

Tales from the riverbank

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STORIES!

YOUR No.1 Angler's Mail brings you a warts 'n' all tale every week, from a different top angler.



THIS WEEK'S
STORY-TELLER IS:

LEO WALMSLEY

The late author of 20 books and 200 short stories whose writing reflected his lifelong love of fishing.

A LESSON FROM A BEGINNER WITH A SPECIAL BAIT

LIVING as we did practically on the shore of one of the estuary tidal creeks in Cornwall, and with a little cove of our own, mullet offered to me a frequent provocation and challenge. They were grey mullet, a species that with local variations is found in many parts of the world. They have very small, practically toothless mouths, their principal food being plankton and algae.

I had tried trolling from a dinghy at the edge of the shoal with light tackle and worm, but on no occasion did I succeed in persuading one of the multitude to take any interest.

Regularly throughout spring and summer several mullet would swim leisurely into our cove when the tide was high enough, so close in that their dorsal fins were breaking the surface.

At the slightest sign of footsteps they would swim out again. I had tried stalking them, moving to the water's edge on my hands and knees, then flicking the bait on top of them. I had tried approaching them from the side of the cove with my landing net, then making a sudden rush, half throwing the net at them. They would elude it, swim out, yet in ten minutes if I kept dead still they would be back in shallow water to mock me.

One summer's day, with the holiday season in full swing, I saw a boy about 11 years of age sitting on the wall of the Albert Quay fishing. He had a bamboo rod, without a reel, his line just tied to its tip. He had a cork for a float. Alongside him was a basket with a lid, a Thermos flask, a half-eaten Cornish pasty and a half-skinned banana. He had bare, sunburnt legs, with sandals

on his feet. He was wearing shorts and an open-neck cotton shirt. But for the Thermos flask, the pasty and the fact that his garments were beautifully clean and unpatched, it might have been myself of long ago. I sensed a kindred spirit.

But I felt sorry for him. Evidently he was a visitor. The Albert Quay was the last place any local boy would have chosen for fishing in the season, for it was the main landing place for small pleasure craft, as well as the ordinary harbour traffic. True, there were usually small pollack swimming about the wall, but so many boats were tied to its rails that at present only a small area of surface water was visible, and it was impossible to see if there were any fish or not.

I watched him for a while. His cork float, although it kept moving horizontally in the slight swell made by the harbour traffic, gave no indication of a nibble. Then I said, with perhaps a suspicion of condescension: 'You know, you'll never catch anything here. There are too many boats coming and going all the time. If I were you I'd go down to Readymoney Cove, or go over to Polruan and along to the castle and fish from the rocks. There'll be no one to disturb you there, and sometimes you can catch quite big fish. I don't suppose you've had even a bite here.'

He looked up at me and smiled. 'Oh yes I have - plenty!'

'Have you? But have you caught any fish?'

He was still smiling. 'Yes - I've caught two.'

'Have you?' I said. 'Well done. What are they, little pollack?'



“ The Albert Quay was the last place any local boy would have chosen for fishing in the season.”

'I don't know what they are, but they're not very little. One of them pulled quite strong. They're in my basket.'

Without taking his eyes from the float he lifted the lid of the basket. Inside it were two mullet, one of them about a foot in length, both still quivering. I was astonished.

'Those fish are mullet,' I said. 'Do you know that I've been fishing here for years and I've never yet caught one on a hook? What bait are you using? Ragworm?'

'No. I couldn't get any worms. I'm using bits of banana. They seem to like it all right. Are mullet good to eat?'

'You bet they are,' I said, hoping there was no bitterness in my voice. He lifted his rod and pulled in the line. The hook was bare. He put on it another pellet of banana and

dropped the line in again.

I said: 'Take no notice of what I said about moving to another place, my lad. Carry on.'

Since then I have tried fishing with bits of banana, with bits of orange peel, with dough, with mussel, worm, soft crab, maggots, ears of corn, trout flies and other artificial lures, but I have yet to catch a mullet on hook and line.

■ This story is taken from *Angler's Moon*, first published in 1965 and reprinted this year by The Walmsley Society. Copies priced £12.24 (plus £3.50 p&p) are available from www.walmsleysoc.org



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