

As a Man Thinketh...

There is nothing more inviting to me than an ancient willow tree standing sentinel in some quiet backwater away from the main river, its weeping fronds trailing green water and its canopy-shade a resting place for any creature happening by.

My Willow Room is just such a willow, in just such a scene, where I go as often as time and circumstance allows. I dip beneath its covers, and lean my tired back against its craggy trunk.

It is a room of wonders, its roots deep in Mother Earth; a gentle, inviting place, where my thoughts can wander undisturbed beneath its living greenery.

It is in my Willow Room, on a hot-summer's day, with

Our life is what our thoughts make it
Marcus Aurelius

the blue sky cloudless and the sun too fiery dangerous to meet with the eye, that the rays of heaven are filtered through the leaves to form a glorious tapestry of ever changing glints and twinkles; a movement of dapple, never still, ever changing, coming and going in a shape-shift, bearing witness to its Grand Creator.

In my Willow Room I am freed from the mundane of life to enter a world that is far beyond: I see clearly a forming of Monet in the jostle of silvered leaves and patches of sky which is unlike that of any expression which can be devised by man through the medium of brush and paint; and

where, too, Dali finds space to forge with Salvadorean genius a deeper vision, too close to the edge of sanity for comfort: an alien dimension, where my earless head is pliant without skull, my soft chin propped with a forked stick, my eyes closed, and ants crawling unfelt from my nostrils. A boat lies stranded on a beach of palest yellow sand, the line of the ebb seen in the far distant, a solitary pebble is close by. I am asleep. Reality is flown. I am pliable to be shaped in disjointed experiences, like Alice through her looking glass; the span of all time is held in Now.

Afternoon hours in my Willow Room, follow the

morning's fishing. They are always enjoyable, always refreshing to body and mind: cheese and bread, cake and brew, a time to think and a time to nap - and then, awake and renewed, its back to the fishing, back to the hope in a baited swim.

Today though, I'm not fishing. I'm in my Study, surrounded by shelves of angling books, a cabinet of reels, drawers of tackles, rods galore hanging in a wardrobe, and a shoal of dead fish swimming this way or that in glass-fronted tombs.

I'm watching the play of light on my curtains, and I'm thinking myself a fish beneath a lily pad-as if back



As a Man Thinketh By Peter Wheat

in my Willow Room with Monet and Dali and the croaks of moorhen paddling water out beyond the fronded veil.

My thoughts form and reform, and I'm trying to catch their reflections and write them down before they vanish.

All things angling are a deep passion with me. I have loved Art and practiced its diversities from childhood to manhood; and now, in my eventide, I love it still, and exist in hope that I have time left to enjoy it the more.

And yet, for all my passion, I know in my heart that angling has never been, never could be, the Meaning of Life or of first importance in the ever circling Scheme of Things. I find sound wisdom in the counsel of Robert Venables, writing in 1662: *Make not a daily practice (which is nothing else but a profession) of any recreation, lest your immoderate love and delight therein brings a cross with it, and blast all your content and pleasure in the same.*

Likewise, Richard Brookes in 1766: *Remember that the Wit and Invention of Mankind were bestowed for other purposes than to deceive silly Fish; and that however delightful*

Angling may be, it ceases to be innocent when used otherwise than as a mere Recreation.

Contrary, in more recent times, Robert Louis Stevenson had this to say from "the other side of the coin": *Perpetual devotion to what a man calls his business is only to be sustained by perpetual neglect of many other things – and it is not by any means certain that a man's business is the most important thing he has to do.*

A long life has taught me the value of nurturing a *balance in all things*: in fishing, family, employment, responsibility, friendship, to name but a few. Balance, I find, is the best antidote to selfishness – that sly old gremlin which still comes whispering over my shoulder from time to time. (Oft have I heard his voice, but too late!)

It is a wise tradition never to make the catching of fish the first importance of your life, but rather to cherish its pleasures as a "pill of reward" – a pill, taken in the right measure, at the right time, and in the right place and company, for the right reasons, which is guaranteed to bring a store of happiness.

And isn't it happiness that we truly seek?

A man of understanding once said: "it is a shame that so many go fishing all their lives without realising – it is not fish they are trying to catch."

I agree.

Tradition is an interesting thing in modern - day angling. It exists as a process of thought, an attitude of mind, which finds its expression in the how, why and wherefore of a man's approach to the sport – while also influencing every facet of his life. Its beginnings lie far deeper in the id than perhaps any of us realize.

It is why, in Golden Scale Club gathers, we recognise only a pleasing normality with each other; while folk on the outside looking in witness only strange acts of childish behaviour - conkers, Frisbee- throwing, and the like – plus the odd eruption of outrageous eccentricity for good measure.

It is why Mr Crabtree and all got banned from the Mayflower Inn for giving the spurious impression of trying to kill a swallow with a rocket!

I am certain that if any one of the traditionalist persuasion too up archery,

it would only be with a longbow of yew; golf with greenheart – shafted clubs carried in a canvass bag; fly a biplane rather than a jet – and yet still yearn for an air – balloon.

Our bamboos, our centrepins, our canvas, our wicker, our tweed, are a comfort to our needs- as natural as nature itself – the outer expression of that felt within.

Rejoice by all means, but take a warning: don't entertain any idea of living in the past; it is a falsehood! Our time is Now. The past of angling has gone by with the hours, as finally as the river flows to the sea. There is no Tardis in which to catch it up. The nostalgic longing for that which once was, is nothing more than the affirmation that we are discomfited by the world in which we live and are seeking for something more agreeable.

Ponder this: has any past age been any better than the one we live in now? I doubt it, I doubt it very much. The stick of rock we call history is run through with setback and disaster, and my guess is that there have always been folk- anglers included- who have looked back in a spirit of longing for a better time. We who angle now in the traditionalist mould are the progeny of that way of thinking, but in reality we don't long for any part of the past in its entirety, but only at the bits and pieces which satisfy our needs in the present.

In tackle and dress, the angler shows off what he feels within. It is an individual expression. The traditionalist, if he is honest, knows that he combines the actual artefacts of the past (and faithful reproductions) with modern ideas and innovations which best suit his idea of 'rightness'. He never lives in the past or recreates the past in the present. Put



*Wheat in traditional hattin, with Winter's Gift: m'lady of Frome at an ounce under three pounds
Picture credit: Pete Reading*

simply, traditionalism is a quiet statement of what is considered taste and discernment.

Angling, from that first golden moment when an ancient hunter, dressed in animal skin and carried a bone hook attached by dried sinew to an ash stick, felt an urge to fish for fun rather than for food, has been an amazingly progressive activity-sport, art, pastime, call it what you will-in terms of tackle, rigs, techniques, baits and clothing. The driving force has always been to catch more fish, and to be as comfortable as possible while doing so.

Angle-think moves at a remarkable pace these days- to fast by far for the traditionalist, who says: 'Hey up! Hold your horses! I want off this crazy merry-go-round. I want to find my balance (Salters?). I want to select from both past and present what suits my taste discernment-not live on the cutting edge.'

Questions arise. What is and what is not, traditional? What are the criteria? When is an item modern, and when does it become traditional? Who makes the rules?

When you start juggling with the balls of such questions, it isn't very long before they fall out of sequence and coming bouncing back through the backside of a hefty headache.

If you don't want a headache (who does?) may I suggest that you accept the view that it's all down to the individual, and that traditionalism should never be some tight-knit cult with tiresome rules and regulations upsetting a very fluid movement based on personal choice.

Good heavens, the Mohave Indians of Arizona are ambushing my thoughts! These chaps are fishermen; they angled anciently with a rod of red willow, barked and straightened by an ingenious Indian method,

a line of the prepared bast of 'ido, another species of willow, and a hook made from a barrel cactus thorn (*Echinocactus wislizeni*).

William Radcliffe, in his book *Fishing from the Earliest Times* (1921), records these details, but most interesting of all is what he has to say about the hook: 'It is better adapted for fish which do not nibble at the bait, but bolt it hook and all; for this reason the Indians fasten the bait below the hook.'

Cripes! A hair-rigged bolt-rig in a book ninety years old- and a traditional fishing ploy of the Mohave for probably many hundreds of years before that!

No doubt, and sadly so, the palefaces have long since 'modernised' tribal thinking to crank-handled 'correctness'; but nevertheless, there you have it: the hair-rigged bolt-rig both ancient and modern-though it is only you who can decide if it is acceptable or not, and within the bounds of taste and discernment.

It fascinates me that so many of today's traditionalists (even a vast multitude) are locked -in, with wet eyes, to circa 1950s carp fishing. Most often the lads concerned were birthed decades later than the period which holds their interest, so my perspective must differ greatly from theirs, having been born towards the close of the 1930s, and my formative angling years spanning the late 40s, 50s and 60s-when hunting big fish took off with a vengeance, changing the whole ethos of coarse fishing for ever and a day. (Richard Walker once declared that he had created a 'monster'.)

It astonishes me to look back and realize that among my friends have been Warren Hastings, the legendary catcher of Thames trout at the start of the 20th century; Claude Taylor, a fishing companion

of F.W.K.Wallis in 1930s Royalty days; a nephew of Henry Newlyn, one of the men directly responsible for stocking the first barbel into the Avon-Stour catchment in the 1890s; a grandson of Francis Francis, perhaps the most influential angler of the 19th century. And I think, too, of the notable anglers who were my friends from the 60's until death took them to pastures new: Richard Walker, Fred J.Taylor and Peter Stone, to name but three.

It is in looking back, that I recognize how very different my perception is to the man of tradition who links with the 50s-60s as times before he was born. Knowing both the good and the bad of that period, I often find his views and conclusions rose-tinted and a tad distorted. It makes me smile, but nothing more than that.

What does disturb me, though, is an angler who struggles to express traditionalism, and is clearly not comfortable in his tackle or his dress. I find that sad. It is really nothing more than a sham-an actor on a stage trying to play a part and playing it badly. Far better to be one's self, and enjoy.

All the tackle I use now, is the same tackle I used in my formative years. The gear was norm then, now it is the trappings of tackle auctions and traditionalism. If, then, I am a traditionalist, it is not a persuasion borne from nostalgically 'looking back', but rather is the result of my stubborn refusal to move forwards. I'm a leftover! A fragment of lucky jetsam that has been dodging the tides of change for more than forty years.

In 1968 I added my last 'modern' rod to my armoury-my signature Avonmaster, which was manufactured under my name by Davenport and Fordham for many years. Since then

I have found no reason to make further changes apart from occasional 'tweaks'. In my ancient rods-both bamboo and glass- I have faithful companions of countless adventures down the years- and more, no doubt, to come.

The mention of glass recalls to mind a callow fellow dressed in breeks and a Norfolk jacket, smoking a heavy pipe, watching me at my fishing with an Avonmaster rod. From beneath the forpeak of his 'Sherlock Holmes' came the smirking comment: 'Not very traditional, is it?' I begged him to reveal his year of birth. '1973,' he replied. 'Well' I said, 'I was using this rod five years before you were born, so work it out for yourself.'

I doubt the penny dropped, but it goes to show what a difference of thinking there is between a chap looking back to times before he was born, and a chap like me still alive in the times and experiences of his youth.

I cherish my friends of the traditional ways-particularly my fellow travellers in the Golden Scale Club. Always it is very satisfying to be in their company, and to be slipped far away from this stirred world I don't understand and don't want to be part of.

That said, however, it would be churlish of me not to acknowledge my many close friends who dance in the plumbago of carbon rods and oft take a twirl with latest gizmo. Despite their 'doings', they all, to a man, radiate that special spark of warmth and goodness which permeates our sport and those that truly love it.

Hang me for a heretic, if you will, but I hold firm that traditional angling is never just about tackle and dress; it is the expression of thought in *all things* which most clearly sets it apart.

As a man thinketh, so is he.