IT FINALLY HAPPENED TO ME

After 40 years of fishing for trout from a boat it finally happened to me. I have witnessed my first life jacket fired in anger.

The day started well, with a good breakfast in the nearby Sidcot Arms. After several days of unsettled weather it was mild and overcast; the pressure was rising (yes I am in the barometric pressure camp); the birds were already moving out on the water; there was a light breeze, just enough to put a ripple here and there, and I had a good Shiraz in the lunch bag – all was well in the Pike small world.

Tackling up in the car park, the portents were not good however. My boat partner opened his rod tube, and found only an empty rod bag stuffed inside; he then remembered that he might have left it in a previous car park a week or two back! He cheered himself up by showing me his brand new, latest model, Airflo boat seat. I proceeded to carry engine, and batteries to the boat; when I got back, he was trying to erect the seat, which he had not done before. When I returned from the small room after applying some sun cream (I do not like greasy fingers when I am fishing) he was gone. Getting down to the boat with my own kit I found the bow totally full up, and my partner playing Meccano kits with large amounts of aluminium. He asked me what I wanted, and I pointed out that I needed my kit to go in as well - clearly a problem! I used my initiative, and loaded it onto the adjacent boat; I then lifted it into our stern, and climbed aboard; meanwhile, the metal workshop was continuing up the front. I then sorted the anchor rope, and coiled it for an untangled release – it had 10ft of heavy chain – ideal for settling into weed, and helping the tine to bite. Not best pleased now, I consoled myself with the thought of shiraz at lunch time.

I had decided to fish up at the top end of Butcombe, where the river comes in, as my regular colleagues had previously said there were fish up there. The pleasant morning, and serene surroundings, were only interrupted by the continued clattering from the front end of the boat. Halfway up Butcombe, my partner asked why I had stopped; I explained that I was not going into the shallower water until he had finished erecting the bloody seat. Although he only had it half expanded, he opted to settle for that – he put the front pegs over the gunwale, and the back on the seat, but there was not enough room for his knees, so he changed to the rear pegs over the gunwale. As we approached the chosen area, there were fish rising all over the place – a long time since I had seen such idyllic conditions. We were in for a great day.

I pointed out to my partner that he should drop the anchor when I had manoeuvred us into position. This proved to be a mistake, as the whole 10 feet of chain shattered the peace of Blagdon valley, as it rattled and vibrated over the side, link by link. I looked up, and there were no fish rising near us! I settled down to wait for some time, which gave me an opportunity to remonstrate over the seat at the front end. The peg spacing was wider than the seat, which meant that only one of them could rest on the seat. The result was a rocking and clanking with every movement; I pointed out that this was not going to encourage the fish to come back near to us. The seat was discarded with a loud crash into the well of the boat. I reached for the shiraz, as I thought it was going to be a long fruitless day.
Surprisingly, after 20 minutes or so, the resident kamikaze fish took my blue UV buzzer, (I had just bought a shed load at Eyebrook, when I found out that the locals were using them with devastating results) and I had a nice 2½ lb fit Blagdon trout in the boat. After despatching it, I spooned the contents, and found it full of buzzers. This was repeated over the next hour or so. My partner had not had a fish, and was getting cramp, so decided to resurrect the accursed seat. There were damsels about, and when I spooned the next fish, I found some damsel nymphs in the contents; accordingly, I decided to change the point to a buoyant imitative damsel nymph, which I did, and then looked up to cast out. However, the area in front of me was covered with a full line being retrieved – the boat was not swinging. When I explained that I didn’t feel like fishing behind the boat, my partner tried to lift the whole of the line off the water, with a hefty back swing. The unsecured seat slid backwards, until his butt was over the gunwale, at which point he executed a neat backward roll into the water. There was a loud smack as the jacket inflated, and the contents of the seat tray were distributed like anglers’ ashes over the water.

Although my first thought was to let him drown, I put my rod down; it was then that it got serious. My partner’s bedraggled head appeared behind the rowlock like a rat-tailed gargoyle, with two sets of white knuckles clamped onto the gunwale. I politely, but firmly, told him to get to the rear and come in over the engine, but he was having none of it. He was in a total panic, and trying to get back into the boat, over the side. I had to hang over the other side to stop the boat capsizing; at the same time, I was pushing him back with an oar, like Pi and the tiger, trying to steer him toward the stern. I tried to remove his fingers from the gunwale, but they were clamped with the grip of the condemned. I then picked up the marrow spoon and tapped his fingers; this did not work so I tapped harder. When he saw me pick up the priest he did start to move to the rear. When I looked around, I saw that just like sea gulls out in the ocean, two boats had appeared from nowhere (one up to the Blagdon fishing bretheren), keeping a sensible distance, they were also urging my partner to move to the stern.

Having got to the stern, with arms flailing, so therefore difficult to hold, he started to climb up over the engine, but kept shrieking that something was holding him back. I couldn’t work this out, but then noticed that his bright yellow line was twisting on itself, ever tighter. His line was now round the prop, and in his second panic attack he had hit the tiller arm, and turned the electric motor on – the motor was now turning, with the blade steadily ripping his trouser leg to pieces – fortunately not his leg; his fluorescent yellow line was tightening onto legs and trousers. I ripped off the dead man’s magnet, and released the motor shaft clamp to give some movement. (There is an RAF procedure to get an incapacitated colleague into a life raft, which consists of pushing the head down a couple of times to get some momentum, and then on the third go, pop the body up over the lip, like a penguin on an ice floe – I decided that this would probably not be welcome, or the best way forward!). Whilst staying as far forward as possible, but just within reach, I managed to pull him far enough forward until he could hook his fingers over the rear seat; as his legs came out of the water, they looked like a monstrous spun dubbing loop inside the twisted yellow line. I slashed this with my filleting knife to release his legs!

The contents of the seat tray (several fly boxes; a foam cushion; and a shocking pink lighter(!!!) – he doesn’t even smoke), were now down the breeze, except for six inches of rod tip (10 ft rod) sticking out of the water, a yard or so behind the boat, complete
with baseball cap. There is something distinctly melancholy about watching a baseball cap slowly disappear below the water, next to six inches of rod tip! One of the boats kindly collected the flotsam, and as he handed them over, helpfully observed “that’s the second one this week”!

We made it back to the lodge without any further incident. As I was digging my towels out, he was standing, shivering, in a puddle of water, with it draining from his trousers and shoes, looking rather forlornly at his brand new Iphone, which had been in his jacket and was now destroyed (the third one I have witnessed in 18 months); at that point, a well known guide came in for lunch with his student, and cheerily asked how we had got on; my reply did not contribute an awful lot to his student’s fishing experience.

Those who know me will be aware that I always like to take a learning point away from a days fishing – so what were the learning points here?

I offer:

a. I must be more careful about who I fish with.
b. If you have new equipment, make sure you are familiar with it, before you go afloat.
c. Practice erections in the boat serve no useful purpose.
d. Always make sure your seat is pegged at both ends.
e. Make sure you know how to get back into a dingy, without capsizing it.
f. Make sure you both understand an agreed recovery procedure in the event of an immersion.
g. Keep a zip seal polythene bag in your jacket for the mobile.
h. Always wear your life jacket.
i. It may happen more often than you think!

Fred Pike