



Flaxitt i. et. p.

ANGLING FOR SALMON

THE REFLECTIVE PERSON’S SPORT: A SHORT HISTORY

Exactly when, how, or where fly fishing originated is unknown, though accounts date back to Roman times. The story of this sport not only traces changing methods and equipment, but also upheaval in society and technological evolution.

Humans have almost certainly fished flies since the dawn of antiquity, but the first recorded account was set down by a Roman known as Ælian, in a book called *On the Nature of Animals*, which was written in about AD 200. There are one or two problems with Ælian as a historian

(not least his conviction that goats could breathe through their ears), but he wrote a third-hand account of how the Macedonians fished with a fly and even gave us enough details to make it possible to tie something like that fly today. A couple of years ago, the Macedonian fly was given a field test, and it caught a

trout first cast. You just cannot keep a good fly down.

After Ælian, there is a long gap in the record—which is not to say that fly fishing was necessarily forgotten, just that no records of it have survived—and then fly fishing surfaces again in late medieval times, in places as diverse as

Bavaria, Italy, and Japan. But of all the places where the pursuit had taken root, the mother country must surely be Britain, because that is where fly fishing was transformed from a way of getting food into a sport, or, as many would argue, a way of life.

Although the first printed work on fly fishing was published in England in 1496, the transformation came when a trio of books about fly fishing appeared two centuries later—the most influential of which was the fifth edition of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, which had a second part written by poet and translator Charles Cotton. The combination of Walton's rural idyll and Cotton's detailed advice on fly fishing inspired a flood of newcomers into the sport and guaranteed *The Compleat Angler's* place as the third most reprinted work in the English language—it has now gone to over 400 editions.

In Walton's time, fishers throughout Europe used lines woven from horsehair, which were generally attached to the top of the rod. Reels were virtually unknown, meaning that casting was a simple matter of literally whipping the line back and forth, and if a big fish ran to the end of the line, the only option was to throw the rod in the water and chase it downstream if it didn't break off. However, anglers were using a wide range of trout flies, with Cotton alone listing more than 60, all of which he had to tie himself because there were very few tackle dealers around in the seventeenth century. Salmon fishers were few and far between at this time, mainly because fishing tackle was not up to landing the species, but nonetheless, the first book about salmon fishing was published in 1694.

The next big change was the widespread adoption of the reel, which had first been mentioned in association with fly fishing in the 1650s. Reels only seem to have become popular in the eighteenth century—almost certainly because the increasing popularity of fishing made it economic to produce them for the first time—and for a long



Top: Portrait of Izaak Walton, author of *The Compleat Angler*.
Above: Richard Brookes' *Art of Angling*, published in 1766.

while, reels were made by jobbing artisans who could turn their hand to anything. The concept of manufacturers who made broad ranges of fishing tackle lay a century in the future. Despite the fact that reels had become standard equipment by the eighteenth century, they were not very good and tended to have very narrow spindles combined with wide spools, which put the angler at a huge disadvantage when playing a big fish. By now, a substantial cottage industry had grown up making hooks based around the town of Redditch in England's Midlands, and an angler who was prepared to shop around could buy most of his or her gear, rather than having to laboriously make it bit by bit, as had been the case previously.

One of the major developments in fly fishing occurred around this time, because with industrialization came the production of tapered fly lines, and anglers began to experiment with casting. Until rods grew rings, and reels and woven lines became standard, the limit of how far an angler could cast was about 26 ft. (8 m), but now, although false casting to extend a line was →



EA Barton fishing the River Kennet below Ramsbury.
From *An Album of the Chalk Streams*, originally published in 1946.