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TROUT & SALMON

THE VOICE OF GAME-FISHING SINCE 1955

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Lessons from a
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A LOOK BACK

Simon Cooper remembers being a fly-fisher in the 1970s



LOCKDOWN, AND ALL ITS VARIOUS manifestations, has prompted a surge in 1970s retrospectives based, I guess, on some imagined concurrence of the dreadfulness of that decade and this. They say that if you remember the Sixties, you probably weren't partying hard enough. If you remember the Seventies, it is likely you were not partying at all. The miners' strike. The three-day week. Systematic power cuts. Endless runs on the pound. Austerity that made our recent version look like a moneyfest. The Winter of Discontent. But for all that, we went fishing. And big time.

For the 1970s was the coming of age for fly-fishing as the stillwater revolution drew hundreds of thousands of new participants a year into the sport, taking advantage of more leisure time, more places to fish, and the better and cheaper tackle available in shops and by mail order. I still have my first-ever fly rod. In truth, it was a glass-fibre abomination but goodness how excited I was. Yet soon I was casting envious gazes over those with the NEW thing: carbon fibre. Today, improvements in rod technology are incremental, but back then the innovations were truly groundbreaking.

Strangely, reels seem to have remained relatively unchanged. Yes, we have the Abels of this world, but they are essentially piscatorial bling. None the worse for that, but I guess even the most mad scientist reel engineer has concluded that you can't reinvent the wheel. Lines, on the other hand, are vastly improved, albeit ruinously expensive.

Flies? Dry-flies were still what we would regard now as old school. The invasion of Adams, Humpies and Wulffs was still to come. Nobody had yet added a bead head to a nymph. On ponds, lakes and reservoirs the transition from wet-fly to nymph was gradually happening, but we were still 10-15 years away from the rainbow alliance of lures the average fly-box sports

today. And as for saltwater flies. Did anyone know such things existed?

In fact, we were catholic in our chosen destinations: Scotland and Ireland were about as exotic as it got. Iceland or Norway perhaps, at a pinch, but Russia was, as yet, an undiscovered land and Lefty Kreh, the man who effectively "invented" saltwater fishing was only just discovering the Florida Keys and hanging out with Crazy Charlie and his eponymous fly.

Back home, we still killed pretty well everything we caught; four trout in the day was the absolute norm. Today, most people would consider four fish a poor morning let alone a poor day. Grayling were a pest, each and every one dispatched accordingly. And as for salmon, who could have imagined going from plenty to the edge of oblivion in half a lifetime?

There were definitely two tribes fishing in the 1970s: the dying vestiges of the tweed brigade and the modern, last word in sartorial elegance, fishing waistcoat, or vest as we call it now, wearers. Goodness, how *à la mode* we thought ourselves. And if you really wanted to be the part, you donned hip waders. Whatever happened to them? People seem to default to chest waders these days even in the height of summer.

So, should we get all dewy-eyed and nostalgic for the Seventies? In respect of migratory fish, definitely. In terms of the sheer excitement for a sport that was on the up-and-up, for sure. But otherwise, I think not. Some things are better. Some worse. But fly-fishing remains, as it was back then, as a slightly quirky pastime with much to be proud of. ■

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