

Lotta otter Lit up by Lantern Man

By Roy Webster

"You are off fishing then, Boy Roy, where to?" questioned Old Sam, who often ambled from his nearby cottage for a chat with the lad's parents.

"I've sunk our boat, rowed it into a sharp stake in the dyke, so I've hacked a path through the old Broad reed bed beyond the alders and willows to reach the Canal about 400 yards from where it joins the River Ant above Wayford Bridge," explained The Boy. "I'm taking my torch so I can see to fish in the dark when the bream feed best."

"You had better watch out for the little lantern men," grinned Old Sam. "They roam about in the alders once the light goes."

Lantern men, lantern men? The Boy shrugged his shoulders.

Old Sam was having him on again: "a proper wind-up merchant if ever there was one", he thought. Thus, dismissing Old Sam's warning as nothing more than a joke, the young angler crushed his way through the reed and rush growth, traversed the wide ditch along a fallen tree trunk and within half an hour he was at the waterside in sight of the confluence where the Dilham Canal meets Taylor's Cut, and converges into the River Ant proper.

The Boy had previously fed in liberal quantities of mashed boiled potatoes bound into a tasty mixture with hen's layers mash and a sprinkling of fish meal. This was the magical mixture hungry bream could not resist and he baled in a few more handfuls to tempt the fish into what he hoped would be a feeding frenzy.

His tackle consisted of an old greenheart rod, an ancient Starback centre pin reel carrying thick braided line, a swan quill float and a size eight hook tied to 18 inches of cat gut baited with bread and fishmeal paste.

It was the summer of 1947. Man-made synthetic materials had yet to be manufactured into items of fishing tackle so The Boy had to make the best of pre-war equipment from the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, it was long before fibre glass rods, nylon monofilament line and fixed spool reels revolutionized the sport that attracted during the 1970s more than four million anglers to the nation's rivers, canals, lakes and ponds.

Meanwhile, The Boy had to manage with rudimentary kit with which he had managed to become adept at catching the Canal coarse fish of varying sizes.

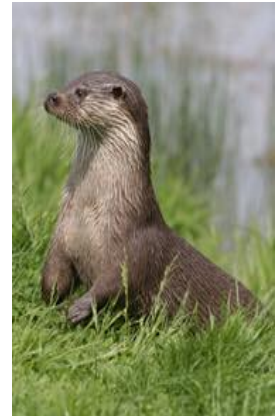
He noted pinhead bubbles had begun to rise to the still surface, a clear indication that bream were hoovering up the free offerings scattered on the canal bed. The baited hook was neatly and quietly cast into the beckoning hotspot.

Within minutes the red-topped quill dithered, glided across the surface before dipping out of sight.

The Boy struck into the fish and a 2lb bream came struggling to the bank where it was carefully gathered in a prewar shrimp net, unhooked and slipped into a home-made keep net of strawberry bird protection mesh, stitched to fence wire hoops, weighted with three inches of lead piping.

Three more fish of similar size were in the bag before the water erupted. Mr. Cuthbert Peck was carrying out yet another annoying trial run of his motor racing dinghy that sent a two-foot high wash beating down the reeds and rushes on all banks, scattering fish in all directions.

It was more than an hour before the bream returned and fed again, and now the light was fading. The Boy decided to fish on by battery torch light but suddenly his attention was attracted by a loud splashing commotion on his right by the pussy willow shubbery, followed by the sound of teeth munching on flesh and bone. The Boy turned the beam of his torch towards the animal sounds and illuminated a small group of otters, a mother and two kits feeding on a brace of plump bream.



This attractive family of aquatic mammals and The Boy had been fishing in the same swim, all of them successfully, it appeared. At that point in the proceedings He never spotted a flickering light beyond the bushes.
LANTERN MAN?

After the war otters were still being hunted by a blood-thirsty section of the community who still derived an obscene pleasure in setting a pack of hounds against one terrified animal forced into an outnumbered, often losing battle for survival.

But this mother had managed to avoid the hounds and was now expertly filleting fish flesh for her young and The Boy decided to leave them to it. He had witnessed a balance of nature episode working in the raw when coarse fish were thriving in the Canal.

He emptied the live contents of his keep net into the canal to rejoin the huge bream shoal that would not only provide the Boy with a great future fishing but also help to sustain the young otters into a healthy, if not entirely safe, adulthood.

His return home was midway through the reed jungle when his lamp batteries gave out. Under an overcast sky with no moon or stars for guidance, he was homing by instinct, alone in a watery wilderness.

Without mishap he made it to the boggy alder carr, but his sense of relief suddenly turned to alarm for, between the standing timbers rising from the water-logged peat, his attention was drawn to the almost subliminal flickering flashes of light. The Boy froze. Had he met up with the Lantern Men? Perhaps Old Sam had not been joking after all! Suddenly a slight breeze, no more than a whispering zephyr, brushed the branches and cleared the air at ground level. The Lantern Men were gone, leaving The Boy mystified.

However in the new school term it suddenly became clear during chemistry lessons that he had witnessed that dark night an example of ignis fatuus - the spontaneous combustion of the marsh gas methane ignited by traces of phosphorous from decaying vegetation.

Old Sam had called these ephemeral flames Lantern Men, while others describe them as Will-o'-the-wisps or Jack-o'-lanterns.

And young otters, what was their future? Not promising. The harsh winter of 1962/3 took a heavy toll on their population as rivers and broads and canals froze over for weeks on end. And, although hunting these animals that had become the people's favourite via the pen and film of Henry Williamson's (Taka the Otter), was outlawed, this aquatic mammal then unluckily fell foul of the coypru extermination campaign. Quite simply the spring cages could not discriminate between the two species and resulted in numbers of otters visiting the taxidermists. In addition, some very toxic agricultural pesticides also took a heavy toll on all wildlife until they too became banned by stricter government conservation policies.

Thanks to popular protection Acts of Parliament, otters have made a welcome comeback, much to the delight of millions of wildlife lovers of all ages, who would never forgive anglers if ever they managed to secure the brutal otter cull a selfish vocal minority continues to demand. Ironically while the otter population increases the otter hound has become an endangered species.

Taka, the healthy Canal otter, has delighted our nature lovers walking and boating along the waterway. He has chased off the marauding mink and Little Ratty (the Water Vole) is consequently staging a marvellous recovery from the unwanted attention of this relentless alien predator originally imported and farmed for its high quality fur.

Thus long awaited changes for the better along our once famous industrial Canal may be detected already in the softer and more comforting breezes of its own "wind in the willows". And stand by for more. Some say "Lantern Men" have already been spotted on the darkest marshes. So keep watch. As the nights draw in the ghost of Old Sam may be next to appear!