish in such a situation. You cannot keep a fish out of weed that stretches 20ft out from the bank with a 13ft rod, but you can avoid more of it than with a shorter tool and possibly have more control over the fish.

If you leger upstream the majority of bites are slack-liners; a long rod will pick up the slack better and offer more chance of striking home the hook.

One may require a shorter (say 10ft) rod of considerable power to fish where snags abound; I don't think I need to elaborate on that one.

A short rod may be a more practical tool in small rivers and streams and where trees and foliage make long rods



taboo – it may be an advantage too where particular swims are under one's feet; undercut banks, deep fast swims alongside piling and the like. There is not always room to sit well back from the bank or angle one's rod downstream to shorten it, so we need the short rod.

Then there is the soft rod. It may be that the barbel are heavily fished, small baits are required and consequently fine tackle is the only answer to catching the brutes. Powerful rods will only result in breakages while using fine line. A soft action rod will absorb shocks better and give more to the fish should you be

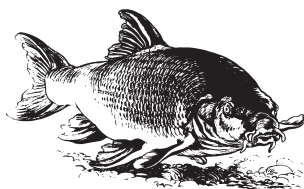
a bit slow in giving it its head.

And there's another reason for the soft rod – just for the hell of it – to have a rod that really bends to a hard fighting fish. That's my scene! A soft rod, centrepin reel and a big barbel. Man, that's living! The centrepin reel is my personal choice for float fishing but any good fixed-spool reel will do the job well enough.

For legering the fixed-spool reel is far more versatile than a centrepin, although I occasionally use a centrepin for legering it is only where swims are reasonably close, or in small rivers. For free-lining baits the fixed spool reel has opened up a new simplicity of fishing. Before such reels any free-lining done meant yards of loose line, hand controlled when fishing upstream. Not on when windy!

One of the most important

aspects of barbel fishing is location. In fact, it's the number one priority; for you cannot catch 'em if they aren't there, can you? Certainly ideas as to what constitutes a barbel swim have changed in recent years and many barbel,



and big ones too, have been taken from slow moving swims or almost slack water.

I remember several years ago catching barbel in a dead slack bit of water on the Thames upstream of Chertsey Weir. As they were rebuilding the weir at the time and making a lot of noise with piledrivers and such, I considered the fish had moved away from the fast water above the gates and apron

because of the disturbance. Thinking about it though, they could have moved upriver a bit and still had a reasonable current, so it is possible the barbel always hung about this particular slack for reasons of their own.

Fishing the slacks on the Royalty became a profitable occupation when heavy baiting with maggots was allowed, the reason there was obvious however; the fish used to come into the slacks to clear up maggots that had been accidentally deposited while the anglers were fishing the faster currents. When this was observed, thinking anglers baited the slacks deliberately and some heavy bags of fish resulted. Mostly one had to wait until late evening to reap this harvest, but not always. The late evening fishing would point to a possibility that barbel had always entered adjacent slacks at twilight to feed, and fed in them when they

considered them to be safe areas during the hours of darkness. This appears to be borne out by catches on the Thames generally where anglers fishing at night have taken good barbel from slow areas and slacks, where barbel are rarely or never taken during the day

Barbel, being a shoal fish, can be concentrated in a very small area and this is where exact location of the fish is so very important. It is less important on a large river like the Thames, where a shoal of fish might move about an area to feed, but on smaller rivers like the Kennet, Stour or Avon, I have consistently found barbel in the same few yards of water year after year. A cast of two or three yards too far upstream or two or three yards too far downstream and no bites are forthcoming.

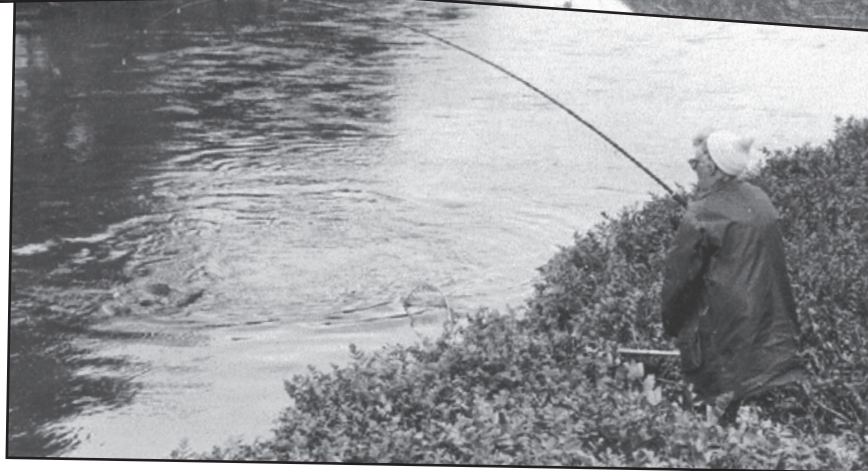
Naturally some conditions will move them. Heavy flooding will on occasion create a barbel swim where

they are not usually caught. The edge of the current beside an eddy caused by the flood can produce barbel for a few days, even in cold winter weather, and slacks will then give a chance of a fish.

Failing observation, either surface indication or

location by polarized glasses, one can only use one's ability to read the water, remembering barbel like strong flows and gravels. Undercut banks, weirs, where rivers narrow, strong currents between surface weeds, fallen trees, weed rafts, shallows and all the places where you think the current is too strong for fish to be.

Should you find a good barbel that's unknown, it might be as well to keep it to



Above: Kay Stewart doing her stuff

Top-right: No longer pics like this now we don't use keepnets. I don't even own one now.

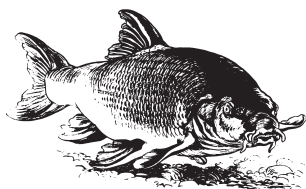


yourself, or only share its whereabouts with close friends – you might never get the chance to fish for it again otherwise!

I think barbel will eat anything. The list of baits that will catch them is as long as your arm but, as with other species, some baits are better than others, some are better in certain rivers and in some places it is difficult to get the fish to take a bait at all.

When I was a lad the few who fished for barbel legered large lumps of paste and lobworms. Mention has already been made of the favourite of the Royalty, bread and bran. My first visits to that fishery were with the advice that worms were never taken but gentles occasionally caught fish – I'd like as many pounds in my pocket as I've caught Royalty barbel on worms.

Cheese came into fashion for a while and fish were reported from several rivers that succumbed to various ways of presenting it in pastes, cubes, mixed with bread - and so on. Have you ever caught barbel on



silkweed? I've had them from Sunbury Weir and a friend had some good fish from Shepperton Weir years back. At Throop hempseed accounted for many barbel, including some monster fish in the 13lb bracket if memory serves me right. The old hempseed fishermen of the tidal Thames knew that hemp caught barbel, and soon after the Belgians introduced it during the first World War they were catching barbel at Petersham Meadows on the seed. It brings barbel to the rod of some of my friends regularly on the Thames and

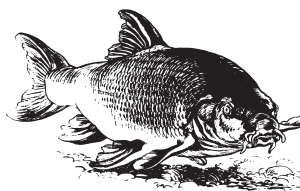
is a killing bait. It is a bait that can be introduced in quantity, what is now referred to as particle, multiple or quantitative baits.

With the success that quantities of small food items used as hookbait and feed has had by modern carp fishers, I feel that several of these baits will be used with equal success for barbel fishing in the near future – perhaps already by some thinking angler. The most popular quantitative bait of all is the maggot, combined with the methods popularised over the last decade (baitdropper and swimfeeder) have produced so many good catches of barbel, especially the swimfeeder, that some matchmen have tried to have the 'block-end' banned.

'New' thoughts on baits for barbel includes the trying of meat or meat based baits. As time passes quickly by, it is not so long ago that sausages and sausage meat became **the** bait to use for barbel. Beef sausages dropped in boiling water for a few seconds was the thing. I believe Peter Stone got in first on that one and popularized 'banger' fishing, even it wasn't his idea. It may have been his idea, he's capable of it, the rotter! Present day meat-based baits are luncheon meats of varying types, and some of the boys are now trying canned dog and cat food mixtures. So far as carp are concerned meat-based baits could fairly be described as new thinking, but although they have become "newly" popular over the last 10 years, it isn't strictly true to describe them as new to barbel fishing. Francis Francis wrote of meat baits well over a hundred years ago, and stated that he had known, "Many fine barbel taken with a bit of fat bacon, and raw beef or mutton is often taken greedily." He then suggests groundbaiting with bacon or chopped beef.

Personally I cringe at the thought of chopping up a nice piece of fillet steak into barbel baits, but for those of you who wish to try.....

'Specials' the high protein baits used for carp fishing that were the subject of controversy in 'Angling' are now being used for barbel I'm told. We shall have to see if they prove worth the cost and effort when there are so many



other baits that barbel take.

Barbel are caught on small fish occasionally and early in the season will take minnows quite well, and spinners! Loach, bullheads and doubtless crayfish will catch them.

I have contrasted barbel with carp in this article and in some ways they have similar habits and feed in similar fashion. They will dig out food as will carp and will even lift stones to get at food underneath. This would explain their liking for loach and bullheads. It is a habit that can help one locate barbel, for feeding barbel make many of the clean gravel patches that you see in deepish water.

Feeding barbel can give one the most fantastic bites. The rod will bend double as the fish takes and, if the clutch is tight, pull the rod out of the rests. Barbel often pick up a bait and turn downstream with it, and it is this moving off downstream that gives the big bite. Another common bite is the 'trembles'. Here I think the fish has picked up the bait and is chewing it on the spot, and it is the chewing that causes the trembling. Hit them fast or the fish may feel the hook and spit the lot out, or chew the bait off the hook if it's soft.

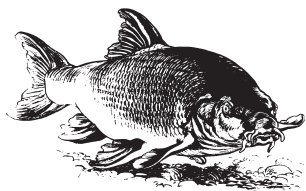
Where fish are caught regularly and are shy, bites may be difficult. It is no use waiting for the big bite. You must hit every little knock; hold the rod, and if anything feels strange – strike it. I like to have my rod angling skywards to create a 90 degrees angle between rod tip and line. With this angle the fish can pull the tip down more and give a bigger more hittable bite because it feels less resistance at first than with the rod more in line with the bait.

When fishing with swimfeeders I will fish a very short link at times as barbel come right up to the feeder. They have been known to mouth it! Before the feeder, maggots were placed in a paper sweet bag along with a stone and cast in to the swim. When the bag came apart at the seams, out came the maggots! It also put a lot of rubbish into the rivers! The chap who invented the block-end deserves a medal. He must have given enjoyment to thousands of anglers who wouldn't have caught so many fish without it.

In low clear water a fun way to catch barbel is to freeline a bait to them. A knob of cheese paste, a lobworm, a piece of luncheon meat anything heavy enough to cast, is thrown upstream of the fish from below and allowed to trundle back towards the angler. It will come down through weeds and get down on the bottom of shallows quickly enough. With nowt on the line bar a hook, the fight feels fantastic.

I have barely mentioned trotting for barbel, also a very enjoyable way of catching them, but perhaps I should because although trotting hasn't altered much in technique over the years, there are one or two ways to overcome the shyness of fish in well flogged swims. One way is to fish a very fine hook

link, but there are times when even a float going down a shallow swim appears to make them uneasy, and the shoal will part to let the tackle through and the bait untouched, although they will readily feed on loose offerings. A bubble float overcomes this fear and although difficult to see, there is no mistake when a barbel takes the bait. Barbel bites



may be finicky at times on a leger, but they are always positive enough on float tackle – once they've made up their minds to accept the bait.

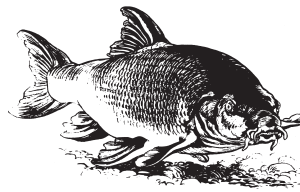
One must realize too that when trotting normally it isn't possible to fish a swim at an accurate depth unless the swim is a short one. Depth will vary through a swim, and

as one must fish the bottom, or better, drag the bottom, one must adjust depth so that the bait is on the bottom at the deepest part, or at least make sure that the bait is on the bottom in that part of the swim where the shoal is.

I suppose the newest innovation over the last few years when trotting small baits that are used also as groundbait, is the baitdropper. This gets quantities of bait down to the fish in the swim, rather than loose feeding with which much bait may be wasted. I had this hammered home to me once when loose feeding some maggots to barbel. Dace were boiling up for the maggots but I thought plenty were getting down to the barbel, but I wasn't catching any. I started putting in maggots with a dropper and immediately started getting barbel. I suppose clayball fishing was an original baitdropper method!

A final thought on float

fishing for shy barbel. Where one can wade out to fish a shoal, or the swim is close to the bank, a form of stretpugging can be



successful. A large, heavily shotted float (I really do mean heavily shotted with enough lead to hold the bait down in a current), is slowly led down in the flow with a long, fine, hook link of four or five feet. The bait arrives before the tackle and is often accepted without hesitation by very shy fish.

Fishing for barbel has become increasingly popular, as has carp fishing for reasons of availability. There is no doubt barbel are on the increase. In the Thames – even the tidal reaches, they are coming back in quantity.

The night fishing ban being lifted has made Thames fishing for them easier where fewer fish were previously caught. They are spreading fast up in the Hampshire Avon, they are increasing in the Dorset Stour up to Longham and there are a few upstream of that. The Severn barbel fishing is already famous, although of only comparatively recent introduction. Yorkshire rivers have always been known for barbel, and one hopes that even on the 'trout only' stretches where barbel abound, fishing for them will eventually be allowed, at least after the trout fishing season has ceased.

Such a hard fighting, powerful fish as the barbel will always have a claim to fame, and provide new problems for the thinking angler.

Dave Steuart