

Welcome old friend!

Martyn Page

Provided by The Costessey Point Project. www.norfolkanglers.com/wensum

Wensum barbel, so much has been said, so few are their numbers. I am no expert of barbel fishing generally, but have caught a good number of the Wensum fish and although I love them all, there is one very special to me, as I'll now try to explain.

The only trouble with the Wensum is the small head of barbel and therefore it is inevitable that the fish get caught more than once and become known, (oh for a prolific head of them). So it was with my old friend, she has no name, "Mug" is so uncomplimentary for such a magnificent fish, so in writing this piece I will name her for the first time, Bo, (Something to do with sex and a lady who we all like to see a lot of). Bo put in her first appearance (as far as I am aware) at the end of June 1978, when I had the fortune to capture her, in magnificent condition and weighing 10lb 13oz. Her weight has altered little over the following few years, but I fear she may not now be quite the same, perhaps age or repeated capture will have had their effect. Or maybe it's my imagination.



My success in 1978 was as a result of constant searching for a big Wensum barbel during the close season, spurred towards my desire to catch such a beautiful beast following Steve Harper's capture of the first Wensum double the previous year.

After much spotting I had found Bo in a swim with only one other barbel, a fish of about 5lb and with the season only days away I felt confident she would remain for a while in that area. The first two weeks of the season I spent tench fishing the infamous Marsh Lake, but then my mind returned to Bo and the last day of my holiday saw me on the banks of the Wensum. Two weeks had had an effect. Heavy rain had coloured the water and the river was some two feet up on normal. Confidence simply oozed from my bread flake, (she was not a shy fish in those days, hence no bait problems) as I flicked it out into the river. Seconds later, I was into a fish; a boil on the surface and the 5lb fish slipped the hook. Feeling disappointed at losing the smaller specimen, my second piece of flake was cast to the same spot. "I've disturbed my quarry without a doubt", I thought, but no, seconds later the battle had begun and some minutes later I landed my quarry. I could hardly speak with elation for days after.

Bo was caught a few times in 1979 and 1980 (at least five of which I am aware) by different anglers; she had seen many different baits having been caught on some, lost on some and it seems, learnt only part of the wariness of her colleagues. During those two seasons I had not spent a great deal of time on the Wensum and only once did I see her, under a small weed raft, - I was not fishing that day but sat watching her for about hour. (Such observation is always rewarding).

The summer of 1981 did however see me more regularly on the Wensum, spending hours getting to know each of the barbel, watching their behaviour, their wariness of certain baits. Enjoying success and failure, relishing every moment and every barbel, regardless of size.

This particular Sunday however, I had been chub fishing, accompanied by my lucky mascot, my lady-friend, Lynne. Her charm had not been working its usual wonders, with only two chub by mid-afternoon, when I decided to try a deep swim at the end of a straight. The swim was heavily weeded, but with patience one could wait until a gap appeared in the weed and cast the bait into it. The gap would quickly close as a result of the action of the current, but in such swims the chub were usually most obliging and with suitable tackle the tug of war usually results in a chub in the net.

I was fishing downstream with cheese bait and I was not happy. No chub bites, but line tremors if fish were catching the line. "Could it be a shoal of 'whiskers', I kept thinking. I had to find out, so after reeling in I crept round and approached the swim from downstream, waited and watched. As the streamer weed parted, suspicions were confirmed, for the main shoal of Wensum barbel had taken sanctuary in the swim. Including at least three over the 9lb mark.

Thoughts of chub had now completely left my mind, as I put together a more powerful rod, 9lb line and switched bait to luncheon meat.

Nearly an hour later, the rod was ripped round and I was into an extremely powerful fish, heading upstream under the weed. I never really had a chance with that fish, having lost vital seconds at the start of the fight and the barbel took great advantage by ploughing deep into the weed. After a long tug of war the hook hold gave and I was left with memories of a big one lost and myself to blame.

That fish upset the others and they shifted deep into the streamer, away from my little gap. So there were no more encounters that day.



Monday evening saw me and my mascot, rushing across to the swim after work. Will they be there? Fingers crossed! Yes, a bronze flank turned, luck is with us.

I was prepared this time, having planned carefully all day. The first half hour was spent sitting upstream feeding hemp into the swim. I soon had the barbel feeding furiously, rolling, turning and shovelling up the hemp. Meanwhile, Lynne was preparing some bunches of tares on cotton for hook-bait. I even positioned myself differently, fishing upstream to the barbel this time, so that immediately upon striking, I could pull the fish back downstream, confront it and net it really

quickly. Well, you know what they say about the, "best laid plans"? And all that. Ten minutes after the first cast the rod buckled round in my hands and I immediately powered into the fish. Part one worked, for up through eight feet of water she came. A massive explosion on the surface."A double", I thought as my heart beat went into overdrive, but that was a second lost, already she was on her way down again and unpredictably she came in towards me, burrowing into the streamer weed only a few feet out. Then all went solid. One should learn by one's mistakes and I'd allowed her a brief second whilst I marvelled at her size and I looked set now to lose my quarry. There was no doubt the barbel was still on, but so very heavily weeded that to merely keep pulling would result in the hook pulling out or bending, or even worse, the line snapping, leaving the hook still embedded in her mouth. So contingency plan number one was to be brought into operation. I gave her a slack line. Nothing happened, even five minutes later nothing had happened. Meanwhile, Lynne had set up a weed-cutting blade on a spare landing net pole and with this I commenced contingency plan number

2. Keeping rod, with a lightly tensioned line in one hand, I started cutting weed with the cutter on an extended pole with the other. I kept well away from the line, cutting downstream and near in. It soon became obvious however that I couldn't reach far enough – I had one option left and I was very wary of this.

It took a long while to make up my mind, but in the end I decided that I wanted that fish enough to go in, even though I knew it would mean rising life and limb in the strong current amongst the steamer weed. At the edge the river shelved from two to about four feet and then rapidly to eight feet. I had to keep in that shallower water, for the end result in the deep water would have almost certainly meant one drowned Martyn and I did not drown, although I did suffer for days after with exhaustion. The exact length of time I was in the water is not known, though it was approximately an hour.

Initially, I kept very close in, in two feet of water, so slowly cutting weed and watching it drift downstream. Eventually I became more adventurous, through necessity and went in to chest depth. All the time I could feel the bottom breaking away and the drop off was only a couple of feet away, but my determination prevailed.

Indeed, fortune smiled as I had an audience, one worried Lynne plus two lads and their young ladies, all of them willing to give assistance. I lost count of the number of times they passed me the weed cutter and then took it back when I needed it. One becomes exhausted so much quicker when in water and there is very little leverage when you're up to your chest in it. An eternity seemed to pass whilst the cutting was in progress. I used each arm in turn until it ran out of strength, then swapped the rod and started again. At each rest I used the landing net pole to pull the loose weed downstream. Slowly it became an epic imprinted on the minds of the audience, two angling companions who were helpless to assist on the other side of the river and myself, for the rest of our days.

What of the fish in all this time? Yes, she was still there. I wondered at first, but after about ten minutes in the water I caught sight of her flanks for a brief second some six feet or so further out, quite deep down and tangled in all

the weed, helpless. Many minutes later I saw her again but this time she kicked and moved. The weed bed moved with her. I bit my tongue in anguish as the rod tip slammed under the water and I prepared myself for the disappointment of the loss, but no she went to ground. Not long after this I moved my legs, only to be nearly bowled over, for she had gone to ground actually under my legs without my knowing it. Tense moments followed as the fight recommenced. The weed-cutter was dropped and two hands took control of the tackle, but the water's cold edge had caused my muscles to tighten, for cramp set in. It was real agony just to maintain pressure. I was losing the battle, as the fish lunged time and time again. It was only a question of time before the hook pulled.

That moment didn't come though. So when she settled down to a period of inactivity, I worked out my next



move. I could see that the weed was now thinner as a result of my efforts. I could sink a landing net into the water at this point and reach the fish, which I could clearly see just out from me. The problem was that she had doubled back under the streamer weed and therefore if I pulled on the rod I tended to pull her back out into mid-stream. It was time to give up the weed cutting I realised, for the danger of slicing the line was very real now. Gentle persuasion would be the answer. Using a landing net pole only, I started easing the problem weed towards me and then before it returned in the current, pulling as much of it out as I could with my free hand. This went on for ages; whilst the barbell lay underneath, head downstream. I feared that it could be drowning by taking in water backwards through its gills. Fortunately, as I pulled one clump of weed, something happened. Suddenly, the water heaved, the barbell was on the surface. The fight resumed, but I was at the point of no return. I could put no more pressure on the rod because of the cramp in my arms. I could get the net under the fish, but had so little energy I could hardly lift and even when I did, the fish, which was lying tail towards me merely drifted out of it as a result of the double back effect of the weed and current.

I must have tried a half dozen times to net it, each time with the same result. A gasp from the girls as they covered their eyes, a missed heart beat from myself, (please don't let me lose it, please, please, is there a god?) and a half hearted run from the barbel. It was stalemate and the balance could not be affected by the barbel or myself.

I don't know if there is a god, but there is comradeship in the human race, for one of the lads, an angler, decided this was the last straw, he stripped off and came as a knight without armour to my rescue. With us both in the water and both lifting the net, we prayed that we could get the net up before the current pulling the weed, entangling barbel out of it. The plain facts of the matter were that we couldn't and with my strength failing rapidly, I was in danger of slipping over the drop off to a watery grave. The position was critical – we tried yet again, but this time as we slid the net, I found a last reserve of power, which moved the head round to face us for the first time. The net was under her, but again the weed began to pull her away. Then suddenly, the extra pressure was too much, I watched in horrific disbelief as the hook pulled from her mouth. Not now please, not now, well over an hour after the beginning of our encounter. The suddenly I was aware of the cheers behind me and as I opened my eyes, the horror was instantly dispelled; there in the net was the barbel. The hook pulling out had allowed her to sink – straight into the net! That moment of emotion, the sudden success against impossible odds, the help and encouragement of people I didn't even know, I can never forget that moment. I just yelled, "she's mine, she's mine" as we passed the landing net to those on the bank and I was helped from the water. I bent, exhausted to my adversary and kissed her for giving me so much. I then found the hook had been pulled back by the weed when it parted from its mouth and had come to rest lightly in its pectoral. I carefully removed it and lifted her from the mesh into the wet weigh net and on to the scales. After deducting the net, my barbel weighed 10lb 2oz. I was shivering, suffering from exhaustion, almost exposure, but what the damn! She was then slipped into a carp sack and I stood with her for a few minutes, holding head upstream until energy flooded back and then moving to a shallow run quietly up stream I walked with my fish across the river to enlist the assistance of John Watson's photographic abilities before standing once more in the water with the barbel faced upstream until she surged powerfully away.

The capture took so long, she was actually mine for only a few minutes, but that is the way it should be. Some moralist may say that the capture was not true in that I went in for my fish, but to me that fish was the best I capture of my angling career, as it gave me the most pleasure. On the day, it was landed, but when the slides were returned it was obvious from the three familiar spots on her head that she was an old friend paying me a visit.

Thank you Bo.....

Martyn

©2005 Martyn Page

