

Clan

Thoughts about the rod...



BY APPOINTMENT TO HRH
THE PRINCE OF WALES
MANUFACTURER AND REPAIRER
OF FISHING TACKLE

Thoughts about the rod...

Text by Harry Jamieson.

I would like to say from the outset that although short rods are very popular at present, I believe that the modern angler's passion for their use is fundamentally misplaced and unsound, both in their use for dry fly fishing for trout and for fly fishing for salmon. I'm aware that this statement is probably contrary to most modern thinking in the tackle industry to day, so I'd like to tell you the reasons behind this thinking.

If we look back briefly at the evolution of fishing rods and the many and various materials that have been used we find that they have been made from not only a variety of tree woods in the early days but man made materials like metal tank aerials, glass fibre and now carbon fibre. In trout and salmon fly fishing I believe the first major breakthrough in rod manufacture came when the natural qualities of greenheart was found to make excellent fly rods.

Several rod manufacturers perfected the use of this incredible wood with the help of one or two expert anglers of that era. The use of split cane came a little later and was pioneered originally by some American rod manufactures but their rods were made solely for the trout fishing market and so short split cane rods became very popular with trout fishermen in America.

The use of and the building of long two handed cane rods never really took off in USA. The use of split cane however became popular here in UK and rod makers produced many trout fishing rods for the trout market.

Greenheart trout rods became almost obsolete over night except for its use in the salmon fishing world where greenheart maintained its prowess for some time before it also was finally overtaken by split cane. Split cane salmon rods were built by some early British manufactures but only in short lengths if compared with the old and very long greenheart rods.

This was mainly due to the fact that the glues



Master rod builder, Harry Jamieson, in front of his workshop at Dorback Road, Nethybridge. In the background you can see some greenheart rods, the one to the right was made by the famous Alexander Grant.

of the time were not strong enough to hold together long split cane rods because they found that continuous spey casting and being soaked with water tended to make the early glues fail so the rods tended to fall apart despite the use of intermediate whippings.

History records that the professional salmon anglers of Scotland in the late 1800's and early 1900's did not take to these shorter split cane salmon rods of 12 or 13 ft in length. They were however very popular with the visiting gentry as they did cast a good overhead line but were poor at the spey cast or the switch cast that a longer greenheart would deliver with ease.

Greenheart rods of 15, 16, 17, 20 or 22 foot remained popular for the experts to use. Lifting and casting without shooting an inch of line these doyens of salmon angling world could



The next spey casting champion, Blair Banks, performs his skills at Spey Side. In his mature technique he remains of the legendary caster Peter Anderson.



lift and deliver regular fishing casts of 50 yards or more with ease. I doubt if any of the modern rods or fancy profiled fly lines even in the hands of some of the experts of today could achieve that without a great deal of physical effort and stripping and shooting miles of loose line. So where have we gone wrong?

I have watched anglers in summer conditions on many Scottish rivers tackle up with short, stiff, modern, carbon fibre double handers of 12 or 14 ft and try to fish fine and far off, which is a much-needed tactic in bright low water summer conditions. These shorter rods throw a much shorter line than their 16 ft springtime rods.

The misplaced thinking is that because they want to use light tackle and to deliver fine and far off that a short rod is the answer to their dreams. For some unexplained reason these anglers assume that any rod over 13 ft in length is extremely powerful and that the longer the rod the more powerful it is, but if we think about it, it is very often the other way about. If I had my way I'd use a 16 ft in the spring and at least a 17 ft 6 inch rod in the summer, if I could lay my hands on one.

What is the origin of the short rod craze we as instructors have to live with today? Personally I believe it is all the fault of the dry fly fisherman! The dry fly man has dictated the use of short but quite stiff, or shall we say purposeful, rods that throw a short but comparatively heavy tapered line that turns over a long tapered leader with a small dry fly attached.

This fashion has spread to salmon rod manufacturers so today we see short stocky powerful rods that are light in weight yet have to be loaded with a heavy and oddly tapered line if we are to get anywhere.

Long dry fly rods were the vogue a hundred years ago but times have changed but the use of progressive tapers has not, it is claimed that these short rods for salmon are easy to fish with and much less tiring to use than long rods... bollocks!!!

It's not the length of the rod which tires the



angler, but the amount of effort required to bend it while making a cast, and the shorter and stiffer the rod the greater effort is needed.

My knowledge of the Greek classics are a trifle rusty these days but was it not Archimedes (who must have been a fly fisherman) who said “Give me lever long enough, and I will lift the earth”. Casting simply boils down to the question of leverage, the leverage contained within the even distribution of the power taper profile of the rod.



To clarify that statement: – If an angler can comfortably exert “x” amount of force in a cast without tiring himself then a longer rod with the same amount of energy input would make a much longer cast. So if we build two rods one 17 ft and the other 14 ft each requiring the same energy input and each loaded with the appropriate weight line what happens?

The angler will find that with the three foot extra leverage of the longer rod he can throw some 10 yards further with equal effort. He gets a longer rod stroke a slower swing and far more power into the cast. I suggest that I would rather use a 17 footer all day than a stocky 14 footer as the effort of casting a long line would be far easier on my old muscles than forcing a short rod to cover the equivalent area of water, and besides it also does not give the good presentation at distance that a 17 footer would.



It’s the rod that does the work for you, and it’s the leverage that is needed, for if the lever is short it requires far more force to be applied to produce a similar result and for a short rod to work it has to be stiffer and stronger, while a long lever can be lighter and much easier to work. The weight of long rods is not a problem particularly when modern materials are used. The old greenheart rods may be heavy when compared to carbon fibre but the balance and progressive tapered actions of those old rods compensated and were not so fearsome to wield as some people may think.



The modern short rods if they are to be effective must be stiff and quick in action and be loaded with a heavy line if they are to be a serviceable

casting tool. Now a heavy line is just exactly what one does not want in summer salmon fishing because it usually falls heavily onto the water and usually delivers the fly with some power. Furthermore when a rod is at its extreme distance it rarely delivers the last few feet of line



Former world record holder Scott Mackenzie casting at Ness Side. He is often speaking about Alexander Grant and his ideas.

including the leader gently and straight, hence fine and far off is the cry!

If a rod is made to be light and whippy to throw a light line then it has little casting power to throw a long line particularly in adverse winds. On the other hand if you use a light 17 ft rod it is possible to throw a light line into half a gale with little effort.

It is the power profile of the taper of the rod that is of importance and again history records that greenheart salmon rods were built in the 1800's that could catch a one pound trout and for that fish to put quite a bend into the rod but that very same rod was quite capable of hooking, playing and landing salmon up to 50 lb. as well as picking up and delivering 50 yards of line and presenting a fly dead straight at 50 yards without having to shoot an inch of line.

Tournament methods are all very admirable in themselves but they don't succeed so well in actual fishing. On competition platforms it is possible to lay down 20 yards of line ready to shoot and with the use of fancy profile line tapers cast into the far distance but it generally falls onto the water heavily and rarely does the fly with leader extend fully or arrive with any delicacy! Plus standing on a platform gives extra length to the rods ability to cast a long line.



Taking all things into consideration I would suggest that a 17 or 17 ft 6 inch rod would be the ideal length for a salmon rod for all seasons. It would give real water command and if properly made with a progressive power taper from tip to butt that delivers progressive power from the butt to tip and is matched with a continuous and progressive tapered line from 4 wt back and through to 12 wt at 50 yards it would enable anglers to readily lift and present a cast without the time wasting and energy sapping endless stripping and shooting to deliver good casts up to 50 yards or more!

To end up a final word on rod length. It is far better to use a rod which is really too long for your water than a rod that is too short. Each rod can throw a certain length of line with ease depending on its length and to find that you are compelled to force a rod beyond its natural range is annoying and can be tiring.

So many times I have seen so called experts turn up on big waters with small double handers with shooting head profile lines that have miles of running line and being all macho in trying to be seen to chuck huge distances but at the same time disturbing the actual lies the fish are in and so end the day wondering what went wrong and where are all the fish!

If they only sat down and considered that they have been using a rod for most of the day at its absolute physical limit and if they had only had the gumption and tried a 17 footer it would have been child's play to cover all and more of the water with ease and delicacy and ended up as fresh as a daisy and probably with a fish or two.

Each season I watch anglers using short rods, trying to do the impossible, and in doing so absolutely ruining what casting ability they had. They heave and jerk and try all kinds of impossible tricks to get out another yard or so to cover a fish, until all the smoothness, which is the essence of good casting, have gone by the board! So much for short rods and all these fancy tapered profile lines of today they are, I'm sure, the main root causes of most, if not all, of the atrocious casting we see today. Quickness and jerkiness are the casting instructor's nightmare!



The philosophy behind a modern Clan rod is closely related to ideas that was presented by Alexander Grant, the Wizard from Ness, more than a hundred years ago.

Finally the casting of over short rods for fly fishing is one if not the main cause for the angler to use too much force simply because rods are usually too short and stiff and once they have got into that style it is difficult to correct. So many anglers and I am afraid even some APGAI instructors appear to be besotted with the use of short rods. It seems to me to be the in thing to be seen to do.

So to repeat myself once more if it takes "X" amount of force to throw 40 yards of line, that power can be gained in two ways: (1) by using

a longer lever and applying comparatively little power there to, or (2) by using a short lever and wearing out your muscles... lets face it in either case the force exerted by the tip of the rod is exactly the same!!!

To compliment my hypothesis we have to consider the profiles of the lines that should be used to utilise to the full the abilities of the longer rod in salmon angling. Again history records that salmon anglers of the greenheart era used mainly plaited silk lines which they usually made up them selves or had made especially to their own requirements.

Although little is recorded in the annals of angling history about the actual profiles of lines used by some of the anglers of yester-year who could and did regularly throw 50 to 60 yards of line without shooting line. Those lines would not have been double tapered I am sure. Simply because once the back taper plus some running line had been let out of the rod tip the lift off and an efficient return cast would be almost impossible to achieve.

We all see that in today's line profiles when the end of the belly of the profile is out of the rod tip plus some running line then the thinner line that follows just has not the weight to efficiently pick up or propel the heavier line in front of it. I believe these long lines that were used to throw these extremely long distances were of a single taper profile.

That is to say at least sixty yards of progressive taper from the front end right through to the point where the plaited silk line was attached to the flax backing. It is also interesting to note that even the long gut leaders used in those days were also finely knotted tapered down to the fly. This together gave a complete and evenly progressive taper over all of sixty yards or more.

This concept is taken once more from the dry fly fisherman who has historically used from the 1700's a double taper profile line of around a 5 weight on a 10 ft 6 to 12 ft rod with a 12 ft tapered leader down to the finest point where the fly is attached.

Yes Sques used a 10 ft 6 rod and Halford used single handed rods of that length as well as double handed rods of 14 ft or more for dry fly fishing on the chalk streams. If we take time to think about it the average dry fly cast on a chalkstream using this set up rarely if ever would require a cast that takes out more line than exceeds the middle of a modern standard double tapered 5 wt line.

Thus from the rod tip down to the fly there is always an even progressive reducing taper that allows for the minimum amount of power input to propel the line forward and yet turn over the long leader properly and present the fly like thistle down. Any other profile of taper would not and does not work so successfully and if used presentation certainly goes out the door. At every stage of the cast or length of cast there is always heavy line pushing out lighter line both to and fro.

I firmly believe the same should apply in the salmon tackle set up where the taper of the entire rig has to be a progressive one right from the point of the fly back to the point on the fly line that determines the distance required to be cast forward. This would be at 50 yards if a 50 yard cast were required.

To illustrate the taper required it would be from a 4 weight at the end evenly progressing upwards through the various weights to 12 weight at 50 yards. It must be remembered that these old boys who achieved these remarkable feats of casting did not shoot line! But could with consummate ease lift off and deliver fishing cast after fishing cast of 50 yards or more for hours on end without getting tired albeit using 17 or even 22 ft greenheart rods and plaited silk lines.

Using a profile line as suggested would have several benefits. Firstly the need to strip and shoot line would be almost eliminated and at what ever length of line was out of the rod tip the rod would easily cope with propelling the line out as there would always be heavier line pushing out lighter line right up to the 50 yard mark! Turn over and presentation also would not be compromised but improved even at these huge distances. The switch and spey casts were

used by these old boys to achieve this casting prowess.

With all the modern technology and modern materials now available to us I believe these achievements could be quite attainable today (even by decrepit buggers like me) if we put our minds to it and get away from the quagmire that the tackle industry has led so many of us into at the moment. I have no qualms in looking at and learning from history.

I believe we should do it more often. I think the tackle industry should listen to the thinking anglers and not dictate what shape and profile tackle we should use. The development potential of short rods is an has been long satisfied in my opinion and the profusion of the many an various profiles in line manufacture indicates to me that the tackle trade is fast running out of new ideas.



“When I saw with my own eyes the result he could produce, I was more impressed than I have ever been by any fisherman’s technique, because everything he did looked right. So few anglers look right in all their actions. But in his case the leisurely sweep of his 17-footer, the seemingly endless length of line uncoiling in the air, the perfect fall of the fly, and smooth running of the whole machine looked perfect, and when you have learned the trick for yourself, it also feels perfect...”

Jock Scott, from the book “Fine and Far off”, concerning Alexander Grants casting skills.



Carron, classic spey fly tied by Sven-Olof Hard.