

Pike Anglers Club of Great Britain



Bill Chillingworth Interview

Not even a stroke could keep Bill Chillingworth off the water - or stop him rounding off the season with a brace of 20s. As he turns 69, Steve Rodwell tracked down a man who's managed 321 of them in a fishing career stretching over more than 50 years..

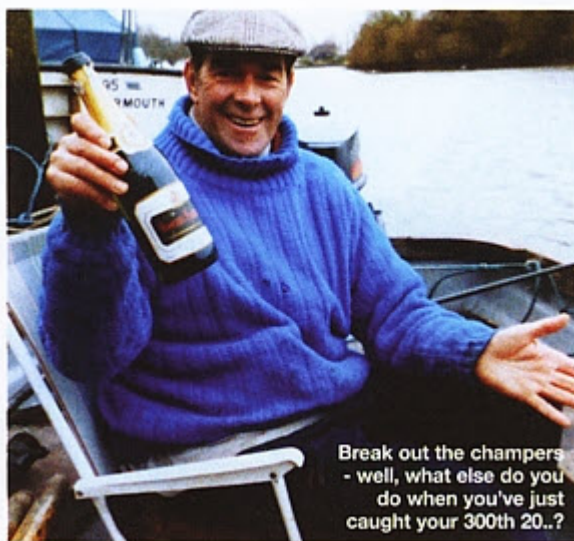
It messed his season up. He had to get a comfier boat. But Bill Chillingworth's bounced back from a stroke and he's still topping up his incredible total of 20's - despite worrying whether his arm would be up to showing a fish who's boss in the tidal Yare.

"I'd had 319 twenties up to the time I had my stroke but I managed two late ones this year and that meant a lot to me," he said. "I did worry about my arm and whether it would stand up to the strain of playing a big fish so to get out there and achieve something like that is excellent."

That's two twenties more than I caught all season. Ditto most of my mates. We rushed around all over the place, we worked like hell - Bill's smiling politely by now.

"You know, people today just don't seem to want to sit it out," he says. "That's not my way, that's never been my way. I try to read the water a little bit and the areas and have some courage in my convictions. I suppose I've just got a more leisurely attitude. People go past me at 8 a.m. and I'll still be there when they back at 4 p.m. "If you have the courage in you convictions, you sit there and you do it. I've been a pike fisherman for 57 years now."

With more than 300 twenties under his belt, you can't really argue with Bill's approach. He was there in the 60s and 70s, when pike fishing struggled out of the dark ages and a handful of anglers like him put the Fens on the map. And it was all down to a teacher, who lived down the street in Hertfordshire where he grew up. Well, kind of. "At the age of 11, I was taken down to the River Lea at Ponder's End by my piano tutor, who lived next door to us," he said. "I'd never been fishing in my life but he took a group of us down there. I saw one of them catch a pike and from that moment in time that's what I wanted to catch. From then on, I've worked my way along. I can still remember when I got my first rod, my first Fishing Gazette float - that's roughly how I started into it."



By the 60s, Bill was fishing the Fens. Even then, the numbers game which has come to dominate the 21st Century piking scene had reared its head. "I'm not one for big fish lists, they don't interest me," he shrugs. "It developed into a numbers game many years ago, especially in the days of the Relief Channel. A lot of the top line anglers used to buzz you as soon as you got home and it was a question of how many doubles and 20s." "In the end it just got too much, so Sheila and I somewhere round about the early 70s took ourselves apart. We just wanted to relax and enjoy our pike fishing as we knew it. We wanted to get away from the rat race of pike fishing."

Bill smiles when I tell he's always been one of my heroes. When I ask him how he feels about giving a rare interview to Pikelines, he says he feels honoured. The irony of this isn't lost on me and Bish - who's snapping away with his camera in between emptying Bill's beer stash. If it wasn't

for Bill and a few of his fishing mates, the PAC might never have been. It started off with the Pike Society, run by Yorkshireman Eric Hodson. Launched in the early 70s - at a time when most pike caught ended up with a whack between the eyes.

"He was a cracking chap, really good fisherman. But he was finding it hard to hold this group together," said Bill.

www.pacgb.co.uk

"It came to pass that Hugh Rickards, Barrie Rickards, latterly myself with Laurie Manns, decided to form the PAC. I was invited - and I was quite honoured - to be the first President. And we endeavoured to get it off the ground, with a lot of work through the angling press, the local press and it went on in leaps and bounds. I'm very pleased to see where it is today and there's no two ways about it, pike fishing generally from the conservation point of view and making people aware of pike and how to handle them has really come on, so pike fishing has benefited in a big way."

Other organisations have sprung up since, in Ireland and Scotland. Politics aside, Bill thinks they're all for the good because they've got people on the ground focussed on what counts, which is looking after the fishing we all prize so highly. "If you've got the same people who are prepared to do what Barrie and Hugh did, and Laurie in those early days, it can only be beneficial." "It gives a little bit more scope, a little bit more time to lend their expertise to anglers in those areas, rather than it all graduating from the north and south of England. You only get out what you put into it. They've got the opportunity and hopefully the get-up-and-go to do something about it."

Rows, well - I had to mention them. Bill is philosophical. "Nothing's ever straightforward in life, everybody's got their own views on different things. There have been one or two things which have to come to pass in the PAC where I won't say you had bad eggs but people made mistakes." "That will still happen in the future but at the end of the day if they can be rectified then people can get through them and carry on."

When I ask Bill about his heroes or who's impressed him, he says there are two that come to mind. One is Hugh Reynolds. "He gets big fish every year, he has a fair amount of doubles and three or four twenties and he goes about his business very quietly. "I've known him for 40-odd years, I even fished with him up until the last week of the season. Very knowledgeable man, founder member of the PAC and that is one man I admire."

The other man is one he's had a few ups and downs with over the years. It all started the day a young lad in shorts came striding purposefully up the banks of the Relief Channel from Downham Market railway station. "He says excuse me, can I have some of your bait. I was down there for two or three days, so I explained to him: Look young man, I'm sorry but I've barely got enough bait to take me through my stint." The lad concerned - one youngster from King's Lynn, name of Neville Fickling - was sufficiently miffed he penned a vitriolic letter to the Angler's Mail about the incident. "Do you know I was slagged off all over the Angler's Mail the next week: I met Bill Chillingworth and asked him nicely for some bait, the guy refused me and off he went." "I watched him for three or four years after that and it was obvious he was going to go places."

The story resurfaced a few months back, when I blagged a couple of trout off Neville on Ladybower. He wasn't wearing shorts that day, but he lent me a couple and my mate Johnny had a 23 on one and I had an 18! Later I asked him if he had a couple more going, he gave me the Bill story. "When I asked Bill Chillingworth for some bait, he never gave me any," he said. Err, nice one Neville. "This might sound strange to you but that guy, I know what he's put into it, I know the way he's gone about things in his fishing and he's achieved a lot." "I know the time and effort and the tenacity behind the man. A lot of people don't, a lot of people knock him." "From that day onwards, he had the knack. If you caught a big fish, he was there. The day I caught two record zander who do you think turned up, who came wandering up the bank out of the blue? It was Neville." "All in all, I've followed his career right the way through. So in answer to your question Hugh Reynolds and Neville are the two that stand out to me."

Neville stood out even more after the now legendary occasion when he came sauntering up the bank on the Relief Channel, where Bill was fishing a noted hotspot of the day, and announced he'd have to move.

Bill had beaten the rush and settled into a swim he didn't really fancy vacating. Words were exchanged. Neville disappeared and returned with the bailiff - who confirmed Bill would have to move because Neville had booked 30 pegs, including the one he was sitting in.

Bill could have been up with the rest of them in the publicity stakes. But it wasn't what he wanted, after hitting the headlines a few times early on in his early career. "I still consider myself up with the best of them, I class myself that I can hold my own with most of them," he said. "But people say to me you've had all these fish but you haven't had a thirty pounder. Well in all fairness, where I've fished over the years, thirty pounders aren't common." "They're not common in the Fens, or in gravel pits. I've had no end of fish 28 plus from gravel pits, I have had 29s, I've had a fish on the end on the Delph though that was well over 30lb."

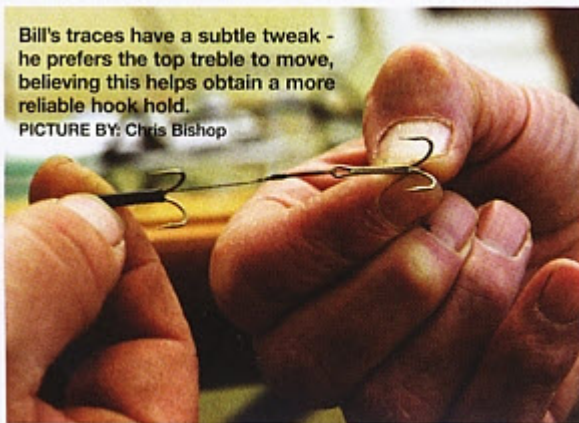
"I lost it on what was the bank, because the Delph was up and over the banks, it came off. I dropped the bait back right where it came off - it was a fair-sized chub and that looked like a minnow hanging



outside its mouth - it went straight away and I thought God, I've got it again. As it happened, it was a 14lb zander." We all need a bit of luck from time to time. And Bill's the first to admit the lady concerned has smiled on him once or twice all the same

After getting permission to fish a complex of pits in the Ouse valley, he scored well on one of them which was at the end of a fair old hike down a track behind a locked gate. Too far to walk with all your kit, the trick was to make sure the key would be left hidden nearby so you could drive down to your swim. After arranging a trip with his brother one Christmas, Bill found the gate locked and neither fancied the route march. So they dropped onto a pit by the road Bill had always written off as being too shallow to be worth bothering about. Bro found an 11 ft deep area in a pit averaging a third as much water Bill found twenty after twenty - including two on the day he had to go into hospital for an operation - but thought he'd sneak a few hours on the bank first.

Bill doesn't hesitate when I ask him about his favourite waters and his favourite part of the country. "I really have a love affair with the Fens, they're not the easiest waters to fish for obvious reasons. I've always said you've got to think like a pike, you've got to learn to read the water, because Fen drains are much of a muchness wherever you go. "This is why you've got to believe in what you think is right. You've got to look at the stock, you've got to be on the water early to find the fry and the food fish and you've got to put a lot of work in."



Bill's traces have a subtle tweak - he prefers the top treble to move, believing this helps obtain a more reliable hook hold.
PICTURE BY: Chris Bishop

Today's standards seem a world away from the 60s and 70s sometimes, on legendary waters like the Relief Channel. And as Bish rifles Bill's picture collection, the stories come thick and fast. There's Guy the Labrador, who always got up when he had a run and stayed by his master's side. Days out with Sheila, black and white pics from a bygone age when the Fens were the piker's Mecca and the likes of Bill, Barrie and Hugh rewrote the history books - with a bit of help from a lad in shorts. Chillingworth The Yare's the place Bill reckons he's going to catch his first 30. But the Relief Channel and the Post Office mile was the greatest water of all, etched in his memory.

"I took a walk along The Stones with Sheila a few weeks back and you know it hadn't changed. The rushes were still there, I could just see it. "Put a bait out there, I always had one on a paternoster just

on the corner - you know that's my favourite rig. I don't use all the booms and bits and bobs. That makes pike fishing very technical, when pike fishing itself is simplicity. "All you want is a stop knot, a bead, a sliding float and your terminal hooks. I'm always fishing the same as I was 30 years ago, you've seen my rigs."

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