



by *Eddie Bosomworth*

The Last Rites

PRIESTS come in all shapes and sizes, no not the human ones although they too come in a variety of sizes, age, ethnicity, and country of birth. The priests I am referring to are the ones used by fishermen. They like their human counterpart are called upon to give the last rites. So where did the term 'PRIEST' originate? I know of no other similar terminology in any European language that refers to such a device as a means of dispatching a fish that the angler has successfully landed. The use of the 'Priest' in salmon fishing in Britain is very much a part of the ritual of despatching the fish and is, in Scotland, usually accompanied by a 'wee dram' of neat whiskey provided by the angler and much enjoyed by the guide or ghillie as he is known.

Of course there are many ways of dispatching

a fish. For many anglers, hitting the fish on the head is the simple way. As a young lad, I used to fish with the worm on small burns in Scotland, and when a fish was caught, - and these fish were often under 500gms in weight,- the easy and recognised way was to insert one's thumb into the fish's mouth and with a quick move bend the fish's head way back and the backbone would break, the

flowed out to sea right on the edge of town and when the tides were right, there would be a number of salmon nets men setting and retrieving their nets from either side of the river. The nets were piled on a flat board across the stern of the rowing boat and paid out as the oarsmen rowed in a big curve out round upstream and back to shore. The net was then retrieved and there was always



gills would separate from the under belly and the fish was dead in an instant. I don't think I ever felt queasy about killing a fish this way, certainly not as a pre-teenager.

Occasionally I would accompany my father on a Saturday from Edinburgh to Berwick on Tweed where I was free to wander around the town while my father did business in the Corn Exchange dealing with farmers who wanted to buy or sell cattle or sheep. The river Tweed

anticipation and excitement as the last few metres of net were pulled ashore. One of the men would grab, what to me looked like a chair leg and with one good wallop smack each fish on the back of the head as it lay within the mesh of the net. It was the first time I had seen this method of killing a fish, and it left a lasting impression on my mind. I can still picture these gleaming silver bodies, some as long as my leg, tails lashing sideways then shuddering and lying still as the coup de grace was administered with a powerful blow. I had also seen a salmon being killed by lifting the fish by the wrist just in front of the tail, and swinging the fish out and down so the head met the heel of the boot with a solid smack. One hit was all it took. Then of course a nice rounded rock of the size of a tennis ball would do a perfectly adequate job of stilling any signs of life in a trout or salmon. There was no need to carry a heavy object in the pocket, there being thousands to choose from right along the bank of the river. It was only when one was fishing from a boat that it was necessary to have some means of dealing to the fish when it was brought aboard. This was always the case when loch fishing. Seldom were any two priests alike. Each fisherman would likely have his own favorite, be it home made or bought from a tackle store. Looking at the numbered priests in the illustration you can see just what a difference there is when you assemble a small collection of these.

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(1) This looks to me as though it may well have started out as a form of rolling pin but for what exact rolling use is anyone's guess. My reason for saying so is that the handle is out of proportion to the body of the article. Not only that, but the blunt end shows signs of being 'parted off' as one would do in a lathe. Still it would do a good job on big fish. The wood appears to be ebony and is nicely crafted and finished and carries enough weight to the job nicely.

(2) This one is quite heavy and has a lump of lead at the business end and what appears to be a 'disgorger' or 'hook out' at the other. One would assume that because of its length, it was usually called into action to deal with quite large fish. Being of European origin, pike automatically come to mind since their teeth would make a disgorger mandatory.

(3) There are signs that this one may have been designed and used as a woodcarving mallet. It is quite short, yet heavy enough to deliver a decent blow with a minimum of force. One could see that a sharp tapping action is more in keeping with the use that it may have been put to. Added to that, the surface of the head is quite pitted and bears signs of repeated impact on its surface.

(4) Now here is a specifically designed priest for killing a fish. There can be no doubt about that. The only comment one could make is that it started off life as something else and I am not quite sure what that may have been. The transverse hole through the neck of the handle may well have been to permit the use of a torsion bar had it originally been a tool of some description. The loaded brass head is typical of a commercially made trout priest.

(5) Number five is a nicely engineered compact priest that would tuck into any fisherman's waistcoat pocket and might also prove handy in any confrontational situation by a group of poachers or others bearing ill will

(6) This next priest has a shrink plastic covering over, I would guess, a wood shaft, with again, the typical brass head. Ok for small fish, but a bit light for anything above three kilos.

(7) Number seven has beautiful lines in its shape and is made from lignum vitae, a super dense and hard wood that is ideally suited to the job. The lighter of the two contrasting tones of the wood has a warm honey coloured

look to it. I can recall this wood being used in the old-fashioned wringer or mangle. A machine used in the laundry to squeeze all the moisture out of linen sheets and other items having been through the wash. Two heavy rollers could be adjusted to give a thicker or thinner gap between them and when the large crank handle was turned the rollers turned clockwise and anti-clockwise as the wet clothing was fed into the space



between them. Woe betide any little fingers that might be caught in the process.

(8) Priest number 8 has a lead plug insert in the head. One tap from this little baby and oblivion is guaranteed. Although short in length, the weight is sufficient to administer a single fatal blow.

(9) The ninth one in the list, from my point of view, has a decided history in that it is inscribed with the owners name and the date 1906. The fact that it is made from kauri likely identifies it as being of New Zealand origin. It is quite short, but like its neighbour number 8 it is adequately heavy in the head to

administer a satisfactory thump on the head of a fish. While seeming a little on the heavy side for a trout priest, one must remember that the average trout back in the early 1900's did need a fairly solid whack on the head to kill it.

(10-11-12-13) These four are what I would call commercial priests, all having been manufactured by some of the major tackle manufacturers in Britain, probably around the 1920's and 30's. They are all pretty much of a much ness in that they have very similar lines and all have the same material and shape in the brass head. One can usually find the manufacturers name stamped into the brass head.

(14) Here we have a priest with a short cork handgrip and what looks like a fiberglass shaft with an alloy head. A bit light I should think, but nicely made.

(15) Now this one is interesting as it is in two sections, with the lower piece fitting inside the upper and screwing in tightly. What is it you might ask? Well it is called a stomach spoon and its purpose is to be inserted via the mouth of the fish to retrieve a sample from the gullet of what insects the fish had been recently feeding on. For dedicated dry fly fishers it was almost a must when one was fishing for selectively feeding brown trout. The job was to try and catch the first one to reveal what imitative pattern one should be using, be it the hatching nymph, the dun, or the spent spinner. The spoon in this case is brass, but I have seen them made of ivory, bone and silver, and not always as this one is, part of a priest.

I have saved the last two images of priests till the end of this tribute to the last rites as they are somewhat symbolical, and are perhaps more of a talking point than a practical instrument. These two priests are both carved from a section of a stag's antlers by master carver Des Baker of Taupo. The detailing is superb. The upper priest has a wonderful dragonfly at one end and a superb looking snail at the other, with numerous insects depicted in between. The plaited lanyard and the toggle just perfectly complete the picture.

The lower priest has a different texture, somewhat ivory like and depicts a trout complete with lateral line and all the spots.

These two are truly a work of art and a tribute to the bone carver's craftsmanship.

All photography courtesy of Jeremy Wells and the Killwell Collection

