

## **BREAM FOR BENJAMIN, CHERRIES FOR THE BOY.**

**By Roy Webster**

I want you up early tomorrow morning, Boy” commanded the Old Man.

“What for”?

“We’re going fishing on the Dilham Canal”

“What time?”

“Five O’clock.”

Five AM? The Boy Roy recoiled at the unacceptable thought. At the best of times he was a bit of a sleepy head. He loved his fishing, but not that early even though the new season was barely two weeks old.

“I don’t want to come,” was his immediate response.

“You will when you learn where and why we’re going,” grinned the Old Man.

“We are off to the canal to catch a couple of decent bream for your grandad,” he explained.

“Grandad who”?

“Well you have one in Kent and another just six miles away on Swanton Hill, so which one do you think it is?” posed the Old Man sarcastically.

“OK, we’re going to Swanton Abbott to see Grandpa Benjamin, but why so early,” wondered The Boy.

“First we have to catch brace of his favourite edible Canal bream for him to enjoy, then call in at the cherry orchard for a chat with your Uncle Harbett before going on up the hill to grandad’s house,” explained the Old Man.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD! The Boy needed no further encouragement. He remembered his first and only visit to the ripe cherry fields, where juicy bright red fruits hung enticingly from the low branches just beyond the reach of his clutching fingertips. Old Uncle Harbett (Flongie to his work mates and husband of Benjamin’s daughter Florence), had picked him a whole full punnet and would do so again, he mused, his mouth slightly watering at the very thought of the treat before his mind turned to the main job in hand on the canal.

“What shall we use for bait?” He queried.

“I’ll dig a few worms tonight from the cow meadow; the bream will go mad for them,” predicted the Old Man. “Now get off to bed.”

Next morning, the fishing tackle was ready on time and so indeed was The Boy, who could hardly wait to get among the vivid beckoning branches of the cherry orchard.

The route to the Canal above the ancient Tonnage Bridge towards Ruston Common was only a 15-minute cycle ride. By 5.30am, with the sun breaking through the misty horizon, father and son, who were greeted angrily by a pair of noisy marsh nesting redshanks, were fishing. They were hoping a brace of the plump bream, whose shadowy shapes were visible in the crystal clear water, would take more than a passing interest in the succulent wriggling lob worms.

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The Boy certainly wanted to get going. His mind was almost unable to escape the mental vision of ripe, sweet smelling dangling cherries. "We better hurry up and catch the fish," he muttered irritably, repeatedly thrashing his fishing line into the gap between the bank side streamer weed and lily pads

By contrast, the Old Man quietly lowered his bait into a promising spot by the far bank weed growth and within twenty minutes the bright red celluloid float dipped beneath the surface. The fish was a plump bream of about 2lb, its scaled skin pigment almost jet black against the sparkling clear water background.

The Boy followed the Old Man's example and adopted the more gentle approach and he too safely reeled in and netted a bream of about the same size. In those early post war years, anglers fishing from common land were permitted to retain two sizable course fish per day for the pot as lawful supplement to the war time ration book.

By 7 am, the early summer sun had risen well above the tree line, casting long, rippling human shadows across the flowing water sending the bream for cover beneath the prolific growth of marginal lily pads bordering the far bank

"The bream are scared and have stopped feeding. No point in staying any longer, we have our fish," declared the Old Man as he dismantled the fishing tackle. He carefully wrapped the twin catch in greaseproof paper and stowed the package in a waterproof carrier bag before the leisurely return home for breakfast and pumping more air into the cycle tyres ready for the longer, more arduous journey.

Arriving at the cherry orchard after the leg aching five miles of mostly uphill pedalling, a number of men and a few women were seen ascending and descending ladders, harvesting the valuable fruit crop that supplied local market stalls and grocery shops. The freshly picked produce was also sold direct by Flongie to the local public and holiday anglers visiting the Canal who turned into the fruit farm's ancient thatched hut fruit shop situated on the roadside pull in car park.

"Where's Uncle Harbett?" yelled the 12 year-old Boy Roy, gazing upwards at the succulent mouth-watering Early Rivers bunched among the lowest, leafy twigs no more than two feet above his reach.

"You looking for me?" smiled a kindly, grey-headed man wearing a flat cap and a 12-bore shotgun tucked under his right arm. It was indeed Uncle Harbett, the Old man's brother in law lurking behind a tree trunk, taking a swig of cold tea from a corona bottle.

"Are you going to pick me some cherries . . . please?" that important last word uttered by The Boy just in time.

Harbett, whose main job was to scare off ravenous starlings raiding the laden trees, unloaded his gun of dust shot cartridges, propped the barrels against a tree trunk, clambered up four rungs of the nearest unoccupied ladder and filled a container with glistening, red cheeked fruit.

"There you are, my boy, some of the best," he smiled, handing over a bulging basket of new season Early Rivers' cherries.

The Boy, muttering his thanks, crammed succulent fruit into one side of his mouth while spitting out the seed stones from the other. Needless to say, this young human conveyor belt rapidly emptied the basket.

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“We’ll go and see your grandpa Benjamin now,” murmured the Boy’s slightly embarrassed Old Man and the pair mounted their steeds and pedalled strenuously up the Swanton Hill to the house of one of the more compelling North Norfolk larger than life characters of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Grandpa Benjamin who passed away well into his nineties was a remarkable individual of amazing historic human interest. In his early years during the nineteenth century he had sustained his considerable mixed family of boys and girls as a professional poacher. Bestowed with rat like cunning he managed to evade threatening apprehension organised by a series of vigilante groups consisting of game-keepers, farm hands and sometimes the village Bobby, not to mention the occasionally concealed vicious, bone shattering, metal man-trap that was actually outlawed in 1827.

With a clean rap sheet, Benjamin then decided to cross the great divide from poacher to a gamekeeper - a job he revelled in, well into his seventies in charge of pheasant rearing for the shoot... and believe it or not, deterring visiting poachers.... on his beat at the North Norfolk Westwick Estate.

His life history was reminiscent of a character straight out of the much-acclaimed works of authors Fred Rolfe (*I Walked by Night*) and DH Lawrence (*Lady Chatterly’s Lover*). During the whole of his adulthood and indeed well into old age it seemed he possessed an uncontrollable urge to transfer his DNA out of every pore in his body into serial parenthood.

He fathered a dozen children from his first marriage before sadly losing his first wife after child birth. Then, a widower in his mid-sixties, he was forced into what is still known as “a shotgun wedding” with a sweet lass from The Big House who would become dubbed an affectionate Stepma by her new ready-made young family.

“GOODNESS GRACIOUS! HIS THIRTEENTH BABY IS ON ITS WAY” muttered the village side of the mouth gossip mongers.

But he did not stop there. Onward into his seventies and now a remarried husband, Benjamin resolutely sired another three offspring, bringing his lifetime grand total of children (those we know about) to sixteen.

Many of them grew up to distribute their eager genetic material across four continents, rewarding Benjamin with an untold number of worldwide grandchildren and great grandchildren, most of whom he never met. The Boy Roy became acquainted with only few of the impressively large number of aunts, uncles and cousins although he twice met his Aunt Edith who had married (some suggested partnered) the internationally famous multi-millionaire, stained glass window painter Louis Davis whose artistry decorated churches far and wide.

Louis first met Edith when, touring North Norfolk, he knocked on a door of a cottage on Westwick Hill and his request for a glass of water was answered by the pretty teenager whom he eventually persuaded to accompany him back to his expansive Middlesex home as his “companion”. Aunt Edith, who had enjoyed a wonderfully active artistic life in Pinner, passed away peacefully aged 98 while in care at a Lowestoft home.

However, father and son were now on the road again and arrived at Grandpa’s cottage to be greeted by a mother hen and her chicks. Benjamin, now well into his 80s, was resting on the chickens’ coop, puffing and wheezing on a roll-up of Churchman’s County Shag.

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“You brought me two little bream from the old canal,” he chuckled when shown the fish “Your Stepma will souce (i.e. pickle) them for me,” he informed his eleventh born, son Ernest, while simultaneously choking his umpteenth grandson Boy Roy with acrid tobacco fumes.

“You won’t live long enough to enjoy them if you keep smoking and champing on that stinking weed!” hollered a despairing Stepma from the house doorway after spotting her husband furtively slip a fresh plug of chewing tobacco between his teeth.

During his early years Benjamin, while residing in Witton, within convenient walking distance of the NWD Canal, had spent many a happy hour fishing at Ebridge. And he spread widely the encouraging news of his splendid catches of coarse fish species and eels thus attracting many rod and line enthusiasts to visit this man made prolific fishery for a leisurely and rewarding angling weekend. He finally passed away at the ripe old age of 94 after a colourful life and chequered career of extreme excitement and risky adventure, all within a radius of no more than five miles of North Walsham in the heart of the rural Norfolk.

However, the Boy Roy’s Old Man Ernest loved his Stepma who had behaved and treated the whole family as a real mother would. And he continued loyally to visit her frequently until she re-joined her beloved Benjamin in the local grave yard.

While most would regard Benjamin’s way of life as outrageously non-conformist, verging on pure fiction or make-believe, it was for him no more than a normal near-to-nature day to day existence. As for the once famous Westwick cherry orchards, they are long gone, grubbed out of the orchards due to prohibitive, high labour-intensive economics and then sawn up for firewood.

And the progressive history of ancient Websters? Originally named Websterre they were among 1,000 immigrant Flemish weavers who, hoping to escape the brutality of the burgeoning Spanish Inquisition began arriving in the NorthWalsham area during the early thirteenth century.

They succeeded in offering an integral contribution to the hand wheel wool weaving industry in the then important North Norfolk Town of Worstead. The efforts of those early collectives directly resulted in the dropped “A” Worsted fabric products becoming world famous and in great demand following the Industrial Revolution expansion.

Grandpa Benjamin Webster and many of his vast number of descendants also demonstrated they required not the assistance of the wheels but a reliable memory and a well- polished imagination in order to spin verbal, farfetched and sometimes entertaining historical yarns to this very day!

