

THE ROD



Most middle-aged anglers have too many rods and not enough hair. It's sad but true and in both cases there is precious little we can do about it. But it's not our fault: fishing rods have lives of their own, strange, supernatural powers that lead us astray and loosen the tightest grip on any wallet.

Each has a voice, a Siren call all it's own. But unlike the horrible creatures of ancient mythology that sang so beautifully to lure sailors to their doom, you won't hear it at any conscious level. No, this is a subtle invasion of the mind, like mist softly rolling down a valley.

The craving for a new rod can strike at any time. The

fishing season may be months away, shining like a silver speck at the end of a long winter tunnel, yet there you are, full of the spirit of spring and the urge to accumulate yet more tackle.

Standing in the pale yellow light cast out from the tackle shop window, all thoughts of the tin of paint, or milk, or whatever you left home to buy are erased. The sleet falls on the dirty pavement and in you walk, pulled by the rod, like a fish on the line.

We've all done it. Wandered in for just a quick look, which lasts all afternoon. And like an alcoholic who can't pass the pub, we fool ourselves into believing we can stop at just one packet of hooks or a small box of weights.

Intoxicated, in a trance, the rod draws you on. You can only deny it for so long, toying with the floats, flies and spinners, but the sales assistant has your number. He can spot the wide eyes and smell the cash.

Sauntering past the rows of rods, it's impossible not to look. The Siren Song is irresistible. Arranged like a beauty pageant, they are displayed by height, make and exclusivity. They are perfumed with promise and cellulose.

Among the ranks one will catch your eye. A quiet little voice says 'pick me up', and then there's no putting it down. There's nothing you can do about it. The best advice is, try not to touch. Unfortunately, resistance is almost always futile and invariably costly.

Once the rod has you in *her* grasp – that soft, round, silky smooth cork handle will cast a spell. As you caress the glossy frame and gaze intently into her eyes, she'll

whisper. And when you flex and bend her, making short, sharp casts in the cramped confines of the dimly lit shop, she'll seduce you with the call of another life. There you'll share the thrill of catching big fish and experience the joy of long, lazy summer days together. You're hooked.

The sales patter is all just words. It's nonsense: you've been hypnotised by a rod, by her slim, lithe form and dark good looks. She's sold herself. The credit card is produced, signed and accepted – the deal is done. You've just spent money you didn't have on a rod you didn't need.

Walking on air to the car, you haven't a care in the world. The rod is perched against the front passenger seat. She demands to sit there, to be seen. Smiling the smile of the smitten, you touch the rough cordura-covered tube that will keep her safe and sound for years to come: or until the lure of another leaves her cast aside in the garage.

It's freezing outside, but the rod is telling you it's June. You can hear her singing through the air, flicking a size 16 blue-winged olive at a wily old trout. He's rising with effortless regularity, nipping the insects off the surface just below a big willow tree. The rod sends the fly line into the air in snaking loops with a swish. It mingles with running water, dappled sunlight and birdsong. You're gone. The rod is singing your song.

Driving on automatic pilot, the daydream always begins to fade just as you reach home and start to figure out the best way to sneak her in past your wife. With very few exceptions, women don't get the rod thing. Shoes maybe, but a fishing rod for every conceivable situation is an alien

concept. Spending hundreds of pounds on one can put a strain on relations – but it's more often the amount of time spent in her company, in pursuit of fishing dreams, that leads to divorce.

A lucky rod is an especially powerful thing. Everyone has one or had one. They are valuable far beyond the price paid for them. A rod and the memory of the fish it caught go hand in hand throughout the years.

Such a rod is often easy to spot. They usually fall in to the category of: 'They don't make 'em like that anymore.' A favourite rod has usually been in the hands of an angler and/or his family for a long time. It's invariably battered and faded. It's often heavy, a poker-stiff solid fibreglass relic in odd colours, like mustard or white. Often the threads hang loose from the eyes and the cork handle is pitted and blackened by the fishy hands of time. But to the owner, it's a thing of beauty, a friend forever.

I recently splashed out on a new fly rod to replace another expensive rod, which no longer suited my casting style. The old one was a beautiful American job but the action was too soft and floppy. So, after about ten years catching wild trout with her from the west of Ireland to the far north, I decided to let her go.

My first day out with the new one I caught no fish – even though we were only hunting stocked rainbows in a put-and-take fishery in Tyrone. That's another strange thing. The first fish is often the most difficult to catch on a new rod. Andy, my boat partner, took it for a cast. He smiled, slowly nodded his approval and quietly fished

with it. He is a man of few words.

That left me flailing his long-time favourite fly rod. It was twice the weight and seemed ten times as stiff as mine.

‘How do you fish with that brush shaft?’ I said.

‘I’ve caught a lot of trout on it,’ came the terse reply.

I must have planted a seed though because, later that week, he went to the tackle shop and took a slightly longer version of my rod out on trial.

Strangely, it had no power over him. Andy said he was tempted but couldn’t commit. Why should he change a rod that he was happy with? Maybe he’s the exception that proves the rule. Some of us do it all the time.



I once had a very special rod. The funny thing is though that it wasn’t even mine. It belonged to my big brother, but I loved it with a passion. I remember my first sight of it. Stephen rushed home one evening all excited with this prized rod in a thick cloth bag. He was sixteen, I was only ten.

It was unpeeled with a flourish in the bedroom we shared. I was instantly struck by the colour. It had a matt, dove-grey finish and looked silky smooth.

There were no eyes on it. ‘It’s a kit. I’m going to build it myself,’ Stephen said with a satisfied grin. He was going to have a custom-built rod, a one-off. It was special already.

‘You can help if you want,’ he said, knowing that without the extra hands it would be impossible to make.

I was excited: this was a great treat. Stephen was brilliant at making Airfix aeroplanes. I would always make a

mess with the glue but he never did. I knew he'd make a neat job and I was going to help him. I couldn't wait.

He slotted the two-piece blank together. It made a lovely soft, precise sound as it slid home. He flexed it vigorously for a few seconds.

'It's supposed to bend from tip to butt. That's for playing big fish,' he said. 'It's hollow fibreglass, just feel how light it is.'

This was my first touch. The cork handle, above and below the silver reel seat, was warm in my hands. It was as light as a feather and, it was whispering to me already. The writing on the base of the blank declared it to be a ten-foot salmon spinning rod made by Sundridge. I'm not certain but I seem to remember it also had a red map of Great Britain emblazoned on it.

There was absolutely no chance that it would ever be used for the purpose intended by the manufacturer. This rod would be employed exclusively for catching pike, the fish that we both rated above any other.

We propped the two blanks against a bed. Stephen reached for a crumpled paper bag and emptied its contents onto the bedspread. There, lay a tangled mess of chrome-coloured eyes that would be fitted onto 'our' rod. There was also a large wooden bobbin full of a yellow and black nylon thread. It complemented the dull grey rod perfectly. Finally, there was a small tin of clear cellulose varnish and a fine sable hair paintbrush to complete the kit.

It took quite a long time to make the rod. First the eye positions were measured out by Stephen and marked with

a felt-tip pen. Then it was my turn to help. The first eye was laid on the blank. I held it in place with my thumb while my brother made a few turns of the thread to bind it to the rod.

‘Now turn it slowly with me,’ he said.

We rolled the rod. Stephen kept the thread tight, each turn firmly touching the next until the fine thread began to spread down the rod, giving the appearance of broad tape. It was then bound over a loop of thread. When we’d come far enough down the rod, the thread was cut and passed through that loop. It could then be pulled back under, between the whipping and the rod, to leave a seamless finish.

This labour of love was repeated upstairs every night after tea. There, surrounded by the lemon and white wood chip wallpaper and the beige curtains printed with brown birds of no particular kind, we worked together. It was quiet and intense. By the time the whipping process was finished, our four hands were perfectly co-ordinated.

The rod was binding us closer. We were at one with the vision and the job at hand. It was a rare and happy coincidence for two children separated by six years and a different take on life. We shared no friends and had little in common. I was often a burden because he was forced to take me with him on his outings. I would always be his junior, never able to compete on equal terms in football or anything else, except the one thing that united us: fishing. That was the one area where I could compete.

In the early years, our father used to take us pike

fishing. He was no sportsman. He used a boat rod for sea fishing and a huge fixed spool reel with nylon so thick it could easily have been used to string tennis rackets. When he was lucky enough to hook a fish it was winched to the bank without any fuss and little appreciation. The heel of his black rubber boots killed it with a brutal stamp. My father never got the spiritual side of fishing. For him it was all about eating the catch. For some that's enough.

I remember one evening when the three of us were fishing on the banks of the Newry Canal and Stephen caught a pike of about 4lbs. He'd run out of treble hooks and was using a long shank single and a bit of herring fillet.

This is the first time I remember being jealous. I was so envious I begrudged him the fish. 'How could he catch that fish on just one hook?' I wondered. And I stood there on the bank, surrounded by rushes and a light mist rising from the water.

I was fixed to the spot and staring – not for the last time – at my red and white plastic float. I was willing it to go under.

'He'd stand there all night if we let him,' said Stephen. My father and he laughed. They wanted to go but I uttered the Prayer of the Desperate for the first time that night.

'Just five more minutes, just one last cast,' I pleaded. There aren't enough minutes or casts in the world to satisfy an angler who can't catch a fish.

If we were separated by age Stephen and myself were also like chalk and cheese in other ways too. We even looked different. His hair was sandy brown, mine almost black. His eyes were a light grey-blue, but mine were

polished coals. He used his brain – I used my fists. He was methodical, always able to move from A to B in his head without feeling the urge to skip straight to Z. It all made sense to him. There was a plan to follow, and in the case of the rod, he was good at it.

For me, then as now, nothing was clear and plans sort of evolved, took on a life of their own. Instinct and intuition are disastrous attributes when introduced to the world of do-it-yourself. I'd certainly have been left with bits over.

So we worked on, in the stillness of the bedroom. There was no radio, no TV to break the studied concentration. We were content to work together.

Applying the varnish to protect the thread was a tricky business. I turned the blank over and over while Stephen loaded the brush and touched the threads. By keeping it on the move it stopped drips forming. And as each was completed, the hairdryer quickly turned the liquid into a hard and glossy strip.

There was real pride when it was finished. Stephen squinted down the eyes of the assembled rod like they were the sights of a gun. They were perfectly in line and looked like they had been professionally fitted at the factory.

He stood up and brandished it like Excalibur – this was a mighty weapon: in the right hands a prodigious slayer of fish. He didn't know it, but I believed the right hands were my hands.

And my reward for the help and love I'd lavished on this enterprise?

'I'll let you have a cast with it when we go fishing on

Saturday, but on no account are you ever to take this rod out by yourself. If you break it I'll kill you. Do you understand?'

I said I did, but understood that it would be impossible for me not to take it. He didn't fish nearly so much as me and sure, wasn't it half mine anyway? I believed that morally I had a share, was entitled to it. He jealously guarded it in the same way we all love a new rod. But as the cork handle grows darker from use it can in time become just another fishing stick.

As the months rolled by I thought it had indeed become just that for Stephen. I regularly slipped it out of its corner in the garage. It silently insisted I take it. I knew he'd hammer me if I got caught, but that just added to the thrill of catching fish with it behind his back.

I was especially careful with it, except on the one occasion when I nearly lost it. There's a stretch of the River Bann which snakes alongside the golf course at Portadown. There's a deep corner fringed with lily pads on the far side and a little shingle beach opposite from which you can fish.

Like all my friends, I never used shop-bought rod rests. We'd always cut a Y-shaped branch and stick it into the bankside mud or prop the rod against a rock to keep the tip pointing at the sky. Finding a rod rest was part of the day's ritual. When the perfect stick was found, the bail arm on the reel would be left open to allow the fish to take line and Bob's your Uncle, you were fishing.

On the day in question I was with Brian Hobson, a

fishing pal and classmate. We shared a low boredom threshold and a strong sense of adventure. He'd caught a frog and I'd gone down the bank a short distance to see it. When I looked back I saw something moving in the river where I'd been fishing.

"That's my rod!" I roared as we both leaped to our feet and chased after it. The grey salmon spinning rod was sailing down the middle of the river. I'd forgotten to flick the bail arm over so when a pike took the dead bait there was nowhere else for the rod to go but into the river.

It was now well out of reach. Terrified of losing it and without thinking of the danger, I ran further downstream and waded in up to my middle. The water was shockingly cold. As the rod passed me, I reached out, grabbed it and struck. Happy days! The pike was still on the line and the rod was safe. Brian netted what we both had hoped was an enormous fish but which turned out to be a small one of about 6lbs.

It was a warm summer's day and I eventually dried out. It's funny how many days were warm and dry in childhood. Everything seems brighter looking back and the rod is there among the happy fragments of excited days filled with sunshine and innocence.

The rod is there with the pike, the fish that fired my imagination. In my boyhood mind, they lived in a mysterious, unseen realm. Down there, I could imagine them stalking their prey like big cats – the lily pads and pond weed provided cover just like the tall grass of the African plains. The roach, rudd, perch and bream were the

antelope and wildebeest living in fear of ambush and sudden death.

It was that world of adventure and excitement I dreamed about when at school. On Saturdays the river drew me like a magnet. The bus ride to Portadown was an expedition and the long walk to Money Penny's lock on the Newry Canal was an eternity for the boy who still lives in this head.

It's all too vivid. The thick scent of wet nettles and the sweet aroma of freshly cut grass quickly replaced the smell of traffic fumes. As we walked away from the bridge in the town, the tower of St Mark's church grew smaller and the sound of laughter and fish-talk grew stronger.

Beyond the boat club, we'd always stop at the cement steps to catch bait. This was a small platform where a big drainage ditch overflowed into the river. The pipes spewed dirty water into the river under our feet and there were always the footprints of rats in the mud. We'd take pot shots at them with our catapults when we got the chance. We didn't care that it was and still is an ugly little blot on the landscape. For us it was a good place to catch bait quickly and move on.

There was a brief period around May when we never had to worry about the availability of bait. About that time, spawning roach shoaled in unimaginable numbers. They were so dense that in places we could scoop them directly out of the river with a landing net.

Below Knock Bridge on the Bann, just across the fields from Money Penny's lock, there's a set of rapids

that tails off into deep water. We used to stand in the middle of that run and watch as their navy-blue backs surged past us in waves. There were so many that they were bouncing off our wellie boots as they made their way upstream. On the bend, where the water was fastest, the old, unfit and dying were forced onto their sides and jammed against the rocky bank.

On those days we'd spend too much time there. It was an idyllic place. The sight and sound of the running water was always a strong draw.

But that was the exception. Our journey almost always took us to the Point of Whitecoat. This is where the River Cusher, Newry Canal and the River Bann meet. The pace always quickened as we approached it. We'd march on accompanied by the larks singing high in a wide blue sky.

I still love spying them out, little black specks in the heavens. Hand over eyes in salute, you wait for them to fold their wings and drop like a stone to within a few feet of the field. The wings open like a parachute and the little daredevil sails back to its tiny nest in a meadow spangled with buttercups and daisies.

It was always a hard choice where to fish. Mostly we found holes in the duckweed and lilies along the Cusher. Sometimes we'd walk all the way along it, cross the bridge below Moneypenny's and then trudge all the way back towards the town.

At Moneypenny's the ancient lock gates were long gone but the stone chamber and the derelict lock-keeper's cottage survived. It sits just yards from the main rail link

between Belfast and Dublin. It was the age of steam and fast trains that killed the canals in the nineteenth century.

In my childhood, more than a hundred years later, all trace of the towpath had long since disappeared under a tangle of bracken, nettles and trees. For us it was a jungle and it made the walk up the peninsula between the Cusher and the canal a slow and sweaty expedition.

But the reward was worth it. We could fish in both the river and the canal because they were just yards apart. That was the best fishing option but the worst for the feet. It added miles to the journey because at that time there was no bridge at the Point of Whitecoat to carry you back to the Portadown bank – to get home you had to retrace your steps, a journey of several miles.

This then was my hunting ground with the rod and my friends. We were keen but clueless. We rarely caught anything over 4lbs and when we did, it was always beaten about the head and laid on the bank – a potent symbol of pre-pubescent bravado. We were the Great White Hunters: the pike were olive-and-cream trophies, carried home to impress Mum.

On the odd occasion we did encounter a big fish – anything over 10lbs was massive – it was usually a disaster. Fish were lost at the net or because we'd forgotten the net; lost through overexcitement and inexperience; because the tackle was cheap and/or broken or countless other stupid reasons.

The ones that got away are always remembered better than those landed, especially when they disappeared at

a rate of knots into the weeds in a huge swirl.

All fishermen, regardless of age believe, in the big one, whether it's there or not. It's the spark in the imagination that drives us on. When you're ten, the big one is GIGANTIC.

I saw it myself. A huge pike had taken my bait and was swimming away with it close to the surface. I could see her heading directly towards a waterhen in open water. I was certain the pike was for attacking the bird. I ran down the bank, picked up the rod and struck. There was a sickening crack as the line snapped and an explosion on the surface, like a hand grenade had been thrown into the river. It was a monster.

The biggest fish I ever hooked in my childhood was played on the rod. The river was the colour of milky coffee, stirred up by an autumn flood. I was fishing close to the mouth of the Cusher and saw the rod tip twitch sharply round. I gave it a little line, then tightened up and struck.

Suddenly the fish charged off down river with the flow. It was so powerful and fast I was forced to walk after it. The rod was bent hard.

My friends were all round me, shouting and looking for a first sight of it.

It was then we remembered there was no landing net. I'd forgotten it. The pike began to thrash about on the surface near a bend in the steep bank. It was close to, if not over 20lbs. None of us had seen a fish anywhere near that big before. The head was huge, the excitement and

suspense, unbearable. How was I going to get it out?

We noticed a small lip, or shelf, of sand at the bottom of the bank. 'I'll try to beach her here,' I said. There was a fierce flow running, but by sheer luck, the huge fish came alongside it and actually beached herself.

What to do next? The fish was half in, half out of the water. The bank was too steep and slippery to walk down. There was a raging torrent running so if anyone fell in, they'd be a goner. I handed my rod, The Rod, to Brian and decided to try to get to the fish.

As I began to climb down, the great fish could see me and began to lift her enormous head and tail in an arc. She was trying to get off the sand. Two or three more times she did the same and little by little her heavy, beautifully camouflaged body began to turn.

I was halfway to her, my wellie boots slipping and sliding on the muddy bank, when it happened. She made a violent lunge. Brian was holding the line so tight that the nylon snapped like cotton.

It felt like I was watching it in slow motion. With all resistance gone, she was able to turn her big, bony head and roll off the sand. Her massive frame was weightless again in the dirty water. She was gone.

I cried. The tears of disappointment, anger and frustration were unstoppable. I didn't blame my friend; it was just my rotten luck. If only I'd remembered the landing net we might have landed her.

The pain of losing a big fish is gut-wrenching no matter what your age. There is a replay mechanism in

the brain designed specially for such occasions. Over and over it will show you the parting vision of your prize catch. Again and again it will be accompanied by heartache. It's a nightmare.

I remember that fish better than any other I ever actually landed on the rod. Over the years I had a secret partnership with it. It was always left back in its place after our weekend adventures. I lost it when my brother moved away from home and took it with him. It was packed off with the rest of his belongings. A lovely metallic blue, nine footer made by ABU took its place. But it wasn't the same.

The memory of the rod faded with time and soon it was out of sight, out of mind. It was to tell me a different tale many years later when I saw it for the last time. By then Stephen was a golf-playing family man, whose only interest in fishing was satisfied by a once-a-year outing with me.

It was Saturday and I'd called into his house in Banbridge with a brace of woodcock, and a pheasant that Andy and I had shot in the wilds of south Armagh.

I was setting the birds down on the windowsill outside the kitchen when for some reason I turned my head and it caught my eye, or perhaps it whispered. I saw the discarded butt of the rod first. There was an instant flash of recognition at seeing my old friend.

The years had not been kind. It was covered in cobwebs and dust and jammed into a crevice below the flat roof of the carport.

The matt-grey blank was caked in grime.

Worse still – I saw that it was broken. There was a

ragged fracture in the middle of the bottom section.

I stood for quite a time just taking it in: looking at what I didn't want to see.

Then the questions: How did it happen and when? Did he contact the Sundridge factory to see if they had a replacement section? Why didn't he tell me about it? There was also an odd mixture of disappointment and sadness. So much of my childhood was mixed up with it, so many happy memories. It was a break with the past.

Stephen had no idea how much I loved that rod. I never told him about the big fish I'd lost with it or the small ones caught with it. I never even told him I'd seen it broken. And I never told him how much I valued it, because as a wee boy, I'd built it with my big brother.

Then again, maybe he did know. Maybe the rod had spoken to him too. And just maybe, he'd kept its shattered remains as a memento: a reminder of a time when we were bound together as tightly as the yellow and black threads on the rod itself.