

The glorious June 16th

By Roy Webster

For The Boy Roy June 16, 1949, could not have arrived too soon.

After a statutory 90-day lay-off, it was the opening day of the new coarse fishing season and now, after what seemed an age he could connect again with Isaac Walton's gentle art.

The fishing close season came into force by the Mundella Act of Parliament in 1878 and was enshrined in the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Act in 1923.

But, apart from game fisheries of salmon and trout, there was little or no enforcement of the law protecting coarse fish such as roach, bream, perch, pike and tench, more especially during the war years of 1939-1945 and beyond when working classes depended on catching substantial numbers of these species to supplement the ration books that limited supplies of staple foodstuffs until the early 1950s.

In 1948, a wind of change swept across the waters. The Rivers Board Act divided the nation into separate administrative areas, in our case the East Suffolk and Norfolk River Board.

Suddenly uniformed fishery bailiffs appeared on the scene, checking fishing licences and seeking prosecutions for those offences and any violations of the close season.

The Boy, badgered by a mother who had spent the previous three months lamenting the absence of the usual weekly fish supply, did not need her encouragement "to get out there fishing again".

His angling equipment consisting of a pre-war antiquated cane rod strapped together with binder twine, an ancient centre-pin reel and goose quill floats, were crowded into a frayed, wicker creel and awaited on the doorstep, along with a bait can containing garden lob worms and muckheap brandlings.

So it was now the burning question - where would he visit tomorrow, the glorious 16th? Would it be the North Walsham, Dilham Canal down the Green Lane or Taylor's Cut that meandered past the bottom of the Dilham family's garden?

Since it was a Thursday, there was a second question.

Should he fish early morning, before school, later in the afternoon following a six-mile bike dash home or should he bunk off school completely, feigning sickness like some of the men in the village who called off from work?

His mother wasn't having the latter. "Either you can get out of bed at dawn and fish 'til eight before school or I'll pack you some grub and you can make off straight from North Walsham," she instructed loftily.

The Boy decided on the second option. His preparation for the impending school certificate exams at The Paston would have to wait. He planned to be at the waterside of the Canal by 5pm, fishing for bream from a swim opposite the grazing land at East Ruston Common. Arriving at the ancient Tonnage Bridge, where navigation tolls were once paid, he surveyed the scene. Two men were already trying their luck in a clear channel between the lily pads, where angry-looking dark green/brown dragonflies and more delicate blue damsels flitted beside the marginal reeds above the deep yellow lily flowers and king cups.

"Caught anything?" he asked the men. "No bites yet, we've only been here 20 minutes," one responded hopefully.

The Boy smiled. Those fellows wouldn't catch much using hefty tackle more suitable for sea fishing.

Pedalling and pushing his bike over almost a mile of rough ground, much of it the legacy of 1940 Army deepening the canal to act as a tank trap against a possible German invasion, The Boy duly arrived at his chosen spot.

He slashed through a jungle of overgrown brambles and nettles with a sharp long handled sickle, locally known as a reap hook.

Within minutes he had hacked his way to the water's edge. The only sign of life was a motherly mallard protecting her hatch of ducklings and the twitter of reed warblers nesting in the bankside thicket.

Gazing into the distance he spotted a Suffolk mare with a sturdy foal trotting towards the opposite bank. Now, suddenly brimming with enthusiasm he prised open a can of worms and a hook was baited and ready when mother and son their tails swishing up spray to deter bloodsucking flying insects, entered the shallows.

Suddenly, the bream appeared on the turbid surface, their black dorsal fins resembling mini sharks as they scythed among eight hooves, feasting on edible morsels disturbed by the sudden activity.

The Boy cast his bait skilfully downstream and instantly the float dipped beneath the surface and a bream of about 2lb was played into the landing net. After carthorse and son had clambered ashore The Boy reeled in another 11 fish up to 4lb.

Making for home as the skies darkened he met up with the two men again. "What have you caught?" one asked. The Boy opened his carrier bag and displayed two sizeable fish which he had retained for the family pot. "I had a dozen like these," he told the men, who sheepishly admitted they had caught nothing.

"Can I buy your fish?" wondered the younger man.

"No, you'll have to catch your own," responded The Boy sharply, knowing full well his mother was waiting to prepare his catch for tomorrow's dinner.

Thus, it was bream from the Canal on an action packed opening day and next time out the target would be pike from The Cut.



Picture - Roy with a mixed bag of NWD canal fish mid 60's