

Early Days on the Lea

An extract from Fred Crouch's new book

Fred's new book, *Skies of Fire Rivers of Gold*, is currently available but selling out rapidly – Fred has kindly agreed to this extract from one of the chapters being shared with *Barbel Fisher* readers.

As we went back across Kings Weir I glanced down into the huge pool. The water foamed as it cascaded through the hatches and was sent crashing in all directions over the part concrete part timber apron. It had a particular aroma that is there to this day. The noise was substantial with no part of the surface totally still and calm. I had crossed the walkway many times before but never given it a second glance. This time however it was strangely different. I was transfixed and soon realised why.

I'm not sure how long I

'PLEASE DO NOT ASK TO FISH THE WEIR POOL AS REFUSAL CAN OFFEND.' I never could resist a challenge and as I could see a man pottering around in the garden I put down my tackle, lifted the latch on the gate and went in.

The chap looked up and at the same time I spotted a fearsome looking Alsatian that stared at me and started barking. I stood perfectly still. The man called out a couple of calming words to the dog and its bark quietened to a low but just as frightening growl. I offered my sincere apologies, first to the dog and then to its owner. You have to get your priorities right.

I hadn't a clue what to say as he waited for me to speak. I told him about the barbel I had caught from the little sluice pool. He wasn't impressed; in fact he wasn't

the pool, not for anybody. His tone left no room for doubt so with a nod I left.

It was a long walk back and as I reached the car I was met by a torrent of abuse from the others. I really didn't appreciate how long I had been and was glad I was the car owner otherwise I'd have found myself walking home.

I sat indoors with a cup of tea but couldn't get that barbel out of my mind. A friend had given me a little book called 'The Observers Book of Freshwater Fishes of

the barbel. My heart was fluttering when I read of their potential size but it nearly stopped when I came across these words. 'In angling for this fish the area chosen, say, a deep hole or weir pool, should be well "ground baited."

At once my thoughts flashed back to the tiny weir and then to the much larger one. In my naivety I concluded that if the barbel in the small weir grew to three pounds the main weir must be home to monsters, if of course there were any there at all. There was only one way to find out. The following day, I was back at the weir keeper's house.

The procedure reflected that of a day earlier. The gate latch clicked, the dog barked until it was called to order and I walked in. I was now on a mission and had never been a quitter. I had already decided that a little bit of flannel was to be the order of the day. I assured my adversary that I just happened to be passing by as I made my way to see a mate along the canal. I convinced

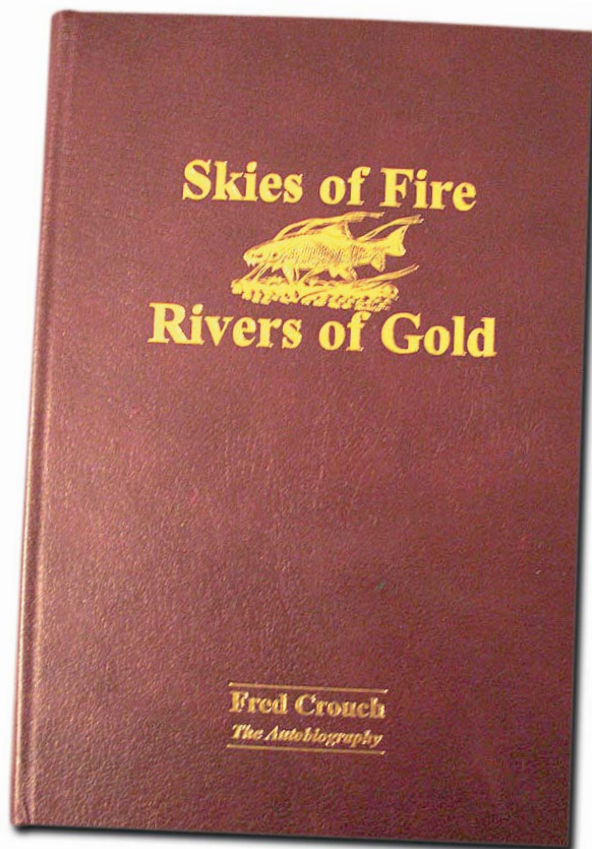
"His reaction was to turn his attention back to the gardening and remind me that there was no fishing in the pool, not for anybody. His tone left no room for doubt so with a nod I left"

stood gazing at the pool but I pulled myself together and continued walking. I got no further than the house that stood on the bank. The first thing that caught my attention was a large, hand painted board that was screwed to the wall beside the front door. It read,

in the least bit interested. I struggled to put some more words together but all I could come out with was a pathetic reference to the weirpool and the fish in it. His reaction was to turn his attention back to the gardening and remind me that there was no fishing in

the British Isles.' I had looked through it many times and although I had seen the picture of barbel I had never read the text simply because I never thought I would ever encounter one.

Flicking through the leaves I came to page 98 and





him that I really wanted a little advice on gardening. I wanted to know why his runner beans were so profuse while my dads were failing miserably. Thus started a question and answer session that I had to appear sincerely engaged in though truth was it meant nothing to me.

I could have got a job at Kew Gardens by the time the flow of advice finally came to

pals had been allowed the privilege of fishing the pool. They had repaid his kindness by fishing into darkness and then trampling down the plants he had spent endless hours nurturing.

I now faced a dilemma. How could I agree with his decision to ban the culprits and then ask, with any sort of confidence, permission to fish?

I decided there and then

looking elsewhere- I thought it essential to have an indicator. The only method I had ever used was to pinch a small piece of dough onto the line that would hang just below the rod top. This worked fine in still water but probably not in the swirling waters of the pool. I recalled hearing about the idea of suspending an indicator from the rod tip. It became known as a swing tip but at

Wormley and Kings Weir.

Plainly suffering from some form of dementia I parked up started out on the half a mile walk surrounded by the blackness of the night. The only sound I could hear was my heart thumping as it leapt around my chest cavity. Before long another noise, distant and barely audible, filtered through the still air. It was the water spilling into the pool, increasing in volume as I approached.

It was drawing me, blinkered and virtually uncontrollably, like a mariner to a siren. The vision of a flashing fighting barbel filled my mind. I reached the bridge that crosses the canal. Peering into the gloom I could just make out the desolate silhouette of the keeper's house. I couldn't believe what I was doing. It was still at least an hour and a half before daybreak and I was beginning to feel more like a burglar than an angler.

Doubt and self-criticism started to unsettle me. I had come so far since the capture of that first little barbel and I feared that I may blow away all of my hopes and aspirations in a single, foolhardy act of impatience.

Even that alarming thought wasn't powerful enough to stop me as I began to tread carefully towards my goal. The gravel path crunched noisily with every step as, still on autopilot, I reached the garden gate. I have to emphasise that there wasn't a light to be seen of any description and I didn't have a torch. Mad? Of course I was mad.

I was on the point of easing the gate latch when a sudden thought filled me with dread. I had been so thorough but had absolutely overlooked one vital thing. Where was the dog? I froze whenever I saw it in the daytime and the idea that it may be loose in the dark was chilling. That should have been enough to send me

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a stop. I commented on his wonderful displays of both flowers and vegetables and slipped in a little feeler asking if he was an angler. He told me he fished in the pool occasionally but the garden always came first. I fought hard against the almost irresistible desire to ask more about the pool but I instinctively knew the time wasn't right so with a handshake and a word of thanks I left him to his horticultural pleasures. As I drove home my gut feeling told me that my desire was on its way to being fulfilled.

I allowed a few more days to pass before calling on the weirkeeper again. I wasn't a great dog lover especially when they are big or fierce. The hound from hell on duty at the weir was both of those things but one way or another I was going to have to endear myself to it. There was no choice as it and its master were clearly inseparable. My first task of making good friends of both was to take some time.

After three or four more visits I finally learnt the reason for his reluctance to allow anybody to fish from his garden. I also learned that his name was Arthur Newton. His voice trembled with emotion as he explained how people he considered

to come clean. I pleaded to have just a few hours, I would pay whatever he wanted to charge and I wouldn't put a foot anywhere his plants. He shook his head and my heart sunk.

“I don't want your money,” he said firmly, “I just don't want my garden walked over.” I nearly ran round the vegetable patch in excitement. I knew there and then I had cracked it.

“You can have one go but if I see any of my plants trodden down, that will be that.” His words were music to my ears and I could hardly contain myself as I asked him if there were any barbel in the pool. He assured me there were plenty and that only left the question of when I could have my day. That didn't matter to him so I arranged to go the following Saturday at a time to suit me.

I had just a couple of days to knock my pathetic tackle into shape. I bought some new line but everything else would have to suffice with a check over. Because of the austerity of my beginnings buying new fishing tackle seemed perverse and to this day I have had a problem spending money on it.

As I had never seen a barbel bite - the only one I had took the bait while I was

the time it certainly wasn't in popular use. I made one from a knitting needle, the hinge sections of a couple of safety pins for line guides and some fine thread.

With my gear as good as it would ever be I only had to decide on bait. It had become standard practice with me to take a large bag of crumb whenever and wherever I fished. I had easy access to any amount I wanted from Prices the Bakers where I spent so many happy times as a child. I decided to use cheese paste for hook bait only because most written advice recommended it. By early on Friday evening I was ready to go.

I went to bed but was up again within the hour as it became clear that sleep was impossible. Unbelievable excitement was stirring my psyche. The only people I feel comfortable saying that to are other anglers. It is one of those sensations that non-anglers may never understand.

At a loss to know what to do I lay back in an armchair and put my feet up but still couldn't rest. I realised my judgement had finally deserted me when at least two hours before dawn I found myself at the wheel of the car heading towards



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scurrying back to the car until dawn but the inner force that was driving me refused to negotiate with my brain.

I pushed on, my mind and my body totally ignoring the advantage of teamwork. Perhaps, like the proverbial cat, I believed I was blessed with nine lives but whatever part of my grey matter had evolved to organise my self-preservation it was clearly a lacking a vast number of cells.

So, in the full knowledge that my dreams dangled on a thread, either from scaring the life out of the Newton household or being eaten by a bear-sized Alsatian I still found it impossible to turn back. I felt like a prisoner given the offer of freedom but having to run past a firing squad to get it.

I gently eased the catch and pushed the gate open. It was difficult to know which were clenched hardest my teeth or my buttocks but with them both under full compression I took my first tentative steps into the garden. I listened for any warning sounds but heard only the water pounding into the pool. With a number of shadowy areas quite capable of offering effective cover for the largest of dogs I squinted into the inky void as I inched my way towards the water.

By the time I reached the bank I realised that the noise made by the crashing water would screen out the sound of a pouncing dog so the worst I could suffer would be a sudden fatal bite into the back of my neck as it leapt and sunk its teeth in. Well at least it would be quick.

When I finally settled down on a large poolside rock I took several large gulps of air to help defibrillate my heart. Once I had regained full composure I gave myself the severe reprimand that my folly deserved. I could so easily have blown it all. Folly was hardly a strong enough word

but all was soon forgotten as I absorbed the exhilarating ambience of the tumbling, swirling waters that stretched out before me.

I turned my eyes to the house that was still totally unlit. As I sat, handicapped by the darkness I became even more confused. Why had I just put myself through that? I couldn't even tackle up before dawn broke let alone cast a bait into the shifting, foaming maelstrom.

With sunrise still some way off I stared at the rushing water and let my mind have some freedom. I was almost overwhelmed by excitement as mental pictures formed countless imaginary scenarios. In my thoughts I rehearsed over and over how I would react to every possible occurrence and eventually tame the unseen beasts lurking in the pool.

I pleaded with the sun to show itself and shook with anticipation as the first telltale bands of light began to illuminate the eastern sky. Still unable to master my feelings I began assembling my tackle too soon but I calmly put up with each silly error and within a few minutes I was ready to fish. My eyes were suddenly

the window. From where he was sitting he could see me and I just gave a fleeting wave of my hand and returned to my swim. I used the opportunity to glance around at the garden just to ensure there was no incriminating damage from my initial entrance.

The first thing I did was to chuck into the water a couple of balls of soaked crumb but the sad truth was I hadn't a clue where they finished up. That was the first problem of many that I would have to overcome on that memorable day. I had no experience whatsoever of fishing in such fast water so each step was going to be part of a learning curve.

Everything I had read assured me that barbel should be sought where the flow is strongest and the bites can vary from gentle taps to violent snatches. I had experience, albeit minimal, of how doggedly they fight but even that was to be of little help.

I moulded on a piece of cheese paste and swung it out into the flow. Before I could get control of the line it had galloped off to my right and was virtually back in the edge. I changed the lead for the largest one I had

I put the rod on the rests and to my dismay, even in the lesser flow, the swing tip was virtually horizontal to the surface of the water and pointing towards the bait. It was immediately apparent that I would not be able to detect a bite if it was the 'gentle' type. Once again I retrieved my tackle and laid the rod down. I didn't have an easy answer because I felt that two essential elements were in direct conflict.

I could put my bait in much slower water enabling the indicator to hang as intended or fish in the stronger flow and have to tolerate a much less sensitive detector. Neither really appealed so I tried a little compromise. I cast out to the fastest water I knew it would hold in and then gradually eased it back pausing now and then to test the swing tip. Unfortunately I could find no happy medium. The only point at which the indicator would hang correctly was where the bait was in effectively still water.

I decided to try both options alternately. Lobbing the rig out to the very edge of the flow I put the rod on the two rests and tensioned the line. The swing tip drooped perfectly but so did my

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drawn to the house. From a downstairs window a shaft of light spilled out into the murk. It was only around six o'clock and still too dark for me to feel comfortable about being seen.

My greatest worry was that Arthur might come out into the garden at first light and think I had been there half the night. I decided to grab the bull by the horns and as soon as it seemed reasonable I walked to the house and tapped softly on

and tried again. Exactly the same thing happened, the only difference being it took a few seconds longer. I wound in and sat in disbelief. The rig I was using was simple. A sliding lead stopped a foot from the hook by a split shot. I couldn't see a way round the difficulty. The best solution I could come up with was to chuck the bait into slightly less turbulent water. This I did and the lead came to rest and held on the bed.

expectations. I planned to try it for fifteen minutes only, such was my dissatisfaction. Before the bait had been in the water for a minute the indicator jumped and the rod took off like something possessed. The battle that ensued was thrilling but not long lasting, although the fish was obviously big. A boil broke the surface and a huge chub showed itself. My emotions were immediately seesawing. It was certainly a good chub but it wasn't a



barbel and my disappointment soon replaced any feelings of delight that I should have felt.

Spurred on a little by the realisation that at least a chub had found the bait I cast again to the same spot. With my eyes glued to the rod top I was on another planet. There was no doubt whatsoever in my mind that my obsession to succeed was soon to bear fruit. I don't know why I knew it, I just did. It would be tempting to suggest some unknown force was at work but I have always been an absolute realist and happy to accept that a combination of adrenaline, optimism and imagination was the true stimulus for my confidence.

With my mind still deeply engaged in the swing tip/fast water dilemma my rod pulled slightly and then accelerated through ninety degrees and simply kept going. Swing tip, I thought to myself, a swing bridge would have left its foundations at such force.

I could only grasp the cork butt and let the reel clatter away. Eventually it slowed but the fish was now more than half way across the deep turbulent pool. By the time I had something resembling control it was hugging the bottom in about twelve feet of water and seemed quite content to stay there. With new 6lb line- I normally used three - I could begin to make the rod do its job. To say I didn't rush things was an understatement but it was for the reasons that all anglers would understand.

I haven't a clue how long I stood there with my mind constantly switching between heaven and hell. I was nineteen with a body toughened on building sites but my wrists were beginning to ache. If anybody had suggested to me that any fish in the River Lee could drain my arms of

strength I would have laughed in their face, yet there I was, wrestling with a barbel and only just about getting the upper hand.

As I battled with the fish I recalled statements I had read and in some cases almost dismissed as exaggerations. 'They do like to stay on the bottom.' 'They are fearsome fighters.' 'Many a rod has been smashed by their unstoppable runs.' Obviously my doubts were unfounded and I mentally apologised to those past commentators and muttered a prayer as I scaled the heights of angling pleasure.

My nerves jangled and heartbreak hovered in every creaking bend of the rod. Suddenly the barbel broke the surface and I wanted to throw myself onto it and deny it any chance of escape. I had been comprehensively warned in print by my peers to anticipate sudden, powerful dives to the bottom, but still I was amazed at its sheer strength. Several times I stooped to pick up my landing net only to be halted, again and again.

I know my tackle was not really fit for the job and the environment was daunting but I was truly staggered by such vigour and endurance. At last my prize was ready to land but not before another heart stopping moment as I realised why writers had suggested a large capacity landing net. Mine was laughable but I had to cope and I did. I unhooked it, weighed it at five and a half pounds and returned it.

I had just experienced an event that became etched into my thoughts for all time. Although I wasn't immediately aware of it the direction of my angling life had irrevocably changed. It wasn't an instant or conscious decision but a longing to catch another barbel that was never to leave me. My future place with regard to the gentle art was thus carved in stone.