

The Boy Roy and his Old Man gently quanted their ancient weather-beaten wooden row boat through the lush green beds of rushes. Suddenly, they were there, in the open water of the once busy Dilham Staithe where small wherries once frequently traded animal and sometimes human foodstuffs via local water ways such as the NWD Canal, the River Ant and the ancient Dilham Cut long before road and rail transport became the dominant, cheapest and fastest means of wholesale delivery of bulk necessities.

However, father and son were not there to admire the decaying ancient corn transporter abandoned in the overgrown Staithe moorings. It was the early evening of Saturday June 16th, 1945 - the first day of a brand new peaceful fishing season following the Allies May 8th nationwide VE day celebrations of hugely relieved populations. And thanks to the Americans, Worldwide peace that year was also assured in the Far East and celebrated on VJ day, August 14.

Before the war the Old Man had spent many a happy hour in the staithe, boat fishing among heavy shoals of bream. Question was: after more than five years of deadly conflict throughout the northern hemisphere were those splendid specimens still there? Father and son clearly were mustering a family intention to find out.

During hostilities boat anglers were considered too easy a machine gun target for low flying enemy aircraft on daylight air raids, the strict advice was to remain on dry land where there was nearby cover. So for the duration of war the Old man and Boy visited the bank of fertile waters of the North Walsham ,Dilham Canal where, for much of the year leafy trees and bushes thrived from Dilham to Honing providing an ideal green camouflage canopy against the pilot of a low flying Luftwaffe Messerschmitt seeking to target human activity. ,not on And after a hopefully successful new season Saturday evening at the Staithe the next big peace plan was to revisit to their favoured war time Canal hotspot, this time by row boat early Sunday morning.

Although trading had long ceased the Dilham Staithe remained very much alive. Reed warblers flitted actively to and from one precarious water borne perch to another. Resident moorhens were muttering moodily at the human disturbance of the natural habitat they called home before a pair of swans with

five freshly hatched cygnets in tow, paddled up targeting their unmistakable hissing displeasure at the human interlopers.

Despite a public right of way there was no visible sign of recent human activity on the staithe only frequent sounds suggesting civilisation was not far away. These indications, reverberating on the evening air, were repeated dull thuds suggesting wood was striking wood. The Old man responded instantly to the Boy's unsaid question. "The lads have started playing bowls again at the Cross Keys pub at the top of Mill road. What you can hear is one bowl crashing into another on route to the Jack. It is the welcoming sound of peace arriving in the village!"

After manoeuvring the boat to within easy casting distance to the clear weed free lagoon fringed by flat, fresh green lilies the Old Man dropped anchor - a home-made contraption of concrete set in a rusty metal bucket attached to wagon rope. Aside from rolling and lighting up a best St. Julian tobacco cigarette and inhaling deeply he sat stock still while focussing the surface for signs of feeding fish as the sun sank lower towards the Western horizon tree tops.

Within minutes he had his answer. For where he had earlier ground baited clear swims with a rich appetising menu of hens layers mash and porridge oats laced with red worms and fly larvae, masses of pin head bubbles continued to surface with no other explanation beyond the certainty that the bream were feeding ravenously.

Baiting pre-war on catgut size eight hooks with lob worm tails, red topped float tackle was gently cast into the bubbling hot spot. It was instant action. Father and Son saw their floats quiver, lay flat and plunge from view resulting in two sizable common bream being played almost simultaneously into waiting landing nets and carefully hoisted aboard. Both were transfixed by the wonderful, deep bronze quality of two four pound plus specimens with not a single scale out of place..

"We are not taking these two beauties home for the ferrets" declared the Old Man sternly, "They are going back in".

Their total catch, all returned alive, that peaceful Saturday evening amounted to a dozen quality bream, a massive bream/roach hybrid and a pristine solitary 2 lb red finned Rudd that had seized a worm bait on the drop. Thus they had achieved and enjoyed a great start to a brand new season of peace and tranquillity.

Now, rising at sun up and bristling with unbridled enthusiasm, the pair had tackled up in their trusty old boat. By now the Old Man was rowing the vessel urgently from the Home Cut and into the NWD Canal estuary leading to the ancient Tonnage Bridge where tolls were once levied on water borne traders. However, village rumour suggested the Army was in the vicinity Saturday, dismantling and removing the defensive war time explosives that had been embedded in the foundations of local bridges. So, was the whole site, including the canal, currently out of bounds to civilians while the risky work was in progress?

As the outline of the bridge appeared through the early morning mist, the Old Man shipped oars and produced an ancient pair of binoculars recently purchased in job lot at the Stalham Tuesday auction market

“What’s happening, Pop.” enquired the Boy Roy in urgent tone.

“Well, as far as I can make out the Ack Ack gun is gone, some cement work has recently been done on the brick work just above the water line and, more to the point, there are no officials or warning notices in sight. We are going through”, declared the Old Man confidently.

“But where to”, wondered 12 year old out loud. He most certainly did not want to mix it with a herd of mooing visitors at a cattle drink bordering the grazing marsh.

“Do not concern yourself, young man” smiled the contented Old Man who had managed to escape intact from World War One service and remained eternally thankful he had missed the draft into World War Two by a mere 8 months and instead was recruited as night time village fire watcher

“We are going to fish the wide bend where the East Ruston Cut enters the Canal. There were usually massive shoals of fish there before the war”.

That decided he headed for dry land and moored up to the trunk of a water side alder. "Today we are going to fish from the bank at the head of that bend" he responded to a quizzical frown from his son. "That way we will not scare the fish population to move off. Bring that bucket of ground bait please. There is a bit of flow so we will bait up at the head of the swim and cast downstream where the ingredients will settle. We are opting to fish bread, maggot or worm baiting size 12 hooks on three medium lead shot float tackle and note the response to learn which food the fish prefer. In addition we shall use the keep nets I made from that old discarded eel sett"

With the Old Man filling the upstream berth and dealing with a regular planned ground baiting strategy, angling hopes began to rise steeply when two skimmer bream were netted within minutes by Roy Boy. Then it was fish for fish hooked by the delighted, care free bream anglers whose senior correctly judged that releasing their catch well downstream every hour was a major contribution to course fish welfare and preservation

At the end of their eight hour new season scintillating second shift enjoying resumed peaceful piscatorial pleasures, interrupted only to munch down a carefully packed lunch, it was estimated their two day aggregate of mainly bream exceeded 100 lbs, all returned alive and well to their natural habitat and fit to fight another day.

Needless to say the anglers' oven ready Sunday evening meal had been simmering for more than a further two hours by the time they stepped ashore and deposited their fishing gear in the outhouse. For once the Old man could not reproduce his age old excuse "I had a puncture in my back wheel!" He just kept mum... ..waiting!

Footnote: A brand new fishing season is almost upon us and following a dry, warmest May on record, the rains this month were more than welcome, restoring flows, colour and dissolved oxygen levels in the NWD CANAL and re-energising the whole water environment, including its marvellous head of miscellaneous fish stocks.

Tight lines!