

'My first Grayling – fishing in Walbran's footsteps' by David Martin

In the 1960's when I was very young I regularly visited my Grandfather in Ilkley. I used to rummage around his house and found both his fishing books and his fishing tackle (most of which I now have). Owen lived all his life close to the River Wharfe. He only fished for two kinds of fish – Brown Trout and Grayling – and by just two methods – fly and trotted worm. So that's how I started and ...so far as Grayling fishing is concerned....continue to this day.

My father did not fish but I guess it was through my interest in my Grandfathers tackle and books that I started to fish. In April 1972 I moved to live in Wharfedale and quickly palled up at school (Ilkley Grammar School) with Martin - who fished (we still fish together). In the early 1970's our first River Wharfe catches included Trout, Gudgeon, small Chub and Dace but no Grayling.

I knew all about Grayling and about them being an autumn/winter fish because I had read 'How to Catch Grayling' by Francis Walbran (published 1895). This book was given to my Grandfather on his 18th birthday and it is inscribed in the inside front cover 'Owen G Bowen 1919'. I read....time and time again...the chapter about 'Swimming the Worm'. At the very start of this chapter he says '*And now we approach branches of Grayling fishing of which I am exceedingly fond, viz., swimming the worm in winter.*'



Although I love my fly fishing, and for the last ten years I have been a full-time professional fly fishing instructor and guide, I am also exceedingly fond of trotting. I do it using a 60 year old Allcock's Match Ariel centre-pin reel.

To the left I am pictured fishing the Bath Street run (Middleton side) with my Grandfather's tackle – a Hardy cane trotting rod, Ariel type centre pin reel and even his float and hook to nylon. Yes I did catch a Grayling!

Walbran mentions the River Wharfe at Ilkley in his book. In the chapter 'Christmastide among the Grayling' he describes a very cold day on the river (in the early 1890's). To quote from the book:

'...I began to think that it was going to prove a real red-letter day; but all at once, in keeping my eye fixed upon my small float out in the stream, I stumbled over a large piece of rock and fell forwards. This caused my wooden creel, containing over 9lb. of Grayling, to sling round my neck, and before I could say "Jack Robinson" I was floundering about in four feet of water.' *'The thermometer had been below freezing point all day, and as I leaned for temporary support against the frozen bank of the river I felt completely paralysed.'*

He put his survival down to the half pint of brandy that he drank immediately from his pocket flask.

'Half an hour saw me within the hospitable doors of the Crescent Hotel, within which I was able to divest myself of my half-frozen clothes, rub myself thoroughly with warm rough towels, and don a borrowed suit.'

My first Grayling must have been caught very close to where this incident took place, some 80 years before. Unfortunately Walbran did not learn his lesson and in February 1909 he died from drowning while wading on the River Ure.

Martin and I used to plan our fishing trips at school and I can just imagine our excitement at the thought of the upcoming Grayling fishing trip. My Grandfather was a life member of the Ilkley Angling Association and the plan was that Martin and I would share one rod and use one of Owen's member's privilege tickets for the day.

On 2nd November 1972 Owen took us to the river at Bath Street end, just a couple of hundred yards downstream from the New Bridge at Ilkley. We had one inch long Gilt tail worms for bait (dug from Grandfathers compost heap) and used one of his Grayling bob floats. The plan was that Martin and I would take turns and this is what we did. Most of our days didn't go to plan but this one certainly did. It was less than 30 minutes before the first Grayling graced the landing net and my record of the day shows a total of five Grayling caught by myself with the largest at 11.5" and three that Martin caught. A real result....and the start of my lifetime passion for Grayling and Grayling fishing. Forty years later and I now live less than 100 yards from where this memorable fishing session took place.

The River Wharfe at Ilkley has always provided prolific Grayling fishing and still does. From the 1890's to the 1970's to the 2010's you could and can expect to catch a good bag of Grayling. In half-decent conditions a catch of around 5 to 15 fish can be expected with most of the fish being in the 4oz to 1lb 4oz size range. And the Bath Street end run is as good as ever. Give it a go.

In his Preface to 'How to Catch Grayling' Walbran says: *'The present little work has in truth been a labour of love, as there is no fish that swims – no, not even excepting the trout, of which I am so fond as the 'graceful, gliding grayling.'*" I agree.