

Tales from the Riverbank

Fisherman (1950s) Item – Fishing tackle (worm/pat)

(Fisherman stands with his back to the audience. Suddenly turns around.)

Fisherman: What are you doing creeping up on people like that? I didn't know who it was. You could have been the bailiff. You know him do you? He's the one who watches us all and tries to stop us fishing here. Mind I did catch him one night. I was having a drink in the pub and who should be standing next to but the bailiff. When I sees my brother out of the corner of my eye and he gives me a sign – so I says to the bailiff, "You look after my pint, I've just got to feed the chickens."

And I leaves the pub with my brother who says as how we can make a bit of money coz someone wants a salmon for their wedding. So we rows the boat out and catch a fourteen pounder. Straight away. Mind I ended up in the water up to my neck. My brother pulls me back in the boat and we pull the net in and back home. I changed my clothes and wandered back to the pub. All in all had been about an hour and he was still guarding my pint and he never even noticed that I had changed my clothes. That's how observant them bailiffs are.

See there's legal fishing and illegal fishing and I have to say that a lot of what I've been about in my life has been the latter. Well I can't be done with paying for licenses and the such.

Salmon and eels that's what we are catching and to catch either you need to go patting or bobbing for worms. My dad taught me this when I was a nipper. You need a good rainstorm and once it gets dark, give them worms about an hour, then they'll come to the surface. You get a nice big metal drum to keep the worms in and they'll stay good for a few months.

Next what you need to do its make them into a pat. Now is any of you good at sewing? Coz what you have to do is thread a double handful of them worms using a 6" needle. Use a very fine thread mind and get the worms and thread them two or three times into a ball. Then you attach all of that onto a pole with a hole in the end. A big eel will steal your pat mind if its not securely on. Our old lady was a master at making the pats, she'd go into that drum and fore you know it she's made up perhaps four strings of worms. Mind, word of advice if you catch a worm from the tail end he threads up easier because from the head end he'll try and curl up.

The smell of the pat is what attracts the eel. It takes about ten minutes for the first bite, coz the eel he has to sniff it out in the water. But after one has bit then they'll all come round and you'll have a never ending load of bites. The eel bites hard and he gets the thread caught in between his teeth. Then you get them in the boat. Some would drop off but would come back and bite again. They ain't the cleverest of creatures, don't know when they are being fooled.

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My old dad, when there was lots of eels about used to come home with half a boat full. Mostly small ones you catch on the pat, for the bigger you need a fyke net.

You walk in with your waders, put the back end in and stretch the net out. It's a bit like a large keep net but these cones here they can't find their way out of. They are trapped inside there. Fykes and putcheons laid all the way about two dozen we'd put in. With the putcheon you go by boat and throw it over and attach it to a line on the bank.

I know one old boy Redverse Leech his name is, not the brightest button in the box, he would put a wad of grass to stop the eels getting out once inside and then he'd stuff the baskets under the bank. Mind, he could never find them. He'd have his putcheons disguised with weeds and he wouldn't know what was a real weed and what was a putcheon! He said once as how he had caught a 20 pound lamprey. 20 pound. Biggest I've ever seen is 4 pound. Prone to exaggeration I think is the posh way of describing him.

You know what some of the tastiest are – the elvers. The baby eels. But you have to cook them right. Give them a good wash, put them on tea cloths and then rub them and rub them to get the slime out of them. Then you pick up a handful and lower them into the hot fat of the pan. That gets them all excited. See its not the same cooking them if they are dead. After a bit then turn them over to crisp the other side and turn and turn and when slightly brown, get them out of the pan, bit of vinegar, bread and butter, salt and pepper and that is heaven!

I had my first net for catching elvers when I was five and I've been catching them ever since. Never stopped. We used to take them into the markets and sell them. Me brother and me fished one night from dusk to the next morning caught nigh on 980 pound of elevers. We made good money from selling them on.

Mind one night my wife says to me, them elvers have all gone a funny colour. It was about 4.00 in the morning and sure enough they had gone all white, like they were covered with icing sugar. I didn't know the night was frosty like and thought what can I do, picked up the tray and all the elvers were frozen to it. Thought to myself "Oh no. What am I going to do? Near on a hundred weight there were and all frozen."

Next morning I was raging, all that waste of elvers and thought I'll have one last look in the van, see what has gone wrong. When I opened the door, the heat of the sun had brought all the elvers round they was wriggling and moving. So I leapt in and drove to the depot where they would buy them fast as I could.

"When did you catch them?' asks the man

"Today's tide sir." And he tipped them in the tank and them little beauties all swam off so he paid me my ticket for them. That bloke who ran the elver station was also the A.I. man, you know he helped the cows to breed, and he was always very grumpy. "Put them in the tank." A few of them

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died and he docked me a bit of money but I still got paid for them.

I have to say this and you will think me a romantic but my wife is the most important person in the world to me. It was a bit of a scandal how we met mind. See I didn't want my child to go to school without a proper name and so we married in a registry office. We got some bloke who was walking up the road to be our witness, slipped him five pounds for the privilege mind. Come home and had our own special reception, beans on toast and then she got on with the washing that needed doing. People didn't like what we had done. They used to look at us like we had the plague. For me though none of that matters as long as we have each other and this place.

There's nowhere on earth I'd rather be than here. Got a lovely view of May hill can see all around the Forest and the top of the Cotswolds. I have sat out here at 3.30 in the morning with a cup of tea, seen a fish coming up and in less than 30 seconds, caught 6 salmon. As long as I got my wife, my tea and a days money I haven't a worry.