

Forage Friday: A Fishy Tale

Friday 15 May 2020

Welcome to Forage Friday: A Fishy Tale – sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

In today's Forage Friday post, as lockdown restrictions have been eased a little this week to allow some more recreational activities, we are going to tell you 'A Fishy Tale'. So take your place on the banks of the borough's many waterways – rivers, canals, lakes, streams and ponds – cast a line in and let the slow pace of the water take you away.



Into the Jaws of Death, artist unknown. 19th century

Underneath the painting a plaque bears the inscription:

'Presented to the Tottenham Council for their Museum by the executors of the late Mr Augustus Taylor
September 1927'

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Like all good tales, we are going to begin a long, long time ago, when a man who loved fishing decided to write about it. This man was the author, poet and biographer [Izaak Walton \(1593-1683\)](#). As this particular book was about fishing, Walton became known as the 'Father of all Anglers'. The book, [*The Compleat Angler; or, the Contemplative Man's Recreation*](#) was first published in 1653.

Walton, along with his fellow angler, writer and friend [Charles Cotton](#), continued to update the work until its last revision in 1676. Walton's love of fishing and his skill and knowledge about the sport is evident throughout the work. The book is more than a fishing manual or instruction guide, it is a discourse about the joys of fishing and it clearly still captures people's interest today. This book has never been out of publication and, almost 370 years later since it was first produced, it is one of the world's most read publications!



Being a Discourse of
FISH and FISHING,
Not unworthy the pen of most *Anglers.*

*Simon Peter said, I go fishing: and they fish, We
also will go with thee. John 2. 1.*

London, Printed by T. Moxey for RICH. MARRIOT, in
St. Dunstons Church-yard, Fleetstreet, 1653.

Izaak Walton, portrait by Jacob Huysmans, c. 1672.

From the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, and the cover page for his book, *The Compleat Angler*, published 1653.

Written in narrative form, the book instructs and enthuses about fishing through the dialogue of Piscator, the fisherman, as he sets about persuading the hunter, Venator, of the practical and spiritual merits of angling. The story takes place over several days as the men walk, fish and talk their way along the Lea Valley, starting in Tottenham and ending in Ware, Hertfordshire.

The book starts with the men visiting the 'sweet shady arbour' of The Swan Inn at High Cross. A place that Walton himself was familiar with as described local history author and publisher Fred Fisk, in his book published in 1913, *The History of Tottenham* wrote about Walton and *The Compleat Angler*.

'The Swan Inn: This famous old inn stands on the corner of Philip Lane nearly opposite the High Cross frequently visited by noted anglers..... It was the place of resort of Isaak Walton, the angler; he used to tarry here awhile before he went to the River Lea to fish, and again on his return. In the front of this house, in 1643, there was an arbour the favourite resting place of Walton, of which mention is made in "*The Compleat Angler*".'



Tottenham High Cross, 1822. The scene shows Tottenham High Road and horse-drawn carriages with the Swan Inn at left, with its distinctive pub sign, and the High Cross at centre.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)
Below are images of the Swan Inn and the men sitting in the arbour before setting off on their journey as published by Fred Fisk as postcards and sold at his shop locally.



Walton enjoying a drink and conversation at The Swan under the arbour. The High Cross is visible in the background.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)
The second image above shows Piscator catching up with Venator and the falconer, Auceps, at the High Cross Heis trying to encourage them to accompany him on his journey:

“I have stretched my legs up Tottenham-hill to overtake you, hoping your business may occasion you towards Ware whither I am going this fine, fresh May morning.”

He was only partially successful it seems, as only Venator continues on the journey with him.

Although the Swan pub, one of the oldest in the area, is no longer a pub, the apartments next door in Philip Lane still remember our famous fishermen's friend – they are named after Izaak Walton.

We will stay with the Lea, and imagine Walton's characters walking along its banks, looking for the ideal fishing spots. Below are 19th century prints of the River Lea showing bucolic scenes of people enjoying time by the river in boats or fishing, or taking in the riverside views whilst having a drink at the Ferry Boat Inn.



Hillyer's Bridge c.1830-40, more commonly known as Ferry Boat Bridge, on the River Lea. [The Ferry Boat Inn](#) can be seen in the background (and looks very much the same today on Ferry Lane by the reservoirs and the river).

Engraving by C Marshall and C Mottram.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)



Tottenham Mills on the Lea, early 19th century.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

One of the local characters in Tottenham is Charlie Bradford (b. 1815) or 'Blind Charlie' as he was known at the time, due to him losing his sight after being hit in the eye by a stone when he was a young boy. Charlie earned a living fishing. He was led by his dog to the New River where he would creep along the side of the water, and reach in to catch fish, crayfish and eels (and the odd rat!) which he would then sell to local fishmongers. We have his 'float' that he used for fishing on display at Bruce Castle, alongside a picture of him and his dog in 1868. Fred Fisk tells us Charlie's story in his histories of Tottenham and [The Summerhill Road website](#) shares these details with you in more detail.



Charlie at home in his 'cave' in Tottenham, 1868

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Walking and fishing on rivers and waterways is a common theme in our picture collection at Bruce Castle. This image (below) shows people walking along the path by the New River whilst a gentleman fishes on the bank in 1832. This view is taken at the top of what was to become Finsbury Park (which opened in 1869).



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)
After the park was opened in 1869, people fished in the fishing lake and also by the New River.



Finsbury Park's fishing lake, c.1950 - 60.

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

It is not all fun though, as fishing can be quite a competitive sport. As well as the friendly rivalry between the fishermen themselves, club competitions were, and still are, popular. There is often a large amount of prestige (and sometimes money!) given to those who catch the largest fish or have the biggest overall catch. Some competitions asked people to catch certain types of fish, and as Walton's book makes clear, each fish has its own character and nuances. A good fisherman will need a variety of strategies in place to catch each type of fish. These can range from using different equipment, tackle and bait, to fishing at different times of day and at different places on a river. My Dad, in his 80s and a keen fisherman all his life, has a favourite reel over 50 years old that he swears by for catching bream, and has secret spots along his local river that he keeps very quiet about.



Fishing competition at the Mill Stream, Tottenham Hale, 1875

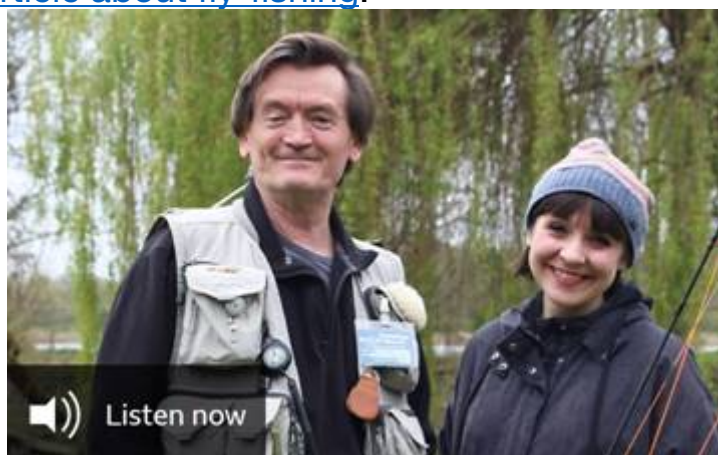
(and if this was today, clearly observing the 2 metre social distancing!)

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Below, we have an image of Mr Briggs of Wightman Road, Harringay c.1920s, proudly displaying his fine catch of the 18lb trout which (according to the text on the postcard) has miraculously lived in the New River – until this point at least – to a record-breaking 100 years old.



From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service) For those who like podcasts, you can listen to former punk rocker, and musical executive, [Feargal Sharkey](#), as he talks about fly-fishing on the River Lea in Hertfordshire in the [BBC 3 programme, The Art and Zen of Fly Fishing](#) (go to about 1.45 mins for the start of the programme). As you will hear, Feargal not only sung one of the [UK's most recognised punk songs](#), he also knows his stuff about fly-fishing. He mentions Walton's *Compleat Angler* and the part that talks about Tottenham in the book. Feargal is the current archivist for the oldest angling club in the UK, [Amwell Magna Fishery](#) based on the River Lea at Amwell Hill. He came into Bruce Castle in 2005 to do some research himself about the River Lea for [this article about fly-fishing](#).



Feargal Sharkey on the River Lea (From the BBC 3 Programmes webpage.)

There have been many different angling clubs based in the borough over the years. Some have been run by local organisations such as Gestetner's. Pubs would often have their own angling club too, as discussed below in an oral history taken in 2004 by Hazel Whitehouse, with John Catling (b. 1929). Here, he talks about the various angling clubs that were run by local pubs when he was growing up in Tottenham in the 1930s and 40s:

“The ‘Olive Branch’ pub used to have a fishing club. In the early part of the 19th century, lads would walk down the towpath as far as Broxbourne but they’d get mugged - they called them ‘footpads’ in those days, not muggers. So they got together and this became the Olive Branch Fishing Club. And the ‘Elmhurst’ had the Broadwater Anglers, and the ‘Northumberland Arms’ had the Lansdowne Anglers. Near the ‘New River Arms’ in the 1950s there was a gravel pit used by fishing clubs. Most pubs had fishing clubs in them.”



Jolly Anglers, on Station Road, Wood Green in 2015 (image Google Streetview).

Originally a beerhouse which opened in 1837, this well-known Wood Green pub in the photograph above was renamed the Jolly Anglers in 1840, after the anglers who fished nearby on the New River. One of the loops of the New River once flowed on the other side of the road, on the site of what is now River Park Road. The fine pub building there now in Station Road was rebuilt in 1905, but the pub has now closed in recent years.

If you are interested in dangling a line in the water yourself, then there are some angling clubs to help you get started (just click on the links): [Edmonton-Tottenham Angling Society](#) or the [River Lea Angling Club](#).

Or perhaps you'd like to follow [this gentleman's challenge](#) of catching a fish in each of the 33 London Boroughs!

We will end the post with some wonderful reminiscences from Walter Halliday (b.1922), who was interviewed by Hazel Whitehouse. He tells us about fishing with his mates as a boy and then joining angling clubs such as the Tottenham

Anglers' Society and the Gestetner Angling Club when he was older (he worked for Gestetner's).



Gestetner Head Office News publication, April 1958

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

“When I was a boy, before the War, we went on our own, just two or three mates on pushbikes. We were too young before the War to join the clubs. You’d get your maggots on the Saturday, say at Chitty’s, in your saddlebag, and the rods you’d tie on your crossbar. Charlie had a keep-net and a landing-net, he had a bigger bike. Had to be careful if you were riding on the tow-path, we’d go to Cheshunt on the main road rather than the tow-path. Too narrow, and fishermen already sitting there with all the gear and their rods down. You’d have to ring your bell to ask them to move the rod, if you were decent, so we did. Others didn’t and they’d ride over it, crush the rod. So we went on the main road, not much traffic then anyway.

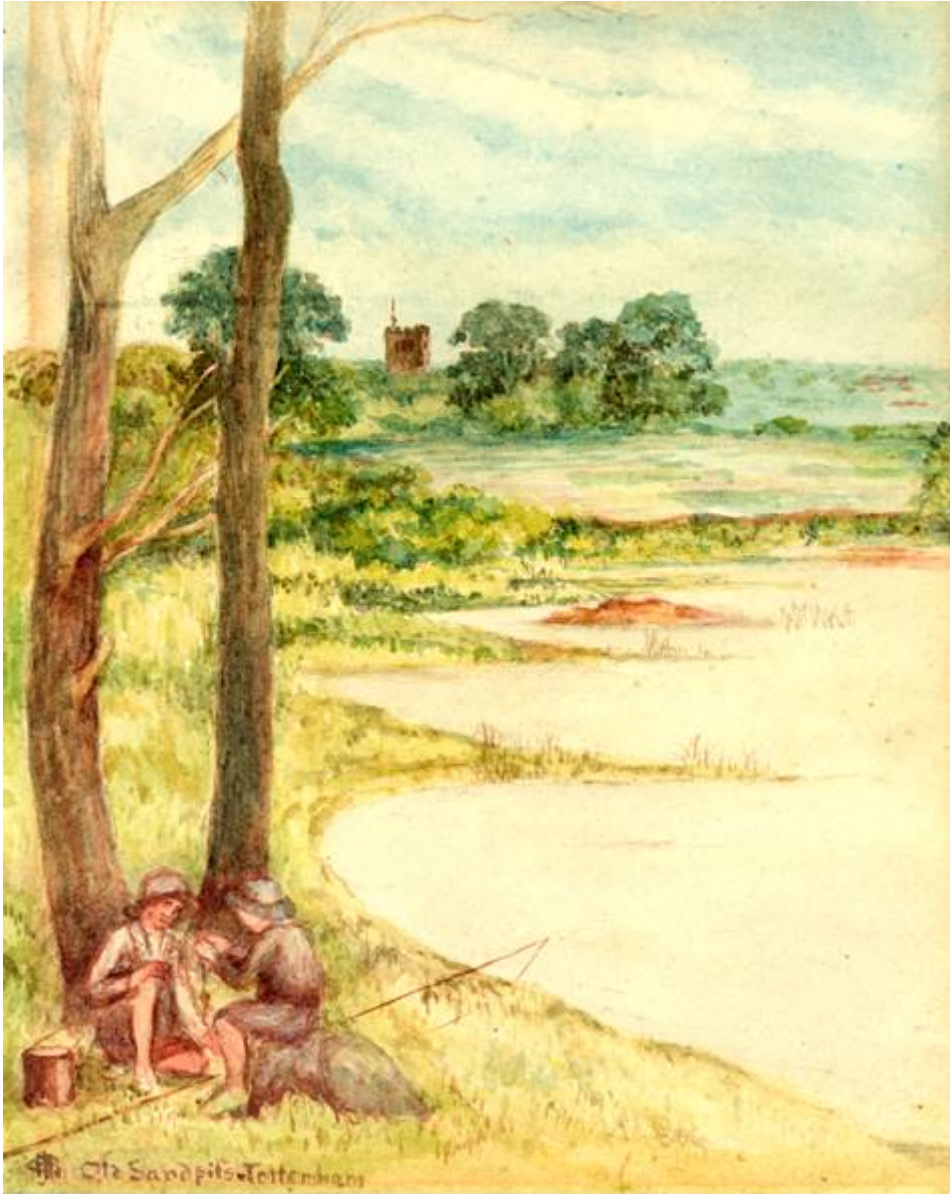
So we’d pick the venue, like between two locks, and you’d fish. And we decided amongst ourselves at the end who had the best ‘bag’ at the end of the day. Charlie might say ‘That’s better than that.....’

Later on when we were in the fishing club, you’d have the meeting the week before to decide the venue for the next Sunday’s outing or venue. And my Dad had the book with all the members’ names and addresses in, and the Competitions Book with all the results in. My father named it the ‘Tottenham Anglers Association’. It started in 1933. He was the secretary until he died in 1957, then I took over and later Bob Brace took it over from me. But when he died, we didn’t know, and we couldn’t get the books back. All gone.

We started off as the T. A. A. but we had to change it to the ‘Tottenham Anglers Society’ when the London Anglers Association objected. They said you couldn’t have an Association inside another Association. So we had to be a Society.

I used to go fishing with my Dad when I was eleven, on pushbikes, on the River Lea. All round here, loads of fishing clubs. You’d fill a coach for the outing or

sometimes get the workman's tickets to get there, wherever the venue was. They had greengrocer's scales to weigh the fish."



Old Sandpits, Tottenham, a watercolour painted c.1920 by Henry James Griffin (1858-1945)

From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Griffin was a local artist, friend and near-neighbour of Beatrice Ofor in Bruce Grove. At this delightful spot above, two young boys sit fishing by the old sandpits in Tottenham, in the once open area of White Hart Lane. The tower of the medieval church of All Hallows (the parish church for Tottenham) can be seen in the distance. The sandpits (or gravel pits as they were more commonly known) were redeveloped from 1921 by Tottenham Council, for more housing and other infrastructure developed as part of White Hart Lane Estate. The full story, carefully researched and written by Ken Barker, can be found in his book [*How Rural Tottenham Disappeared*](#)

And so that ends our post for today. We have been talking a lot about 'fishermen' here, and our images also show only men or boys fishing. Up until the early 1900s, women were not often included in fishing either as a recreational or a competitive sport activity – although would be found selling the fish and, of course, probably cooking them! We would love to hear any recollections about women fishing, so do let us know if you are a keen angler yourself or have had a female angler in your family.

We hope you have enjoyed our virtual exploration of the history of fishing in the area.

Take care, stay well and be healthy

Best wishes from us all at Bruce Castle

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