

Boat Fishing, handling and etiquette. Peter Hartley and Mel Parrott.

Peter kicked off with a short review of the history of fishing at Grafham. When the reservoir opened for fishing in 1966, 90% of the boats were only equipped with oars: just half a dozen had in-board engines. It was necessary to book a month in advance (and pay) to get a boat at the weekend. AWA (at the time) had invested heavily in generating a trout fishery with our own David Moore playing an important role. A day ticket was 10 old shillings or 50 pence! In those heady days, the fishing was so phenomenal that if the angler wanted to fish a hot spot on opening day then he (not intended to be sexist but there were very few ladies in the sport at the time) had to be in position the night before!



Peter reviewed the early history of trout fishing at Grafham. Tools of the trade such as an anchor or a drogue were not supplied. Most anglers had come over from coarse fishing and were pretty ignorant of the needs of still water fly fishing. It did not matter too much as the fishing was easy. However, anglers from the Northampton area had already honed their skills on Pitsford and Ravensthorpe. One group headed by Dick Shrive, adapted a technique used by Thames sailing barges which were equipped with lee boards in order to restrict lateral movement of the craft when sailing the shallow waterways on the East Coast. The Grafham lee board initially utilised the plank of wood which anglers used to fit across the gunnels to make the seating more comfortable before purpose-built seats became available. One was clamped to the side of the boat, close to the prow, and concealed by a surreptitiously placed bass bag! Consequently, how some anglers managed to get their boats to slip across the wind, remained a secret for some time. Lee boards were suited to relatively mild wind speeds. Hence it was a small step to develop a portable rudder which was attached to the stern but with slip couplings on the shaft which enabled the yaw of the blade to be adjusted and the boat could be guided in and out of bays, Figure 1. Trout in a breeze travel up-wind, through the ripple/waves. As the boat drifted down wind, prow first, anglers cast out to either side of the boat and the lures were allowed to move under the influence of the relative motion of the boat and the sink rate of the line. Hence they were presented across the noses of many more fish than when the lure was retrieved up-wind. In addition, the lines initially bowed in the water but eventually snapped straight. It was this action which the trout found irresistible. Depending upon when the take occurred it was possible to guess how deep the fish were and the tactics modified accordingly. Many anglers also trolled using these new techniques. Some were naughty boys and used used spinners: if they thought that they were about to be apprehended, then the backing line was “accidentally” severed with a cigarette. Both these steering devices were banned at Grafham for fear of damaging the boats but they are still permitted at Pitsford and Rutland.

Tackle at the time had been developed for trout fishing on rivers and streams. Many anglers turned up with relatively short split cane rods with limited casting range. It did not matter too much as the fish were often around the bank in the remains of submerged hedgerows. The Northampton boys, with their heavy lines, preferred rods based on the Mk 4 Avon which were familiar to coarse anglers at the time. Lightweight glass rods,

specifically developed for reservoir trout fishing, were pioneered by casting guru, Don Neish (RIP), who ground down the wall thickness of Sportex blanks to produce the "Grafham Ghost". Massive developments were ahead with the advent of carbon fibres. Lines were equally primitive by modern standards. Silk lines were still available. PVC lines had only just been introduced from the USA. They were invariably double taper. The Northampton school cut the 30-yard lengths into several sections and by splicing floating and sinking sections achieved various underwater profiles. The resulting shooting heads were not popular with traditionalists, and even banned on some waters: this led to the almost universal use of WF lines.

The standard of boat fishing is not good in the opinion of Peter. Anglers should realise that it is not a floating bank!!

Peter runs courses on boat handling and etiquette but the first thing he emphasises is the need to be correctly dressed by which he means not a T shirt and flip flops. Invariably it is a lot cooler out on the water compared with the bank. Conditions can change rapidly. Life jackets are a fairly recent requirement. Apart from a waterproof jacket and bib and brace, Peter wears a pair of rubber over-trousers which can be easily washed to remove fish slime.

The usual practice is for one angler to be in charge of the engine whilst the other looks after the anchor and drogue. Anglers are expected to fish in their own quadrant and not poach one's colleagues' fish.

The anglers must work as a team so that different methods are explored until the fish are located. They must have an agreed strategy.

95% of the time Peter would fish on the drift because the flies are continually presented to fresh fish unaffected by excessive angling pressure.

Assess the whereabouts of other boats. Should they be joined or avoided? Boats attract boats. Heavy group fishing pressure invariably cause the fish to move on or feed lower in the water.

Casting distance might be crucial. If one angler is consistently out-casting his partner then his flies will be the first seen (and possibly taken) by the approaching fish.

It is crucial to hang the flies at the end of the retrieve. This must be done outside the shadow of the boat. A wrap of cotton on a sinking line at say 13 feet enables the angler to judge the depth at which the flies are hanging.

Anglers need a selection of lines with different sinking properties in order to explore different depths. Fishing depth was more important than the fly pattern. Peter mentioned 30, I recall John Mees reckoned 35! (come off it – that is in excess of £1000). It is almost a competition in itself! Peter expressed a preference for starting with a Di5 sweep but changed if he failed to catch a fish within half an hour. This is a pointless concept unless the angler has the will to change lines. Peter advised the use of a cassette reel system with a leader at least 1.5x the length of the rod. (I think this means 1.5x to the top dropper). Retrieve the butt of the leader to the top of the rod handle. Snip the leader (but holding on to it!!). Remove the cassette and replace it with the new spool, join it to the old leader and you are away in a matter of minutes.

Peter reckoned that fish were not leader shy. He preferred to use a stiff nylon leader rather than super thin, expensive, fluorocarbon. Fulling Mill and Snowbee nylons were suggested. In my youth Tynex was the choice of some Grafham loch style anglers. It is thick for its strength but it is stiff and consequently less prone to tangling when used as a leader. Droppers reputedly really stand out from the main line. I understand it is still available in

100 yd spools from Walkers of Trowell (and in shorter lengths from tooth brushes!). Does anyone in the club use it?

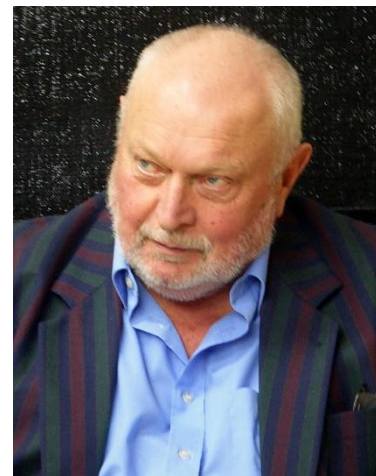
Drogues and anchors are now supplied, since the advent of the shrimp problem. However, the drogue is not permanently fixed and anglers should equip themselves with a couple of G clamps and snap hook carabiners. These must be positioned on the gunnels so that the boat drifts straight down the wind or else one angler will have a significant advantage over his companion.

Peter said it was also vital to cast a straight line in order that instant contact can be made with inquisitive fish. Retrieves could vary from an arms width pull, to a roly-poly. I can report that it is impossible to retrieve too fast as one of my mates demonstrated (for scientific purposes) that fish were capable of taking a fly pulled behind a boat at full throttle. Peter did not seem keen on static fishing but I think this is covered by the figure of eight technique.

Fish finders were not his cup of tea either, in marked contrast to the predator anglers at Grafham. How about GPS to log fish holding areas? Happy with a rudder but not a depth meter? The Northampton anglers were keen on fishing at a water depth of ~10 feet and judged it by sticking their rods over the side of the boat. Which reminded me that some anglers play their fish with a submerged rod in order not to alert others that they had caught a fish.

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Mel Parrott took the stage after the interval. He challenged our description of him as having vast experience of fishing in England and Ireland. Nevertheless, Mel has fished in Ireland for 30 years and conveniently has his own property overlooking Carrowmore Lake. The bad news is that the fishing was its best 40 years ago but thanks to intensive salmon farming and agricultural pollution the quality of trout and salmon fishing has steadily declined.



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Mel pointed out a few differences between Peter's philosophy and what happens in Ireland.

- a. Drogues are never used in Ireland. The monster loughs such as Mask and Corrib are littered with huge rocks just below the surface and should a drogue snag on one of these, the results could be catastrophic.
- b. Long casts do not feature in Irish Lough style fishing. The fish seem to prefer the fly when it is entering and leaving the water. If a companion is a poor (long distance) caster such that the line lands like a bicycle chain (his words) then do not expect to catch fish.
- c. Regarding boat handling skills, Mel mentioned an incident when Peter got stuck in the tunnel at Pitsford!
- d. Peter failed to mention the lack of consideration for other anglers when motoring from A to B (and could have mentioned bank anglers).
- e. Never fish the lane which you have just powered up! Take a wide route to move from the end of a drift.

Residing in Bedford he still regards Grafham as his home water. He likes the Irish. We have a similar language and culture, they are very friendly and above all there are plenty of pubs still open.

The loughs are prodigious in area compared with Grafham at 1500 acres *when full*:

Beltra 1500 acres Carrowmore 2500 acres Cullin 2500 acres
Corrib 14,000 acres Mask 20,500 acres Corrib 48,500 acres.

Boats are fibre glass and 19 feet in length which can comfortably hold 3 anglers. They are driven by a 10-20 hp outboard, necessary to keep travelling times on these large waters to a minimum. Mel strongly recommended that visiting anglers should get a ghillie who will organise the boat hire, provide expert advice and the boat handling skills required for a safe trip. Expect to pay him €150. The brown trout fishing is free. Mel has his own boat and motor housed in his garage. Out of interest, Mel reported that in selecting a boat he found that various makes showed quite a difference in their stability as a fishing platform. Some makers made the basic mistake of directly copying clinker models.

Mel has had a poor year on his local water with zero salmon this season. Allan Sefton came in for some praise, admittedly a few years ago. His first trip to Carrowmore Lake as a guest of Mel, found him catching a salmon with his first cast almost before Mel had got into action. In my opinion, I don't think anyone who has read his book "Fly Fishing for Salmon" and listened to his talks, would have been too surprised at his success.

Mel eventually managed to join Westport angling club which is about an hours drive from his home. He has even managed to win a few trophies over the past few years. Club competitions are usually held on Mask but the time-table is somewhat laid-back compared with our experiences on the AW waters. By the time a boat had been sorted, the start time would be approaching mid-morning. Lunch was held on a designated island. Fishing ceased (lines up!) at 6.30 and the group congregated at the local hostelry to compare notes. Fish were generally few and far between. Bearing in mind the size of Mask, anglers could be 5 or 6 miles apart, so that a good deal of mutual trust is required.

Mel only uses a small number of patterns. One Westport club rule forbids the use of buzzers which limits the choice of early season patterns, particularly as "buzzers" seems to cover almost any pattern! The rule is peculiar to Westport AC and some members, anxious to qualify for International competitions, are not happy bunnies. A selection of flies which he had brought along for the meeting is shown in Figure 2. Mel made the point that there is often a large difference in the design of flies depending who was responsible for the tying. The loughs are renowned for the mayfly hatch. A Green Peter was considered to be an essential fly on any leader.

There is often an algae bloom in mid-summer, but Mel found the fish did not respond to the patterns successfully used on the AW waters: he has yet to solve this conundrum.

Mel was honest in stating that, typically, fish were quite small and four in a day would be a good result. The fish are all natural indigenous brownies: their speckled golden colouration is striking. The occasional 4 -5 lb fish come to the net. Larger fish usually succumb to targeted trolling. Any method is permitted. Whereas Peter regarded catching fish as a necessity to a good day out, Mel is more relaxed and enjoys the company of his friends and "mucking around in the boat" (I think this meant "taking the p*ss out of anyone within ear shot!!!").

Mel has been a World Cup contender this year but before you reel backwards in amazement, it merely required paying an entry fee of €120. Invicta could enter a team? The organisation required to accommodate 500 anglers is impressive considering that boats are mostly borrowed and launched from the shore. Three days are spent qualifying with the 4th day reserved for the final. Most fish were just above the minimum of 13" with the largest being 4¼lbs: Catch and release has not caught on yet. Hence based on the catch rate achieved in the Westport AC events of 0.55 per angler, at the very least the Cup resulted in considerable fish mortality. Mel deplored the waste. Mel has yet to qualify but I am certain that he has not given up. Think of the kudos!

Mel recommended reading "Trout from a boat" by Dennis Moss which has been fully revised and updated and at £16 is a steal. Dennis has extensive experience of fishing the English reservoirs with excursions to Scotland and the Outer Hebrides. Dennis co-founded Wychwood Tackle but he now resides on the banks of Corrib. Hence this is a wide-ranging book with something to question in almost every paragraph.

DG Jones December 2018

For anglers interested in traditional loch style fishing, Martin Introna is running an event at Eyebrook, described as Blob, Booby and Bung free! Eyebrook was almost entirely fished in this manner by the Scots who moved down to the Steelworks in Corby. Hopefully the trout have forgotten all about it by now! Read all about it:

Martin Introna <https://www.facebook.com/groups/459638200875651/?fref=nf>