

# The social history of coarse angling in England AD 1750-1950

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## ABSTRACT

The social division of anglers into 'coarse' (using bait) and 'game' (using a fly) fishermen evolved in the mid-18th century as the new workforce of the Industrial Revolution angled for coarse fish on newly created canals and local public waterways. This paper explores the history of coarse angling, the rise of fishing clubs, managed waters and competition, which together gave coarse anglers a voice in water management and freshwater fisheries, as important as that of the landowning classes with whom game fishing became associated. Historical evidence from the early 20th century is presented for the change from general bait fishing for a range of freshwater species to the specialist coarse anglers of today, who seek a particular species of record weight, perhaps best exemplified by carp.

## KEY WORDS

Fishing,  
fishing clubs,  
coarse angling,  
England.

## RÉSUMÉ

*L'histoire sociale de la pêche au coup en Angleterre AD 1750-1950.*

La division sociale des pêcheurs à la ligne entre pêcheurs au coup (coarse anglers, utilisant des appâts) et pêcheurs sportifs (game anglers, utilisant une mouche) a évolué au milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, lorsque la nouvelle main-d'œuvre de la Révolution Industrielle pêchait au coup dans les canaux et voies navigables publiques nouvellement créés. Cet article explore l'histoire de la pêche au coup, l'émergence des clubs de pêche, des eaux réglementées et des compétitions qui, ensemble, donnèrent aux pêcheurs au coup une voix en matière de gestion des eaux et de pêcheries en eau douce, voix aussi importante que celle des classes de propriétaires terriens avec qui la pêche sportive devint associée. Des données historiques du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle sont présentées pour démontrer le changement d'une pêcherie à appâts générale, visant une variété d'espèces d'eau douce, vers la pêcherie au coup spécialisée d'aujourd'hui, qui recherche des espèces particulières au poids record, dont la carpe est peut-être le meilleur exemple.

## MOTS CLÉS

Pêche,  
clubs de pêche,  
pêche au coup,  
Angleterre.

## INTRODUCTION

Angling is one of the most ancient pastimes, both as a source of food and pleasure. From its origins, using natural materials for rod, line and hook, evolved the high specification and technical equipment used today and a lucrative commercial market. There is little archaeological trace of angling; fish bones tell us the species and an estimate of their size, but to-date the bones have not been separable as the catch of an angler, part of a netting operation or the produce of managed ponds, and finds of tackle are few. Rods and lines of organic materials decay, occasionally metal hooks are found but usually in the context of marine fishing (Steane and Foreman 1988: 147). The managed ponds of the Middle Ages, for which there are surviving contemporary documents on stocking and management (for example those of Prior More of Worcester, Hickling 1971), were created primarily as a sophisticated way of ensuring a ready supply of freshwater fish for the table. These ponds were a sign of privilege and owned by the secular and ecclesiastical elite in England.

In the medieval period there were no imposed social groupings in angling, though landowners always guarded fishing rights on their riparian property. However, acts of land enclosure and the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century divided angling into two distinct types, 'game' and 'coarse' fishing which were enjoyed by different segments of society. Game fishing is primarily for salmon (*Salmo salar*), trout (*Salmo trutta*) and grayling (*Thymallus thymallus*), all caught using a fly. This became dominated by the upper classes who tended to be landowners with suitable waters, or those who could afford to pay to use them. Coarse fishing essentially covers all other species (particularly the Cyprinidae) using baited hooks and was free on municipal waters. This separation into a specific form of angling, initially favoured by the landless labour force, is a more recent development of the early modern period with its roots in industrialisation and the change in population density from a rural to an urban environment.

## EARLY ANGLING LITERATURE

The earliest, most commonly cited English publication on the pleasures of angling as sport is 'The Treatyse of Fysshynge with an Angle', added to the second edition of the 'Book of St Albans', published by Wynken de Worde in 1496. The authorship of Dame Juliana Berners, an abbess, has been relegated to myth and it is not thought to be a wholly innovative work, 'borrowing' from earlier short pieces, a practice which was often adopted by later authors on angling who cribbed from the Treatyse and each other. The uncritical views of the authenticity of the authorship, such as that of Chevenix Trench (1974: 30), have been superseded by more objective scholarship primarily by Hoffmann (1985, 1997). Hoffman (1985: 882) also discusses the discovery of some 14<sup>th</sup>- and 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts which could be sources of information for part of the 'Treatyse'. Printed at a time when books were expensive and literacy levels restricted, this is essentially a book for the upper classes; it also addresses other forms of hunting and hawking and extols the virtues of the contemplative aspects of angling against other rural sports.

The contemporary medieval landless, unskilled worker would have fished to provide food for the table, on commonly held waters, using a type of natural rod cut from hazel or similar wood, a natural line of vegetable or animal hair, and a hook of thorn or bent pin. Peaceful contemplation or recreational enjoyment would have been a bonus. All species of freshwater fish were eaten in the Middle Ages and preserved marine fish were commonly eaten in towns from the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Barrett *et al.* 2004, Serjeantson and Woolgar 2006). Fresh marine fish had always been available but for many, especially inland, the price had been prohibitive. The demand for fresh marine fish could not be met until the advent of the railways and steam powered fleets, together with use of ice and refrigeration, made them more widely affordable in towns across England.

Other early works on angling are listed in Table 1. The most influential authors were Mascall and Walton, particularly the latter who copied material from Mascall (who describes the habits of the different fish, bait, flies, tackle and traps) and the format of

TABLE 1. – Influential early works on angling (after Westward and Satchell [1883], except the anonymous 1577 publication taken from Chevenix Trench [1974: 37]).

Date	Author	Title
1577	Anonymous	The Arte of Angling
1590	Leonard Mascall	A Booke of Fishing with Hook and Line (1884)
1613	John Dennys	The Secrets of Angling (poem)
1651	Thomas Barker	The Art of Angling
1653	Isaak Walton	The Compleat Angler (1985)
1662	Robert Venebles	The Experienced Angler or Angling Improved (1969)
1682	Thomas Nobbes	The Complete Troller, or the Art of Trolling
1706	Robert Howlett	The Angler's Sure Guide.
1758?	Richard and Charles Bowlker	The Art of Angling Improved
1787	Thomas Best	A Concise Treatise on the Act of Angling

the conversation piece from the 1577 anonymous 'The Art of Angling' as a way to dispense his advice. The 1676 fifth edition of Walton's 'The Compleat Angler' was the last for 74 years; it was rediscovered by Dr Johnson in the mid-18th century after which there were 23 issues in the next 80 years (Lowerson 1983: 30). A Parliamentarian colonel later turned Royalist, Robert Venebles, wrote the 'Experienced Angler' of 1662, which went to five editions by 1683. By the Industrial Revolution literacy rates were higher, printing costs lower and, in an increasingly industrial England, the enduring Waltonian pastoral idyll peaked in popularity, with a further 55 English editions of 'The Compleat Angler' during Queen Victoria's reign, with the first cheap one-shilling edition being published in 1886 (Lowerson 1983: 32). All anglers could now aspire to the Waltonian ideal of pastoralism and nature whatever their own hard and often stark circumstances, even if they were oblivious to the political commentary on Puritanism that Walton (a Royalist) employed as a dual theme with angling (Franklin 2001: 61).

## RODS AND TACKLE

In the 16th-century hook makers were established and Kirby's of London, trading from around 1650 to at least 1770, dominated the market in the late 17th to early 18th centuries. Their reputation rested on quality, using tempered steel (Herd 2003: 86)

when lesser quality hooks rusted and were brittle. Later, other centres of hook making developed at Redditch, Kendal and Limerick. Standardised sizes (using a hook scale) did not become common until 1800 (Herd 2003: 143). Hooks were initially blind and continued in manufacture to the 1930s. The use of eyed hooks, although known earlier and illustrated in 1760, were not easy to make in quantity and also met with some resistance, despite the ease of attaching the line, and they did not become popular until the late 19th century (Herd 2003: 234). Reels, which enabled casting with a controlled coiled line, although known in England in the 17th century, were rare and only recommended to the London coarse angler in 1867 (Chevenix Trench 1974: 63). Hitherto, casting was done using a carefully hand coiled and held line, hence the early popularity of the long 'roach pole' (named after the fish most commonly caught) which could reach far out into the water with a hand line attached. The difficulty of landing the catch was overcome in an early superior version of this rod divided into three parts and materials; the top of hazel, middle of hazel, willow or ash and the butt of blackthorn or medlar. Each section had a socket and their construction was described in the 'Book of St Albans' along with details of hook making (Chevenix Trench 1974: 32). However a single long pole was the cheapest option with a hand held line and remained in use through to the 20th century. This was the favoured and affordable option for the 'working class' an-



FIG. 1. – Former location of 'Ye Anglers Club House' at the Kings Arms pub, Salford, Manchester (reproduced courtesy of the Salford Friendly Anglers).

glers dominating the public riparian landscape of industrial England.

#### THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE COARSE ANGLER IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Authoritarian control of social behaviour of the new industrial workforce, which was increasingly concentrated into urban areas, was difficult. This can, in part, be traced back to earlier changes; once the patronage and compulsory obeisance to lordship by peasant rural workers was removed they became independent workers, still very poor, but not tied in a feudal system. Thompson (1974: 387) writes of the distance created between the aristocracy (who retained a cultural hegemony) and landless workers in the 18th century, who were buffered by the 'middle class' who increasingly performed administrative duties in law and taxation. The aristocracy, largely sheltered from the ire of the populace, living in gated and fenced estates, maintained a munificent relationship by occasional acts of largesse. The industrial workforce had evolved from migrating landless labourers and particularly enjoyed violent leisure activities, such as cock and dog fighting, accompanied by high alcohol consumption, all centred round the public house. This anarchic behaviour worried the authorities who viewed angling as a more peaceful pursuit and their encouragement

of angling has been interpreted as a form of social control. Men (women were not encouraged) fished in large numbers along newly constructed canals, in ponds and rivers, anywhere where water was not held in private ownership. These waters were populated by cyprinids, especially roach (*Rutilus rutilus*) and dace (*Leuciscus leuciscus*), and also perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) and pike (*Esox lucius*), collectively 'coarse fish'. Streams and rivers suitable for salmon and trout tended to be in private ownership, or far from centres of industry and urbanisation (such as London, Sheffield, Birmingham and Manchester), effectively limiting the urban angler to coarse fish. The cyprinid species, particularly roach, were more tolerant of the reduced oxygen levels and pollution typical of the waters found in these environs and a favourite quarry. Anglers used the long 'roach poles' which were cheap and hence popular. While angling clubs already existed (such as Dagenham from 1792), they exploded in number during the 19th century: by 1890 there were 620 coarse angling clubs in London alone, virtually all based at public houses (Lowerson 1983: 31). This was a logical choice; the place where members were most likely to be found and encouraged by landlords as good business. A small number were run by temperance societies, such as 'The Bradford Total Abstinence Anglers' (Lowerson 1988: 109), but unsurprisingly these were not very popular. Sheffield also had a large number of anglers, with 21,000 members in 200 clubs affiliated to the Sheffield Angling Association in the early 1900s (Birley 1995: 11). Associations gave clubs a collaborative bargaining base for access to waters and gaining travel concessions (Lowerson 1988: 133). Though women were welcome in the more gentrified aura of game fishing, they remained excluded in coarse fishing. However, families did benefit as clubs operated in part as benefit societies through subscriptions, such as the 'Salford Friendly Anglers Society' founded in 1817 who met in the 'Kings Arms' Salford (Anon n.d.), where traces of the former sign 'Ye Anglers Club House' can still be seen on the brick work of a side wall of the pub today (Fig. 1). These societies helped members through times of hardship, with sickness and death benefit policies; angling competition prizes were food and useful household

items. However, despite the notion of a Waltonian angling brotherhood there were tensions between clubs, not only a class divide between game and coarse fishing but between north and south and between and within coarse fishing clubs. Regional differences in coarse angling practises also developed across England reflecting the nature of available waters (Lowerson 1988: 112). These included the Nottingham, Sheffield and London styles, in the latter the roach pole was greatly favoured (Parker *et al.* 1943: 65, 71, 78).

Sunday was usually a free day from work and in many places Monday, known as 'Saint Mundy' (Reid 1976), was also taken as a holiday, though gradually employers closed their firms on Saturday afternoons, made Monday a working day and increased the working week and productivity. There was some resistance to this change with continuing Monday absenteeism, but by the late 1800s it became widely accepted, linked to the formalised hours required to maximise the efficiency of steam power. However, non mechanised work shops were slower to conform and the practise of a free Monday persisted longest in Sheffield's many small cutlery and engineering workshops, where Monday was also the traditional day for competitive pigeon shooting (Lowerson 1988: 111). Elsewhere, with the five-and-a-half day working week established in many industries, coarse fishermen angled on a Sunday, despite church opposition and the view that Sunday was a rest from all activities.

The railways opened up the fishing landscape and clubs were quick to capitalise on discounted tickets for club outings with a guaranteed low price for a fixed number of tickets. These 'days out' introduced the urban angler to new distant waters and urban clubs started to lease and manage waters in the countryside. For example coarse anglers from Sheffield, Nottingham and Derbyshire took the train every Sunday to rivers in Lincolnshire (Lowerson 1983: 31).

Competition in the 19th century was focussed on the number of fish caught, or their total weight. The quest for the single record weight specimen was a later development. By 1900, 'match days' had become increasingly popular, with cash or goods prizes, often donated by local shop keepers and later

led to more formalised sponsorship. Disputes arose especially where narrow margins separated winners (Lowerson 1988: 121). 'Match fishermen' were a specific type of angler, only interested in competition and these competitions became synonymous with industrial working life, though this was to be interrupted in 1914 by war.

## CONSERVATION MEASURES

The concept of preserving fish stocks and managing waterways had long been recognised and enshrined in law from medieval times, if not always well judged and implemented. Eminent Victorian zoologists such as Frank Buckland, in cooperation with the 'Thames Angling Preservation Society' (founded in 1838), were concerned at declining fisheries in the Thames, and started a trout hatchery. They limited netting operations and tried to ensure fish stocks in general were protected and managed in a responsible way (Bartrip 1985; Wheeler 1979: 68). Anglers were obliged to return undersized fish, thus showing responsibility towards the future of their sport. These principles were understood by coarse fishing clubs and conservation measures were felt throughout all sectors of angling. The coarse fishing clubs leasing waters for the exclusive use of their members had a vested interest in water management; maintaining healthy stocking levels was essential to provide fishing for their members on which rested their success as a club.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

As with other sports, the First World War marked a hiatus in angling. The import of fish stocks ceased, exemplified by the records for the Surrey Trout farm. A major supplier of coarse fish, its pre-war business supply from a Dutch fishery was disrupted until 1925 and again with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 (Clifford 1992: 16). Though access to waters had been relatively easy during the First World War, there were no competitive coarse fishing matches (Birley 1995: 108). Tackle was not produced during the war years and lead

shot, used as line weights, became unavailable. Angling picked up again in the 1920s and during the recession of the early 1930s was increasingly popular amongst the unemployed. Competition was particularly associated with northern, urban industrial areas, especially the collieries, both in good and hard economic times. During the latter, the support and prizes offered by clubs would have been particularly welcome. However, during the recession rail excursions became unaffordable for many, restricting anglers to local waters. In Worksop near Sheffield at this time 90% of club members were unemployed (Birley 1995: 263).

In the 20th century there were signs of a change of emphasis in coarse angling from catching large numbers of fish to the hunt for a fish of record size. This is best represented by carp, whose iconic status for many anglers today supports a very lucrative commercial sector. Carp is used here to exemplify the development of coarse angling in the 20th century which in England it has latterly come to dominate. The common carp is not native (hereafter any reference to 'carp' is to the common carp - *Cyprinus carpio*); the earliest date of introduction is currently mid-14th century from documentary data, though archaeological bone evidence is later (Locker 2010: 172). Originally from eastern Europe, carp were deliberately brought westwards from the early Middle Ages (Hoffmann 1995: 71) and were first imported to England as food fish to be stocked in ponds. At the time the Treatyse was written, the late 15th century, carp seem to have been still rare, but already noted as wily and difficult fish to catch. Carp were not a favourite quarry of the average 18th- and 19th-century coarse angler other cyprinids, including roach, were more common and easier to catch.

The wild common carp is fully scaled and from this form other varieties have been bred: the mirror carp has a reduced scale pattern of a few large scales by which an individual fish can be identified; the leather carp has few or no scales; and the linear carp has scales along the lateral line. These are all forms of *Cyprinus carpio* which have been selectively bred with a deeper profile and a notch behind the head, a 'domestic' feature (other species, such as roach, also exhibit natural variation in scale patterns (Clif-

ford 1992: 11). Carp (including mirror and leather) were imported as small fish, with other species in some numbers from fish farms in Europe at the end of the 19th and early 20th century (Clifford 1992: 14). Mirror and leather carp are usually the record sized specimens caught today, they tend to put on more weight than common carp. In the Victorian period and into the early 20th century 'middle class' and game anglers also took an interest in coarse fish (sometimes using flies to catch them), increasing demand for fish stocks. However the coarse fisherman, for reasons described above, remained generally unable to pursue game fish.

These early, substantial stockings of both running and particularly still waters laid the foundation for the cult of today's celebrity fish. Mirror carp today are often named and repeatedly caught at increasing weights, very large carp are not only sought for their record size but also for their challenge to the angler, as they are said to be more evasive with age. A study by Beukma (1970) suggested that carp learn 'hook avoidance' from a single capture. The return policy and repeated landing of ever heavier individuals has encouraged the development of tackle that causes least damage to the fish. The targeting of these record breaking fish is a studied operation, in practise since at least the beginning of the 20th century. A month of preparation preceded Hugh Tempest Sheringham's catch of a then record 16lb (7.3 kg) carp in 1911 at the Cheshunt Reservoir (Clifford 1992: 47). Sheringham (who was also editor of the angling section of the 'Field' and author of many popular fishing books (Parker *et al.* 1943: 31) began by baiting the water, built a wattle hide and left the rod open to view by the fish before finally casting his line over the period of a month. Such lengthy preparation suggests this gentleman angler was not tied to a rigid working week.

Fish were and are subject to fashion, both as food and as sport, particularly types of common carp. The goldfish (*Carassius auratus*), an introduced species, is ornamental and the Crucian carp (*Carassius carassius*), now thought to be native (Gordon Copp pers. comm.), is caught by anglers, though smaller and a minor quarry compared to the forms of common carp.

The record carp from stocked waters described by Clifford (1992: 14) for the first half of the 20th century were small by current standards, generally in the 20–30lb (9–13.6kg) range. A mirror carp of 99lbs (44.9kg) was caught in 2010 from a lake near Dijon, France (Anglers Mail 2010). In England the record is smaller, recently reported deaths include ‘Two Tone’, a mirror carp who died in 2010 at 67lbs (31kg) (Times 17/08/2010), ‘Benson’ a female common carp identified by a tail marking like a cigarette burn weighed 64lbs (29kg) in 2009 (Times 04/08/2009) and ‘Heather’, a leather carp of 52lbs (23.6kg) in 2010. Heather’s age (around 50) and cunning accorded her legendary status and value (around £30,000), honoured by a candlelit vigil on her death and a headstone at her grave (Times 17/08/2010). The most recent demise was of ‘Fat Lady’ (a mirror carp) at 61lbs (27.7kg), some 30 years old, in July 2011, of natural causes. She had been caught and photographed at least 200 times and was celebrated by a formal burial and a stretch of water named ‘Fatty’s Point’ in her honour at her home waters in St Ives (Times 29/07/2011). The prodigious appetite of carp for particular types of ground bait in managed waters has led to weights often proportionately far greater than length when compared with a wild counterpart, with girths close to lengths. The prospect of truly ‘wild’ carp, in Britain is unlikely. Carp are an introduced species for food stocks in managed ponds from the 14th century, with records of intensive stockings of waterways and lakes in the late 19th and early 20th century. The angler’s ‘wildy’ is really only defined by the full normal scaling of common carp with a sleeker profile more akin to the original wild fish of eastern Europe, which does not have a notch behind the head, unlike the feral and domestic carp. The latter also have a larger body depth (Balon 1995: 16). However the cult of the carp is a late 20th-century phenomenon. During the first half of the century specialised coarse anglers, only seeking one species and record size remained a minority, though Clifford (1992: 45) shows that even then there were some dedicated anglers of large carp, who sought secret waters where they were rumoured to be found from much earlier stockings.

A turning point in carp fishing is often attributed to Richard Walker’s record catch of a 44lb (20kg) carp in September 1952 from a lake in Herefordshire; named Clarissa she was later exhibited at London Zoo, foreshadowing the above mentioned legends of recent times (Rob Britton pers. comm.). Records show carp fishing had already been moving towards specimen fish, though carp were not then the most commonly sought species, this preference was a gradual process. Data from the National Rivers authority show that in 1969 roach and pike were preferred but by 1995 among coarse anglers those professing a preference for one species chose carp, then roach and bream (Hickley 1996).

Books on every form of angling became increasingly popular with lower printing costs. Fishing journals were available from 1877 when the *Fishing Gazette* started publication; it continued in print until 1962. This was followed by the *Anglers News* which was published from 1901 to 1956. In the 1960s a series of new publications started, such as *Angling* (from 1959) and *Anglers World* (from 1962). These heralded a new age of coarse angling, much more commercial in every aspect and not welcomed by all anglers. The post-war baby boom, more money, more leisure, flooded gravel pits creating new fishing waters and new goals to catch the most fish over a certain weight (Clifford 1992: 92) all led to increased demand for accessible and competitive coarse fishing, challenging clubs to provide fish stock to meet these criteria.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clifford (1992) in his discourse on carp fishing history, exemplified by histories of individual anglers and waters up to the 1950s, shows the Waltonian pastoral ideal persisted in an increasingly managed environment where fish stocking reflects demand for record breaking fish. The number of coarse anglers is still growing and the English post-industrial fishing landscape is often a crowded place. This leisure pursuit has seen rapid growth since the beginning of industrialisation in the mid-18th century which concentrated the density of the growing population of England into certain areas, heralding urbanisation.

For much of the period under discussion, coarse angling was most popular among the lower social classes, for reasons of economy and historical patterns of riparian ownership. Angling was an opportunity to reconnect and satisfy a primal relationship with nature as 'man the hunter', fulfilling a natural competitiveness in one of the few remaining forms of legal hunting. The coarse angling environment in England may lack 'wildness'; waters and their surrounds are heavily managed as commercial ventures and the promotion of tackle and accessories to ensure a record catch in comfort is intense, which some may view as diminishing the experience. However these waters are very accessible and unite Walton's 'Brothers of the Angle' in shared purpose. The care shown today in catching, photographing, weighing and releasing fish, often known as individuals from repeated landings, does recall some aspects of the respect of hunter for prey shown by hunting peoples exploiting their environment for food. In diversely different situations both respect the individual animal and also value the environment which sustains both the hunter and the hunted.

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