“OWD TILL” AND THE STONYHURST BLACK

KEITH HARWOOD



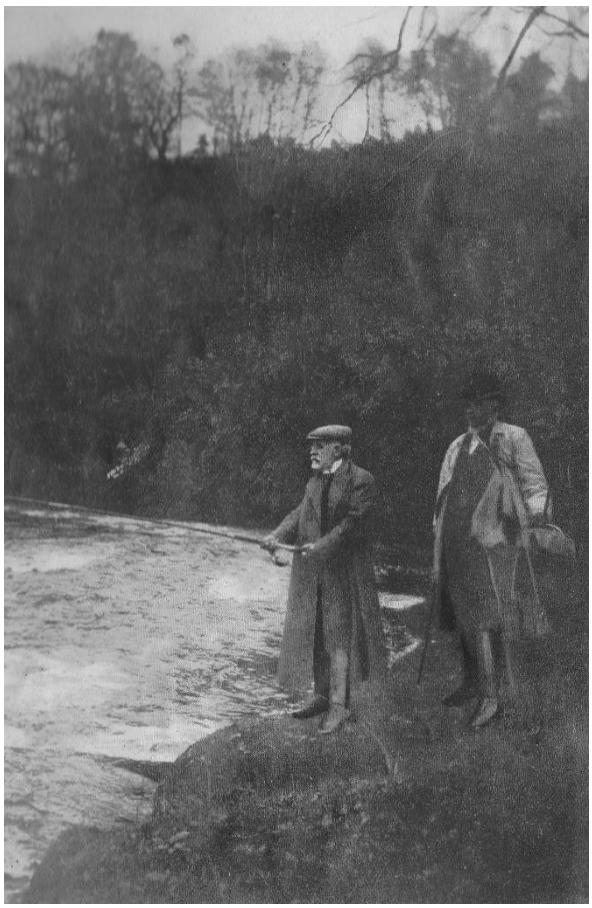
In the early years of the twentieth century, Dr Charles Frederick Holder (1851-1915), the distinguished American naturalist, angler and author, visited the UK to carry out research for his book *The Game Fishes of the World*, published in 1913. During his time in the UK, he fished a number of waters, including my local rivers, the Ribble and Hodder, as a guest of William Walmsley Simpson, a wealthy businessman who lived at Winckley Hall, near Whalley.

In 1898, Dr Holder, a pioneer of big game fishing, founded the Tuna Club of Avalon on Santa Catalina Island in California, whose members have included such luminaries as Zane Grey, Bing Crosby, Charlie Chaplin and Herbert Hoover. It appears that Holder had met William Simpson in 1908 when the latter was awarded a medal and cup for catching the largest yellowtail tuna of that year – a fish weighing in at 60 ½ lbs. This fish was eventually placed in the fish department of the British Museum, together with a replica of the rod and line on which it was caught. Whether they still form part of that collection I do not know.



Not only was Holder entranced by the fishing on the Ribble and Hodder, he also developed an interest in the history of the area and, on being shown the Roman fort at Ribchester (on the banks of the Ribble) by William Simpson, he was led to speculate that the Romans had fished there centuries earlier. On the Hodder he fished below Cromwell’s Bridge and was captivated by its rustic charm. Cromwell’s Bridge once carried a packhorse trail over the Hodder, about a mile from its confluence with the Ribble. It is believed that Oliver Cromwell’s parliamentary army crossed

this bridge on their way from Gisburn to where they fought the King's forces at the Battle of Preston in August, 1648.



In the frontispiece of Holder's book, *The Game Fishes of the World*, is a photograph of the author salmon fishing on the Hodder in the company of "Owd Till", who was acting as his gillie. A review of the book in an American newspaper described "Owd Till" as a '*converted preacher*.'

"Owd Till" was the nickname of William Wilkinson. He was certainly not *a converted preacher* but a *poacher* turned gamekeeper who worked on the Stonyhurst College estate for over sixty years. He appears to have inherited the name "Till" from a remote ancestor who made tiles and "Owd" is simply a Lancashire dialect word meaning "Old." Stonyhurst College, the famous Roman Catholic public school, nestles on a hillside above the river Hodder, not far from its junction with the Ribble. One of its most distinguished alumni was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes and the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was a master at the school.

The College had fishing rights (with both rod and net) on over twelve miles of the Ribble and Hodder and one of the priests at the College, Father F. J. Irwin, S.J., wrote regular fishing reports on the Hodder and Ribble for the *Fishing Gazette*. It is also thanks to Father Irwin and his contributions to the *Stonyhurst Magazine* that we know a great deal about "Owd Till" and his piscatorial exploits.

"Owd Till", who was born in 1833, was a larger than life character with a broad Lancashire accent who could neither read nor write but was adept at catching fish. In his younger days, he recalled how he had avoided being enlisted for service in the Crimean War (1853-1856). One evening, while drinking in a local hostelry, which was full of soldiers and recruiting sergeants, he drained his pint of beer only to find a shilling in the bottom of his glass. He was about to pick it up when one of his more astute friends advised him against it or he would end up serving in the local regiment. On hearing this he dropped the shilling "like a wick coil" and made a hasty retreat. He did not fancy going off to "furrin parts"(foreign parts), as he called them in his thick Lancashire brogue.

One of Till's duties as gamekeeper appears to have been to supply the College with fresh fish, especially on a Friday (a day of abstinence from meat). This he did by both fair means and what today would be regarded as foul means. At times, when the weather was bright and

the river low, he would set “neet-lines” (night lines) for trout and “snigs” (eels). His capture of a large eel by such means was recorded by Father Irwin in the *Stonyhurst Magazine*:



T’ biggest snig as iver Ah hooked on a neet-line wor a t’top o’ Black Wheel (a pool on the Hodder). It wor a Setterday neet, an’ Ah says to John Eccles (his friend), ‘John,’ Ah says, ‘what arta bahn to do toneet?’ ‘Nowt,’ he says. ‘Reet,’ Ah says, ‘let’s pike off an’ set some neet lines an’ fotch ‘em tomorn.’ Well, we sot them lines i’ Black Wheel, an’ next marnin,’ when we’d had wer baggin’ (breakfast), we coomed to fotch 'em. Ah felt abaht wi’ ma crooked stick for t’ line i’ t’ watter, where it wor ebb (shallow). ‘Dang it! John,’ Ah says, ‘Ah corn’t find it.’ How it be, Ah warn’t bahn to loise yon line. Sooa Ah ups wi’ ma breeks and in Ah geet. Bimeby Ah leets on t’ line. ‘Ma word!’ Ah says, we’n getten a salmon on.’ Summat wor pullin and splashin like Th’owd Un gone mad. What wor it, think ye? Why a fower (four) pound snig as thick as me arm; an’ ma word! He took a bit o’ *neckin’ (neckin’ meant to kill it by putting its head in your mouth and biting the spine asunder) – he wor thot thick an’ strong. Well, that day me an’ John had snig chops to wer tea, an proper thick uns on ‘o; we had sooa.*

As well as snigs (eels), Till sometimes caught lampreys on the Hodder. (You would be hard pressed to find lampreys on the Hodder today). On one occasion he spotted the biggest lamprey he had ever seen trying to slither its way up a fall at Hodder Rough. Till quickly got hold of a suitable pow (pole) and struck the poor creature and killed it. According to Till *‘he wor as thick as ma forearm aboon t’ shackle (above the wrist), an’ he weighed over two or three pounds, ‘appen.’*

Another method employed by Till to provide fish for the College table was known as ‘rogging.’ The equipment required for rogging was an iron bar and a funnel-shaped net, a small mesh net with two stakes to hold it open at its mouth. The procedure was described by Till as follows:

Yo’ put t’ net round a rock an’ shifted t’ rock wi’ t’ bar as wor hunder t’ rock ‘d run into t’ net. Wanst Ah took some College lads roggin’ an’ we cotched 54lbs o’ fish in less than two hours – trout, morts (sea-trout), and snigs. Aye, an’ I tell yo no Friday went by i’ them days beawt fresh fish frae t’ river for t’ Community.

On more than one occasion Till confessed to actually shooting morts (sea-trout) ‘*a time or two*.’ This was highly illegal, and once he actually shot a salmon:

‘It wor this road. Ah’d tak ma stand on Lower Hother Brig (Lower Hodder Bridge), when t’ watter wor ebb (low), an’ when Ah glimpsed t’ morts runnin’ through t’ thin watter – they allus runs where its ebb – wi’ thur backs out, Ah loised off (shot) at ‘em, and piked ‘em out below.

It wor aboon Reed Deep (a pool on the Ribble), where I shot t' salmon. He wor plungin' along near t' bank, an' Ah geet 'im i' t' neb wi' t' shot. Eighteen pounds 'e wor, or thereabouts. But t' watter-baillies geet to hear o't, so Ah give over.'



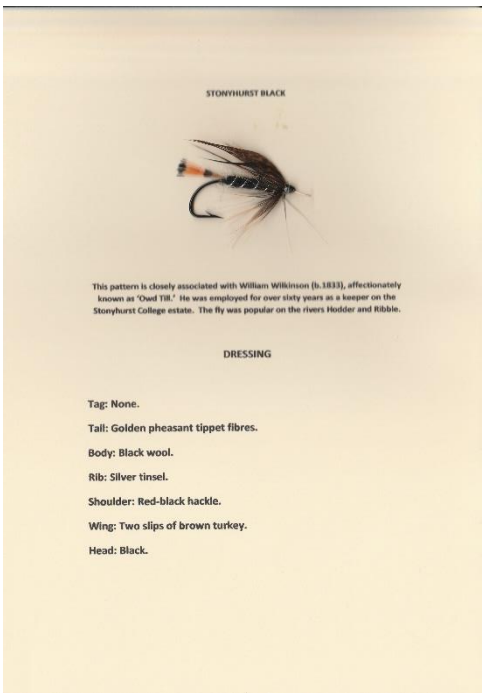
TILL TAILING AN 8LB. SALMON IN LUKE LUM (RIBBLE).
The fish was taken on trout rod with a horse-hair cast.

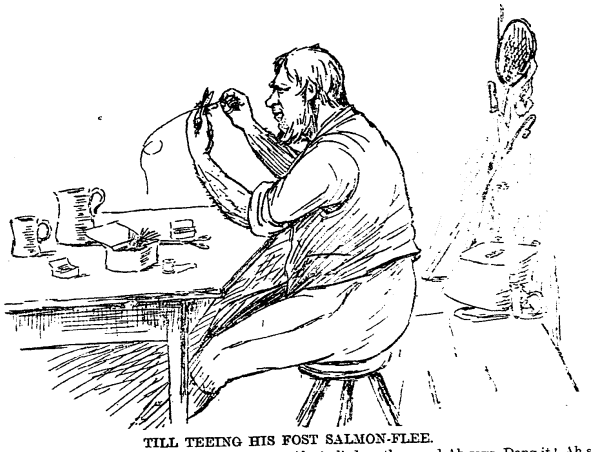
Although Till was adept at catching fish by unconventional means, he was a skilled fly fisherman for both salmon and trout. His casts, which he made himself, were composed of strands of horse hair, preferably from a grey or white horse. His salmon casts were made of twelve strands of hair tapering down to nine with a strand of gut to hold the fly. His trout casts were composed of a double strand tapering to a single strand. The catch of which he was most proud – an 8lb salmon – was caught in Luke Lum (a pool on the Ribble) on a trout rod with a horse-hair cast. The fish took a March Brown trout fly, and Till fought it for over an hour before tailing it out, for he had no gaff with him. His favourite trout flies were the Brazel (an old North Country pattern similar to a Snipe and Purple), Dun Bloa, Woodcock and Brown and, later in the season, Woodcock and Black. For mort (sea-trout) fishing he used a larger size of the same flies he used for trout and on one memorable occasion on the Hodder he caught eighteen morts in eighteen casts. His trout and mort flies were dressed for many years by his friend Billy Robinson of Clitheroe.

Although his friend tied his trout flies, Till dressed his own salmon flies and preferred his "*whoam-med flees*" (home-made flies) to "*bowt flees*" (bought flies). The salmon fly with which Till was most often associated was the Stonyhurst Black. Whether Till actually invented this fly is not known but it was certainly his favourite and the fly itself is simple to dress with a black wool body and a turkey wing. He eschewed the use of fancy salmon flies, which were becoming increasingly popular during the latter half of the nineteenth century and considered them a waste of money:

Thur's a deal o' good brass squandered on breet fancy flees and minners (minnows, presumably artificial ones) an' sich like trinkum-trankums. But to kill fish, gimme a plain rough flee – in Hother (Hodder) an' Ribble.

It was his parsimonious nature that led him to tie his own Stonyhurst Black flies. On one occasion he was forced to go into Blackburn to buy flies from the local tackle dealer at a shilling apiece, a not inconsiderate sum in those days:




TILL TEEING HIS FOST SALMON-FLEE.

When Ah gets whoam (home) Ah looked at t' flees an' Ah says, 'Dang it!' Ah says, 'Ah payed a shillin' each for yon, and Ah reckon Ah con tee as good uns masel (myself).' So after tea Ah sot (sat) me dahn (down) an' med a flee – Turkey for wings, black wool body, wi' silver tinsel wound round it, and black hackle, wi' a touch o' red in 't.

On its first outing his home-made Stonyhurst Black accounted for two salmon, a ten-pounder and an eighteen-pounder:

'Jod blame it!' Ah says, 'Niver no moore bowt (bought) flees for me.' Says Ah; an' fro thot day – it wor in 1866 – Ah teed ma own flees, an' catched more fish an' saved ma brass. Yo see thur's two sooarts (sorts) o' flees med – one sooart to rise t' fish an' tother to rise t' fisherman.

Such was his skill as a fly-fisherman for salmon that in 1866, the year he tied his first Stonyhurst Black, he accounted for 78 salmon, all on fly. I very much doubt that such a catch could be bettered today by an angler on the Ribble or Hodder!



Not only was Till a skilled angler, he passed on his skills to generations of boys who attended Stonyhurst College. In front of the College buildings are two artificial ponds, which were regularly stocked with trout and around 1880 a Stonyhurst Boys' Fishing Club was founded. Till became its 'Technical Expert' and for many years he gave lessons to the boys in casting with trout and salmon rods.

As well as passing on his skills to the College boys, Till proved to be an excellent gillie. He knew the beats of the river intimately and would point out a small space, sometimes only two or three yards in extent, in a pool or a glide with the words:

'If they're bahn to coom at 'o (at all), that's where yo'll hunk (hook) 'em. Yo're wastin' yo're time fishin' onywheer else. That's where they rise when they're takin' t' flee.'

Dr Holder would have been in good company when salmon fishing on the Hodder with Till as his guide.

Owd Till passed away in 1921 at the ripe old age of 88. Even though he suffered from rheumatism in his later years, he was still salmon fishing at Hodder Foot at the age 87. He was *compos mentis* right up to the end and on the night of his death he made a characteristic remark. Sitting up in bed, he said:

'Yon brown hen is bahn (about) to hatch tomorn, Ah mon up an' don mi (get myself ready) an' tend her.'

The brown hen hatched at dawn but by then Till had passed away.



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Dr Charles Holder – from Wikipedia.
2. Cromwell's Bridge, River Hodder – JKH photo.

3. Dr Holder salmon fishing on the Hodder with Owd Till as gillie – frontispiece of Holder's 'Game Fishes of the World.' 1913.
4. Owd Till landing his snig – cartoon from Stonyhurst Magazine, July 1921.
5. Owd Till tailing his salmon in Luke Lum – cartoon as above.
6. Owd Till tying his first salmon fly – ditto.
7. 7. Stonyhurst Black fly – dressed by JKH.
8. Stonyhurst College – photo by JKH.
9. The Hodder upstream of Cromwell's Bridge – photo by JKH.