

THE COMPLEAT ANGLER

'In writing it I have made myself a recreation of a recreation'

In May 1653 an advertisement announced the publication of *'The Compleat Angler, or the Contemplative Man's Recreation, being a discourse of Fish and Fishing, not unworthy the perusal of most Anglers, of 18 pence. Written by Iz. Wa. Printed for Richard Marriot, to be sold at his shop in Saint Dunstan's Churchyard, Fleet Street.'*

The first volume sold well. Marriot duly printed a second edition two years later. Izaak had written extra text and he continued to revise his work for a third edition in 1661. There was a fourth edition in 1668 but Izaak had played no part in its production. In fact it was little more than a money-raising venture by the printer after the disastrous Great Fire of London in 1666. The author did however have a major hand in the final version to appear during his lifetime. This, the fifth edition of 1676, contained not only further revision by Izaak but also a supplement of fly fishing written at his request by his good friend and fellow angling enthusiast, Charles Cotton.

Interest in *The Compleat Angler* waned with Walton's death seven years later in 1683. Publication ended ... for 74 years. Then Dr Johnson initiated a revival of interest which has continued into the 21st-century. In 1750 he encouraged Moses Browne to reprint the book. Nine further reprints had appeared by 1797. The 19th-century produced at least 159 different publications, and by 1900 the book was a world bestseller, beaten only by the Bible and Shakespeare. The pace has hardly slackened since - at least 500 editions had been printed by 2001, which is said to make *The Compleat Angler* the most republished book in the English language apart from the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. And the popularity is not confined to the English language - the book has been translated into at least 20 others.

Just why is this book so popular? It is, of course, primarily a textbook for anglers with its advice on how to catch every kind of fish in English rivers; where to find the best worms for bait; how to breed maggots; and once the fish have been caught, how to cook them with herbs, wine and best butter. These quotations show the wide range of Walton's advice:

About four of the clock in the afternoon repair to your baited place; and as soon as you come to the waterside, cast in the rest of your ground-bait and stand off; then whilst the fish are gathering together (for there they will most certainly come for their supper) you may take a pipe of tobacco ...

some say that camphor, put into your bag with your worms, gives them a strong and tempting a smell, that the fish fare the worse and you the better for it

mulberries and those blackberries which grow upon briars be good baits for chub or carp

as for pastes (bait), there are almost as many sorts as there are medicines for the toothache

Put your carp into a small pot ... take sweet marjoram, thyme and parsley, of each half a handful, a sprig of rosemary, and another of savory, bind them into two or three small bundles and put them to your carp, with four or five whole onions, twenty pickled oysters and three anchovies. Then pour upon your carp as much claret wine as will only cover him, and season your claret well with salt, cloves and mace, and the rinds of oranges and lemons ... when sufficiently boiled, take out the carp and pour upon it a quarter pound of the best fresh butter, melted and beaten with a half dozen spoonfuls of the broth, the yolk of two or three eggs, and some of the herbs; garnish your dish with lemons and serve it up.

minnows fried with the yolk of eggs, the flowers of cowslips and of primroses, and a little tansy; thus used they make a dainty dish of meat

It is now past five of the clock, we will fish till nine, and then go to breakfast. Go you to yon sycamore tree and hide your bottle of drink under the hollow root of it; for about that time, and in that place, we will take a brave breakfast with a piece of powdered beef, and a radish or two that I have in my fish-bag.

However, the everlasting appeal of *The Compleat Angler* may well be due to the wider picture which Izaak Walton so eloquently portrays. It is a window into mid-17th century English country life.

A world of flowery meadows, milkmaids, rural inns *where we may have a*

cup of barley wine, and sing and rejoice together - play shovel board and have another cup to wet our whistles - before sleeping between lavender-scented sheets.

rivers have made many an hour to pass away more pleasantly as I have sat quietly on a flowery bank by a calm river

turn towards yonder high honeysuckle hedge; there we'll sit and sing whilst this shower falls so gently upon the teeming earth and gives yet a sweeter smell of all the lovely flowers that adorn these verdant meadows.

looking on the hills, I could behold them spotted with woods and groves; looking down the meadows, could see, here a boy gathering lilies and lady-smocks, and there a girl cropping culverkeys and cowslips

the very birds of the air ... those little nimble musicians of the air that warble forth their curious ditties

*I in these flowery meads will be:
these crystal streams should solace me;
to whose harmonious bubbling noise
I with my angle would rejoice*

*or, on that bank, feel the west wind
breathe health and plenty: please my mind
to see sweet dewdrops kiss these flowers,
and then wash'd off by April showers*

Izaak's instructional text takes the form of a five-day journey during which an angler passes on his knowledge to a companion who wants to take up the pastime. Although the book's journey begins as they walk up Tottenham Hill on a '*fine May morning*' along a road following the River Lea, Izaak's home county comes into his mind in the later editions. A poem titled *The Angler's Wish* contains the line '*loiter long days near Shawford brook*'. A stretch of the River Meece formed one boundary of his farm at Shallowford - a hamlet whose name appears on 17th-century maps as Shawford.

The Compleat Angler was first written at a time of severe repression for many of Izaak Walton's friends and associates in the Anglican church. Is

his handbook on angling quite as innocent as it might seem? Leading Waltonian scholars have distinct views on a hidden message:

'It has a further, encoded, purpose. It unobtrusively but firmly asserts the values of the Anglicans. The very name angler is a metaphor for Anglican.'

'The book is more than an angler's genial guide. Its celebration of rural quietness, of political resignation and retirement to await better times is, in 1653, a coded warning to its first readers to possess their souls in patience until the king comes home again.'

'Much in *The Compleat Angler* ' was probably written to encourage Anglicans to continue faithful through difficult and dangerous times.'

The idea of a message to those who could read between the lines is not hard to believe when the book is put into the context of its time and its author's acquaintances. By 1640 Izaak Walton had acquired, mainly through the Great Tew circle, an extensive acquaintance among the clergy of the Church of England. From the mid-1640s the Presbyterians were in power and the Anglican Church was under threat; most of the clergy in the Great Tew Circle were ejected from their living. The battle of Worcester in 1651 dashed the last hopes of royalists, and life became even more difficult for Anglicans. The law was severe on those clergy who would not express their loyalty to the new regime. Izaak's own reaction was to '*study to be quiet*' and keep out of public life and dissent. An escape to the riverbank would have been an ideal opportunity to find peace and quiet; many of his beleaguered friends may also have resorted to angling at this time to meet and talk without arousing suspicion.

It was principally Gilbert Sheldon, Henry Hammond and George Morley who kept the Anglican Church alive. All three of the trio had been members of the Great Tew circle; Sheldon and Morley were close friends of Izaak. He was acutely aware of their problems and, as an established author, able to publish a book to help in a small way to alleviate their strife.

There was little apparent call for a book on angling in 1653. Only two years earlier Thomas Barker had published *The Art of Angling*, 'a highly skilled work'. So, was *The Compleat Angler* a disguise for Izaak's real text aimed at his persecuted acquaintances? If so, quotations like these take on a deeper meaning:

God never did make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation then angling

the very sitting by the river's side is not only the quietest and fittest place for contemplation but will invite an angler to it

angling be allowed to clergymen as being a harmless recreation, a recreation that invites them to contemplation and quietness

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This presentation of Izaak Walton ends in the only way it should, in his own words from *The Compleat Angler*

no life so happy and so pleasant as the life of a well-governed angler, for when the lawyer is swallowed up with business and the statesman is preventing or contriving plots, then we sit on cowslip banks, hear the birds sing, and possess ourselves in as much quietness as these silent silver streams, which we now see glide so quietly by us