



A load of Old Bull

By Roy Webster

A full harvest moon hung over the eastern horizon resembling a giant fluorescent cheddar cheese. Its dark yellow hue filtered through the early evening mist, whose water droplets refracted the setting sunlight bouncing off the earth's natural satellite and enlarging the vision.

The Boy Roy was spending the evening fishing his favourite North Walsham, Dilham Canal. He had rowed the family dinghy from its moorings in Taylors Cut*; dropping

anchor by that lush, green flood plain, adjacent to the ancient Tonnage Bridge, where a lumbering adult Hereford bull grazed, protecting half a dozen sprightly young heifers.

The Boy and this proud bovine beast were not strangers, for earlier that summer, while absorbed studying vast shoals of fish in the crystal clear water, the 14-year-old, oblivious to the soft sound of footfall behind him, was suddenly startled by something cold and damp caressing the back of his neck. Turning sharply, he was greeted by a slavering beast with bloodshot eyes and metal-ringed nostrils that began snorting into The Boy's right ear while pounding the earth with his left hoof.

Being caught on the horns of a dilemma was one thing. Facing the long pointed antennae of a huge Hereford bull, with the avenues of escape appearing strictly limited and very wet, was certainly a more serious predicament demanding instant action.

Perched precariously on a tuft of grass, there were only two choices, either dive into the canal or courageously face up to this one tonne ruminant. Somehow, controlling blind panic, the beleaguered Boy chose the second option and fumbled a crust of bread from his bait box.

This was gingerly presented to the slavering animal, throatily grumbling while his small herd of inquisitive females gathered in an orderly half circle.

Happily, the food was accepted by this great ox that decided to back off the canal bank to munch the titbit.

The Boy seized his chance, slithering along the slippery slope to his boat tethered to upstanding bulrushes. He considered his options. Most certainly, he was not keen to give up the great sport he had been enjoying in the cattle drink area where coarse fish shoaled in abundance to feast on the live mud bound bounty stirred up by the cloven hooves. He decided he would attempt to make friends with this huge bovine

he named Bertie the Bull by offering him further tasty titbits in days to come. Thus, a great friendship between man and beast was struck on the Canal bank where the Boy would continue to fish protected by Bertie and his loyal harem.

On his next visit to this favoured venue his fishing tackle box contained stale bread crust from rationed loaves along with turnips and carrots from the family vegetable garden and a dozen Worcester Pearmain apples quietly scrumpled from a low overhanging branch of neighbouring tree.

On disembarking on his favoured fishing spot the Boy spotted Bertie and his female followers grazing in the distance. Instantly the alert bull led a united herd stampeding to a waterside greeting. Where were their snacks? The fodder was duly distributed in fair shares and the cattle departed leaving the Boy to enjoy catching bream and roach until dusk.

On this late summer's evening the appearance of little milk-white mounds of luminescence thrusting through the marsh grass were beckoning. The Boy, no longer fearful of Bertie, searched the water meadow to gather these gifts from Mother Nature - many dozens of wild mushrooms.

It was 1947, several years before cultivated mushrooms returned to the shops. The fungi of the marshes were field mushrooms (*agaricus campestris*) and the much larger, dinner plate-sized, horse mushrooms (*agaricus arvensis*).

The fishing creel was hastily emptied of tackle into the well of the boat and the water proof carrier bag that contained the food tin and bottle of lemonade was also made available. The harvest commenced illuminated by a moon now higher in the sky. A whole hour elapsed and, with the light fading, some 20lb of the velvet-skinned fungi now nestled, stalk down, in the containers, already earmarked for the home frying pan and next day's vegetable and fruit market.

The Boy unhitched the boat from its loosely-tied reef knot and was leaping aboard when a loud bellow rang across the water. In the middle distance, a man waving his arms angrily hollered: "Row the boat ashore, you thief. You've stolen my ruddy mushrooms."

"Your mushrooms, Sir? I don't think so. I have them in my boat so they must be mine," laughed The Boy as he lay back on the oar blades to bite water. The elderly man, face puce with rage, waded into the shallows in the hope of intercepting the escape. He overstepped the mark and finished waist high in the canal, his heavy hobnails rooting him to the cloying bottom mud.

"Bye bye" teased The Boy. "Better luck next time." "I'll see your father about all of this." threatened the irate butt of the taunting. The Boy was untroubled for he could already hear his Old Man's response "Mushrooms, mushrooms? Don't know what you mean. None here, Old boy," would be the innocent tone of his reply.

Packed neatly in pre-war 1lb punnets the bulk of these edible fungi, growing in abundance on the Canal pastures, were delivered by bicycle trailer to market the next morning, the monetary proceeds shared between father and son.

Although mushroom farming eventually resumed post war, collectors continued to

free forage on marsh, pasture and woodland for their favourite fungi, not least the tasty monster nut brown-scaled "Prince" (*agaricus augustus*) which flourishes in groups along the margins of spruce woods and rural roadsides or the much desired Cep (*boletus edulis*, known as the Penny Bun) that favours woodland rides and footpaths.

However, a few words of caution. Although scouring our Canal flood plains, pastures and green lanes for edible fungi is a most interesting means of taking exercise and gastronomically rewarding, there are a few species that can fool the unsuspecting amateur with disastrous results.

The poisonous Yellow Stainer (*agaricus xanthodermus*) which appears similar and grows among field mushrooms is one example and another is the Death Cap (*amanita phalloides*) of which one mouthful is sufficient to kill an adult. The same caution applies to the hallucinogenic red and white-spotted *amanita muscaria*, whose stone or plastic replica with a painted gnome perched on top, is often favoured as a garden ornament.

If you fancy becoming an experienced safe gatherer of edible fungi from the canal lowlands it is essential to read a field guide. And when you have reached the bottom of the last page, the next step is: read it all again, just to be certain you will not be grilling a "wrong 'un" for the mother-in-law!

* The correct name for the man made Channel that linked the Dilham brick making works with the NW Canal and River Ant above Wayford bridge is Taylor's Cut. The local land owning Taylor family financed the brick company and the excavation of the Cut. The Norfolk dialect pronouncing Taylor came over as a posh sounding Tyler. Thus the incorrect spelling wrongly entered the official history books.

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