

**So Ray, how did you get started?**

As a kid, I'm talking about the late sixties, my dad used to take me to Hampstead Ponds and Regents Canal fishing for roach, perch, anything like that, no barbel of course. It didn't really start until one of my friend's uncle, John Eades, took me down to the Royalty fishing. I did see some barbel caught but I didn't catch anything, but you knew that the record barbel would come from there.

At the time I used to go Youth Hostelling, I'd get my pushbike and ride from London down to Christchurch, stopping at various Youth Hostels on the way down, then stay in Burley in New Forest and go fishing from there. Once I even stayed in Swanage and cycled across to the Royalty from there.

My first barbel came from the carpark area. I didn't realise that all the best swims were upstream, I just used to fish where it looked good. I was actually using two rods and caught a barbel of about a pound and a half that ran around the other rod, I remember the bailiff Ken Keynes, came out and gave me a bollocking for using two rods. Then soon after I had a second one of about six pounds and the addiction began. I got my first car in the early seventies, a minivan and



An 18lb 13oz

# An interview with . . . Ray Walton

**As one of our best known barbel anglers, former record holder Ray Walton has been making headlines for more than two decades now. He has put the rolling meat method well and truly on the map and has even designed rods and reels specific for the purpose. On a wet and windy January evening I met Ray just a stone's throw from his beloved Royalty Fishery, at the Royalty Arms in Christchurch, where we chatted over a pint about his fishing.**

then a mini moke and I came down to the Royalty whenever I could.

***You've obviously caught other species, have you ever specialised in them?***

No, if I catch another species it's by accident, unless I spot a chub or something, I do go for chub. I've had pike to 22.10, bream, carp; I've had one tench, eels of course, salmon, and sea trout, all on meat, all whilst fishing for barbel.

***When did this preoccupation with meat and the roving approach come about?***

It all came about by accident. Back in the early days when I

was a novice, I used to carry three rods, one a float rod, one a feeder and a rod rigged with a rolling bullet, not for rolling, it was just the lead I used at the time. I used to just fish the bottom end of the fishery because it was cheaper but one day I was on the top section and a guy was coming back at midday and he said that he'd caught three barbel from the top end. He didn't tell me where he'd caught them so I went up to the weir and started trotting my way back down with maggots.

I started getting what I thought were dace bites but I just couldn't hit them, so I moved opposite where the bites were coming from and fished with the feeder rod. The thing was, I didn't put enough weight on the feeder and it was moving but I was still getting those dace bites. So I put more lead on but it still moved, just more slowly, and I started hitting the bites and they were from barbel. It was August Bank Holiday weekend and from that swim over the Friday, Saturday and Sunday I had 46 barbel on the rolling maggot feeder including 16 in one day.

I used maggots at that time and I would catapult a load of

maggots in, which would get the chub feeding up in the water, then I'd put the feeder beneath them to catch the barbel. Then I became a vegetarian and I changed my life. I decided not to use anything that was alive, in fact when I was fishing with people who were using the maggot feeder, when they were filling up the feeder they were letting loads of the maggots fall into the water and I'd go around picking them out, likewise with my mates when they were using worms, I'd pinch them and let them go.

***You just got a conscience about it?***

Yes, I did contemplate using other baits like sweetcorn and bread but in the end I didn't get the results I was getting with maggots or luncheon meat so I reverted back to the meat but that is the limit that I stayed at.

***There's probably not enough meat in a tin of luncheon meat to upset a vegetarian anyway.***

I was never quite as successful again, I never had 16 fish in a day, well only once from Watersmeet, all on meat, but I was content with having two or three fish in a session. It was just like fishing the feeder, I just kept adding or removing shot to make it go through the swim slowly and there were places like Greenbanks where you could catch half a dozen fish from the same spot over an hour to an hour and a half.

***Do you think that the fish got harder to catch when more people were using the rolling method?***

It did but not for some time. I never kept it a secret, a lot of people saw me fishing and they did the same. We used to fish leapfrog sometimes; three or four of us would fish down the river overlapping the person in front as you went. My catch rate for 1983 to about 88 was always about 200 odd fish a season, it was the same for the people that I fished with, we all had about the same number of fish and that went on for about five or six years.

***To what do you attribute the lower catch rates nowadays, are there less fish or are they just harder to catch?***

Things have happened on the Royalty, I've seen quite a few pollutions, there's been chlorine pollution, I've seen the turbines break and dish out PCB's all the way through the river plus the fact that there's something going into the river at the moment but we're doing something about that. Its been going on for 15 years, I've even paid for samples to be tested but they 'lost' them, its hard to get the EA to do anything about it. We had 1500 fish killed recently in The Parlour, only small fish but there was a load of dead fish seen down in the harbour a couple of years ago, they were thought to have

been dogfish but it's possible that they could have been barbel.

There's definitely been a decline in the four to five pound fish, the fish that used to be the commonest size fish that were caught. 1500 were stocked a while back but they were only small and we've got a lot of pike and of course, cormorants, so the survival rate wouldn't have been that great.

When I used to fish it I was lucky to get more than one or two doubles in a season, the maximum I ever got was 322 fish one season of which five were doubles and two of them were recaptures. I did have a break from the Royalty and when I came back a couple of years ago I hit seven fish and four were doubles. Now that is an amazing change, I wasn't doing anything different.



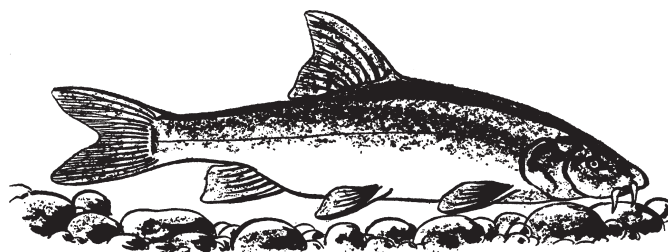
***So, where do you fish nowadays?***

You might think that I chase big fish, I don't, I just like to fish places where there are big fish, it's just a natural progression from catching all those large numbers of smaller fish to going after the bigger specimens. I don't feel I have to catch the huge numbers now and if your life revolves around barbel they are your ultimate goal.

I fish the Gt. Ouse, the Kennet, the Teme last year, I've fished the Wye, but mainly the Ouse or the Royalty with the odd day down the Dorset Stour and maybe Fishers Green on the River Lea.

***How did you make the progression to the bigger fish?***

At the time I was quite content still fishing the Royalty but I wasn't getting



***"I had five fish in the week, a nine, an eleven, two twelve's and the thirteen"***

any big fish, in fact in six years and over 1200 fish I only had 11 doubles to 11.3. My mates left the Royalty and started fishing the Bristol Avon where fish of 13 pounds and one of 14 pounds, were being caught. I just wanted to go along and see one of the big ones. Then I got banned from the Royalty, I was actually caught fishing after dark, it was only half an hour but it upset someone, so I got banned for a year. So I went to the Bristol Avon and got a brace of 13.1 and 12.6. It was quite funny because my mates took me down there, they all rushed out of the car and grabbed the best swims and left me in the crap one. But I had five fish in the week, a nine, an eleven, two twelve's and the thirteen; the funny thing was that none of my mates had caught the big ones before.

***Then of course, you went on to the Ouse.***

I went to the Ouse to cover it for a feature in Coarse Angling Answers magazine, I was doing a piece on Milton Keynes Angling Club, you know, take a few pictures of the water, find out the cost of ticket, that sort of thing. So I just went to have a look. It had been producing twelve and thirteen pounders, there had been features done on it already and I have to say that I thought that Adams Mill was a red herring, simply because when I got there, no one was

fishing it. Even when I went up there a few times after I never saw anybody there.

When I started fishing the Ouse and looking for the big fish, I actually started fishing downstream on the Newport Pagnell water down below the Shell Garage, thinking that it was the place. I fished there for two years and had nine fish. Even Andy Little fished that area because he thought it was the place.

Then one day I was at Adams Mill and I bumped into Stef Horak, I told him I thought it was a red herring but he took me to the bridge and showed me ten barbel, then I knew it was the place. But it still took me another two years to catch my first fish from there.

***What size was your first fish?***

It was The Pope and it was accidental. Normally I fished above the bailey bridge up to the weir, it looked good but I'd never had a fish from it. There was another bloke fishing a deep hole downstream and he was packing up, I fancied a go there but didn't want to rush to the swim so I had a chuck in another swim on the way down, it was a ridiculous spot to fish, only about a foot and a half deep. I rolled it down and was looking at this bloke, waiting for him to move, when the rod just went whack! It's probably the best bite I've ever had on the rolling bait. When I got it in it

was 15.5.

When I caught the Pope which incidentally wasn't called the Pope then, it was just a big fish with a distinctive spot on its cheek, the first person I rang to tell about it was Steve Pope.

***If you were to catch that fish again today it would almost certainly be the record.***

If it's still alive, it's possible it may not be as it hasn't been caught for two years.

***I thought it was the Pope that was spotted in the summer and it looked to be over twenty pounds.***

It could be but you can't prove it's the Pope, but it is certainly a big fish, when you've got a marker fish like The Traveller that's come out at 19. 2 then this one looks to be about 21.

Looking back at Steve Curtin's record fish Red Belly, which was the second fish I caught at 14. 11, The Pope at that time was always a pound to a pound and a half heavier than Red Belly, so when Red Belly came out at 19. 6 in October, then The Pope at that time would have been around 21 maybe 22 - in theory.

There is a very big fish there but until you get them out you can't say for sure what they weigh, it could be a younger fish that's just long. There are some very long fish in the Ouse, 30 - 33 inches, but until you see the whole body you don't really know for sure. I believe that barbel reach full skeletal growth at about 12 to 13 years of age and if you get a younger fish that's 33 inches long it might weigh 10 pounds but a twenty year old fish could have filled out to 20 pounds.

What we then started to find was the fluctuations in weight are much greater on these Ouse fish than any others. I had mine at 15. 5 in December time, then Guy Robb had it at 15.12 not long

after. When it got caught the next summer it was down to 13 plus again.

These fish will put on 2 - 2 ½ lb in autumn/winter then drop back, but always hold on to about a pound or so of the weight and just keep going up and up, so you can see the potential.

Until we started getting these fish people didn't really know that barbel put weight on in the winter, it was generally accepted that they formed the spawn from their own body weight.



***But the Ouse is the place with the great potential for the record which, of course, you broke.***

Yes, I broke the record, that fish came out to Dave Currell and Martin Bowler at about 16.11, then again in at 17.3 to Kevin Newton all during the winter and from Adams Mill. I knew that if it was caught near the end of the season it would have put on a few more ounces.

I went down there on March 3rd and had the fishery to myself until Ray House and Pete Frost came down. It was torrential rain and I was sat in my car drying out, they asked where I was going to fish but I told them they could fish where they liked. Pete went to the hole and Ray onto the bend further down, I went into what they now call the Snag Swim. On the second chuck down I had that fish. I played it like a nine pounder, I didn't know how big it was until it was in the net and I could see that it was The Pope.

It was actually 17. 5 when we weighed it on the bank. It should have been 17. 6 as the scales were shown to be weighing an ounce light. But, and I don't know if you realised this, when you go to Weights and Measures, they

add weights to your scales right up to the 32lb then deduct them right back to zero. My scales were shown to be 1oz light going up but with all that weight on there, the spring gets stretched and they appeared to be reading an ounce heavy on the way down. So they deducted 2oz from the weight and made it 17. 4.

***Where do you go from there? Having climbed your Everest do you look for harder ways to do it? What is your motivation after getting the record?***

A lot of people said 'well that's it' even Guy said he didn't think the size would get any higher, but these fish looked quite young, they were in such good condition, I put an age of about 17 to 18 on them five years ago and if you consider that they can live to about 25 or 30 or maybe more, this was all new ground.

As I said, these fish have a potential to grow by one to one and a half pounds a year and there's half a dozen or so potential record breakers, so if one of the big ones doesn't get caught for a year, one of the others will come through and take the record and that's exactly what's happening. The last 4 record fish have all been different fish, you've had Stumpy, Red Belly, The Pope and one other that I can't identify.

***Of course there are other fish coming through that will take their places when they've died.***

Yes that's right.

***What do you think is the potential, how high can the record go?***

Unknown, we just don't know, that's why we have to keep coming back and keep catching them, to see where it can go.

***You've always adopted a very methodical and scientific approach to your fishing.***

That came about when I was catching all those fish on the Royalty, an angler said to me "They're recaptures". My first defensive move was to say that they weren't because it's embarrassing, but that is when I started to get into it and I logged each fish and I realised that the guy was absolutely right.

***I found a new shoal earlier this season and of course you never know quite how many fish are out there. I found that by the time I'd caught twenty fish over a few sessions, I was starting to get recaptures, probably two out of three being recaptured.***

That's right and the average angler wouldn't spot that and at the time I was an average angler. I soon found that I was catching the same the fish two or three times in a session, that's on the roving method. You'd catch one up at the weir or in the Trammels then by the time you've walked an hour downstream the fish is there feeding in another swim.

***What's the most times you've caught the same fish in one day.***

Three. Then another double three times in 24 hours in different swims a mile apart.

***And you continue with the scientific approach to this day?***

That's right; I've caught two fish on the Royalty that I've recognised, twenty years later. I've tracked Tref West's fish 'Beau' right back to when John Wilson and John Bailey caught it. At about 10lb in 1978 it must have been about twelve years old so when Tref was catching it in the mid nineties, that fish must have been around 30 years old.

In 1984 I had a fish at 4lb from the Royalty that looked like it was going to die, it was





very dark, it only had half a dorsal fin and was blind in one eye. I had it again two years later at seven plus, the whole shape of the fish had changed, its body was immaculate but it still had the identifying features of the blind eye and half dorsal fin. I caught it again when returning to the Royalty Parlour two years ago at 10.10. So it shows that although it had seemingly been an ill fish, very thin and that, it had recovered and went on to make 11lb plus.



I wouldn't do it now, but I used to take scales from the fish and send them to an angler, who claimed to be the top scale reader at the time. I sent him some scales from a very deformed fish with a crooked spine and he sent me back a letter saying that they came from a very healthy fish

with terrific growth potential, since then I haven't believed a word that anybody says from scale reading, I don't believe that it's a true science.

Even some NRA/E.A. blokes were reading the scales back to front. They must have been taught from books or something but they got it wrong. Basically, when a scale grows it's got a base plate and when it gets bigger it grows another layer underneath it to cover the exposed bit of skin, so each layer will be wider at the bottom and the scale will take the form of a sort of pyramid. But when I spoke to the E.A. they said that the newest layer of scale was the smallest centre ring and that's how they count how old it is, I believe that the newest layer is the bottom one.

You can only really read them up to about twelve years anyway and that relates to skeletal growth.

*Don't you feel that we*

*anglers have a wealth of scientific knowledge that just needs to be pooled so that it can be used to benefit each other? After all, what reason is there for scientists to study freshwater fish? They have no food potential.*

That's right, they only seem to know what they've read in books before, and being on the bank you can learn a lot more. That's why we set up the Barbel Study Group to research the barbel on the River Lea. That ended up with a scientific paper being produced, but now we need another project and that's why I set up the Barbel Specialists Group.

*The Barbel Specialist Group is really a Great Ouse boys club isn't it?*

Well it wasn't set up like that, we wanted a research group and to get biologists involved. There was a really bad press about the big fish being caught which upset me, the big fish that were being

caught were being discredited when there's a lot to learn by keeping records of the captures, if you don't go fishing for them you won't know how big they grow, so I tried to recruit the guys that would help me including top anglers that could catch the fish and do the research

I think in the early days there was a lot of bad press from people that didn't know the water. They were saying that it was just one fish we were after when there are at least six potential record breakers. They said that the river was just a ditch, which it may be in parts during the summer, but it gets much wider down the bottom end. They said that the fish were stuck in a small length of water but there's plenty of room for them to go. Of course the guys that were fishing it kept a lot of the information to themselves so no one outside the group knew all the facts. I didn't mind them discrediting the





anglers but I did object to them discrediting the fish.

*I think that now some of the early fish have died and the back up fish are coming through, when one of those reaches 17 or 18lbs some of those that criticised the fish in the early days will change their minds. Indeed, I see it as being the Redmire of the 21st Century and should be treasured.*

One difference between the Ouse and Redmire is that some of the anglers that fished the Ouse would never have got the chance to have fished Redmire in that some of them had never even caught a barbel. We are talking valuable fish here, not in a monetary sense but from a research point of view. There were instances such as when an angler caught a big fish then left it on the bank to go back to the car to get the camera and scales!

There were some things happening that would blow your mind, fish died through mishandling, kids were fishing it without any idea of how to handle the fish, but all that is under control now that it's no longer an open water, everything is going much better. We look after the fish as well as we can for example, if it's hot and very low oxygen/water conditions and the fish are likely to suffer as a result, we close the water, it's as simple as that.

These fish are very precious, if you catch one it changes your life. Some people have said that they don't want to catch them but believe me, when you do it changes you from being an average sort of angler onto a different level, they're just such special fish.

*So what does the future hold for Ray Walton?*

I'm content with fishing the

Royalty or anywhere, I just fish for bites. I still like to fish the Ouse and will continue until the potential has been reached, I'm more selective about when I go but I'm still interested that we learn more and that we continue with the research.

*And what do you see for the future of barbel and barbel angling?*

Well there's obviously going to be more pressure on the fish, this may make them harder to catch in some areas like it seems to have already. More rivers are being stocked with barbel and the EA and Calverton may be responsible in part for the bigger fish we are seeing now. They breed fish in 'A' class water, it's the first two years of a fish's life that are the most important and they grow at twice the rate in captivity, so maybe the fish that Calverton are stocking are the ones that are

growing to the big sizes.

It may be just a cyclic thing. Fifty years ago there were some really big fish on the Royalty but they weren't caught by coarse anglers at maximum weight, but then there weren't the anglers or the tackle that we've got now, so yes, it may just be a cycle, something that happens every 50 years or so, I'll just enjoy it whilst I can.

*Ray, thank you.*

**Dave Burr**



**For anybody wishing to learn more about Ray's rolling technique, he offers tuition on a one to one basis. For more information he can be contacted on 01202 269035 or on [rollingpinboy@aol.com](mailto:rollingpinboy@aol.com).**

