

# A LIFE WELL FISHED

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## Frank Gutfeld, 1939 - 2015



Frank Gutfeld with his personal best Thames chub of 8.02 courtesy of Mike Tucker's back garden.

### *Introduction by Martin Salter*

Just before the start of this year's river season the world of angling lost one of its 'greats'. Frank Gutfeld, author, broadcaster, and an old school specimen hunter, who fought and subdued many big fish in his time, finally lost his battle with cancer.

I can't remember exactly when it was that I first fished with Frank - probably around 17 years ago when I joined the Red Spinners. We both enjoyed fishing the smaller Thames tributaries around Oxford. Sadly they were already in decline but both the Windrush and the Evenlode still held a few fine specimen chub, roach and perch if you knew where to look. That was one of Frank's great strengths, he really was quite expert at not just catching fish but at tracking them down. For several years he ran a small syndicate on the Windrush of which I was a sometime member and he guided me on to a number of very welcome two pound roach which are still my favourite species today. But I guess it was chub fishing that was Frank's speciality and he was certainly one of the finest exponents of light ledgering that I've ever seen. He knew how to balance the weight with the flow and would angle the line so that even a shy pick up from a big wary old fish would result in a gentle and hittable drop back bite rather than a sharp nervous pull and ejected bait.

Frank was a man interested in many things including politics and persuaded me that I should have him up to lunch in the House of Commons during my time there. I was happy to oblige and I shall never forget him pulling out a musty old file and regaling me with some conspiracy theory he had about corporate wrong doing that I should be investigating. I asked him when all these shenanigans were alleged to have taken place and he said: "Oh .. sometime in the 1960s but I was just waiting until I met the right person to take this on!" Although I politely declined Frank's kind offer to immerse myself in a 30 year old case many miles from my own constituency we remained on good terms and he particularly enjoyed fishing with some of my angling MP friends including Charles Walker who now chairs the All Party Parliamentary Group on Angling. Frank even persuaded me to offer a work experience placement to his super bright young son Max who proved to be a great asset to my parliamentary office.

Frank could be awkward and irascible, charming and warm, grumpy and witty but there was scarcely a dull moment when he was around. There was always something going on in that sharp brain of his and it is a great shame that he has fished, written, spoken, loved and laughed for the last time.

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## Frank Guttfield, 1939 - 2015

*By Chris Tarrant*



Frank was one of the last of the great breed of anglers that completely revolutionised the way we went about our fishing. Men like Dick Walker, the Taylor brothers, Pete Stone and the then young Frank Guttfield taught us to be more stealthy thinking anglers, and that we really could catch big fish of any species deliberately, rather than just chucking it and chancing it. They told us all to think again about bait and all our tackle, they even showed us how to fish in the dark. All taken for granted now but unthinkable in the 1950's. We all owe men like Frank so much. I was privileged to fish with him for many

years. He was so brave right to the end in his long battle with cancer. Although clearly very tired and in pain, he wanted to get out on the bank last March so I took him for a few hours on the Thames. I was content to just sit and watch and talk with an old friend. He only had one bite, on simple bread flake of course, and I netted the chub for him. It was the biggest chub either of us had ever seen. It weighed on two sets of scales a staggering 8lbs 2 ounces!! Only you Frank, only you. He was one of a kind and is already sorely missed.

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## Frank Guttfield, 1939 - 2015

*By Fred Guttfield*



**Frank's personal best barbel of 13.10 by Fred Guttfield**

What can I say about Dad, that others who know the history much better than me, cannot? I wasn't around to witness the big fish revolution he was part of, but can see the legacy he, and it, have left. Clearly Dad was one of the last of a generation of anglers whose influence on today's 'Big Fish Scene' cannot be underestimated.

His influence on my life has been huge. He introduced me to fishing at a very early age and it remains one of my biggest passions. As a youngster I grew up accompanying him to angling events and very early on formed the impression he was a well-respected but outspoken and slightly left-field figure. He urged me, at times unsuccessfully, not to follow others, not to believe everything I was told and to furrow my own path. He was a precise, thinking angler, who worked things out for himself and found his own fish.

He didn't follow trends in fishing, particularly when the bolt-rig revolution spread from Carp fishing into the rest of the specimen world. He described using bolt-rigs as "trapping rather than fishing", as to him, fishing involved a strike. I think this sort of static, hands-off approach, however successful, was at odds with everything he had learned about fish and fishing over his 65 year angling career – the importance of lightweight, finely-balanced tackle and that the biggest fish were the trickiest to catch of all. Most of Dad's big fish were caught light-legering, a tactic that he

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perfected over the years. Dad could hold bottom in raging flows with a minimum of lead, by fine-tuning the bow in his line and position of his rod. I am certain Dad regularly caught fish that an angler using heavier leads wouldn't have even known were there.

In recent years he used these tactics to devastating effect on the Thames, landing 9 Chub over the 7lb mark. His best of 8lb 2oz is one of the largest ever recorded on the river. This personal best was landed only 3 months before his death and proves it is always worth 'one last cast', even if the odds are gravely stacked against you.

His other angling achievements include a 9lb plus Tench - which I think was at the time the second largest ever recorded - and also Rudd up to 3lb 5 oz, but river fishing was his true love, especially the Thames and its tributaries. In total he caught more than 200 Roach of over 2lbs, with a personal best of 2lb 14oz 8drms from the River Windrush in Oxfordshire. He caught many other personal bests on these rivers too – Barbel up to 13lb 10oz on the Thames and Perch of 4lb 4oz and Dace of 1lb from its tributaries.

He lost his fair share of big fish too. When I was 13 or 14 years old he was beside himself to lose a huge Roach on the Windrush, which I had incorrectly identified on a previous sighting as 'a good sized Chub'. This would have surely been his dearly sought after 'river three'. He lost a good number of very big Chub too, but he realised that went with the territory. A fish that didn't go with the territory – an assumed big Catfish – took his bait and kept going while he was fishing for Barbel on the Thames. He also lost a big Catfish by design – on a local estate lake – and this fable later became part of the 'A Passion for Angling' book and TV series.

Dad never gave up his career (formerly a Paper Scientist and later a Garden Furniture Retailer) to pursue angling full-time, a decision he occasionally looked back on. Nevertheless he thoroughly enjoyed being part the fishing 'world' from the early 60s through to the late 70s. His first book, *In Search of Big Fish* - a year of his diary targeting big fish - was published in 1964 and became a sell-out cult-classic. He went on to write for all the major UK angling publications, including the *Angler's Mail* and *Angling Times* as well as the *Daily Mail* and *Fisch und Fang*. He appeared on primetime TV, featuring as a fish expert on Johnny Morris's 'Animal Magic' on BBC One, also co-starring in several episodes of Jack Hargreaves' iconic 'Out of Town' on ITV. His second book, *The Big Fish Scene*, was published in 1978 and showed how the angling world had evolved since his first book – featuring chapters from a new breed of 'Specimen Hunters' including John Wilson, John Bailey and Kevin Clifford.

Fishing gave Dad some of his best memories and experiences, but most importantly, his best friends. His fishing friends supported him (and encouraged him to fish!) right to the end.

Through Dad I was lucky enough to meet the more widely recognised greats of angling including Jack Hargreaves, Jack Hilton and Peter Stone. But to me, Dad was the greatest of them all.

He will be sorely missed by wife Jackie, children Richard, Linda, Liza, Rob, Max and myself, and grandchildren Charlie, Emily, Sam and James.

Frank Guttfield b. 23 July 1939 – d. 12 June 2015

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## Frank Gutfeld, 1939 - 2015

*By Jeff Woodhouse*

### Speaking Frankly



[Franks 7lbs Thames chub from 2014](#) by Jeff Woodhouse

having been given the new middle names of 'Israel' for all Jewish men and 'Sara' for all women. Frank boasted to me once that he was conceived in Berlin and born in Whitechapel, he was therefore a true Cockney as well since the Bow bells were still in place at that time.

Frank never spoke much of his younger days except that his father, being a German, was taken into custody when war broke out and spent some time as a detainee. The next I know of him was when Dick Walker met up with him and mentored him, took him fishing, and introduced him to that set of famous anglers we now know – Fred J. Taylor, Peter Stone, Pete Thomas, Fred Buller, and many others. He also fished with Bernard Venables, Jack Hilton, and the very famous TV personality, Jack Hargreaves.

When I first came across Frank's name I was just a youth of 19 and hadn't been fishing for around 3 or 4 years (since I discovered females, I guess) and my next door neighbour, Harry Lees, had just bought Frank's book, *In Search of Big Fish*. Harry kindly loaned me the book to encourage me to go fishing once more. It worked because I mentioned it to the drummer in our little band after he confessed to being a latent angler and with that we both started off fishing again, usually around Cheshire and Derbyshire.

I also started buying both weekly magazines and Frank's articles were amongst those I read, together with Dick's and a few others. They were all most inspiring although we didn't have access to anything like the quality of fish that Frank had, nor the company to advise and encourage, but we managed and enjoyed ourselves. Sometime later Frank ceased writing for the angling mags, although he did continue for a while with the *Sunday Times*.

That was it for me, he disappeared. I never knew what had happened to him or why he had stopped writing, I wrongly assumed that he was quite old and had retired or what... To me Frank always looked a lot older than his years. Sorry old pal.

In between times, I had left the frozen north and moved to High Wycombe (via Lincolnshire for a spell) and in the 90s was running a local angling club. One day this very select hotel in Marlow contacted me and asked if I could devise a fishing themed attraction to promote the hotel. They had frontage to the Thames, but only just over 100 metres so not really possible to invite half of Bucks and Berks for a free day.

On the morning of Friday 12th June, another angling legend passed away. Many will know the name and so many will have read his books and articles over the years, but to so many more Frank Gutfeld was a friend. He had suffered over the last two years and three months, since being diagnosed, with oesophageal cancer.

Frank was born of Jewish parents who had managed to escape from Berlin and the clutches of the Nazis who shortly afterwards closed the frontiers to all Jews, we need no reminding of what happened to many Jews across Europe after that. They fled using their Nazi issued passports

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I came up with a plan to hold a match amongst England's finest match anglers, past and present. I was lucky because ten accepted the challenge, just enough, and they included people like Alan Scotthorne, Ian Heaps, Steve Gardener, Dave Vincent, Sandra Halkon-Hunt (as she then was), Wendy Locker, and the wonderful Ivan Marks. Keith Arthur also brought along the Sky team to film it (and Keith only went and won it, of course.)

For my efforts, it was unpaid, I was granted a life fishing permit, or at least it was without any dates. Just prior to the match I was testing the waters one evening when this little chap turned up with all his tackle and challenged me. "Do you have a permit to fish here?" he asked in his assertive voice. I showed him my letter granting me authority, which he accepted and when we exchanged names, I said that I remembered a Frank Guttfield from years ago who used to write for the magazines and he also wrote a book.

"That's me." he said. I was taken aback and couldn't help make the next stupid comment, "I thought you were dead." Thankfully it brought a laugh and the usual "Not yet." and since then we got to know each other quite well and have fished together on many occasions. Not always without incident.

Like one night he had just caught a small barbel and returned and immediately on the next cast hooked something else. He got it to the surface and it was an eel, which I was about to net for him using his net. "OH NO, don't use that net, use yours." he cried and without thinking I picked up my net instead and landed the eel. I asked why afterwards and he simply said "I didn't want all that slime on my net, look at yours."

On another occasion I was fishing in his favourite swim so he fished off the concrete where he'd lost a fish, possibly a carp, he'd had enough and was going home. No sooner had he left than I landed a big chub, my best still at 6lbs 12ozs, and phoned his home number leaving a message for him on his answering machine. He rang back immediately and after a few expletives he congratulated me and said it was better than his best chub.

Not for long because soon after I had an operation that kept me off the bank for a month and in that time he hammered that shoal of chub with several fish to around 7lbs 4ozs, I think. We haven't seen them since at that size in the weir, but in 2013 I beat his best barbel, so I still have one up on him for that. Fishing isn't about size and quantity though, it's about friendship and enjoying people's good company and we had lots of that.

Since having been diagnosed in March of 2013, Frank didn't do much fishing. He blamed a lack of energy most of the time and suffered from anxiety. I'd spend most Wednesday afternoons with him whilst Jackie, his wife, went to art class and I'd take him to do some shopping for groceries or we'd walk along the Jubilee river, which he was impressed with. I did get him out to fish from a friend's garden that backs onto the Thames on the last day of the season 2014. He only went and caught another chub of 7lbs exactly!

That was pretty much it for fishing until this year when his old mate Chris Tarrant, almost literally, dragged him out to fish from the same garden. This time he bagged his fish of a lifetime, a chub of 8lbs 2ozs, despite the jibes from Chris shouting "Come on, stop playing about with it, Guttfield." so Frank told me. He then followed that up the day after whilst his wife Jackie was there with another chub of 7lbs 7ozs.

Now the one fish Frank didn't like, apart from eels, were bream. Whenever he caught one in the weir he'd bring it up to my swim, curse it and put it back right in front me saying "You fish for the bloody things, you have it." Anyway, on the last day of this last season we both went to the same garden swim, I fished for bream (I don't mind them) and he thought he was fishing for chub.

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He had a bite and struck, but when it had surfaced his hopes were dashed as a beautiful pale golden bream of around 8lbs+ came into the net. It wasn't weighed because he wasn't interested, it was a bream after all, and he wouldn't even lift it for the photograph. The curse of it all was, it should have been my bream, but as it was coming upstream it must have been so hungry it grabbed his bait by mistake instead. These things happen and does it matter after all?

The irony is that the very last fish he ever caught in his life was one of his most disliked species, a bream.

Following the start of the close season, his health deteriorated quite rapidly as his cancer metastasised to his liver and who knows where else. He was by then too weak to take any further chemotherapy and sadly passed away in the ambulance that was to take him to a hospice. His wife Jackie was with him at the very moment, which was rather nice.

He had a fantastic collection of memorabilia including a landing net hand made by Jack Hargreaves from a hazel branch (I think) and Jack's rod that he left to Frank. It has electrical tape wound around some of the rings that should have been whipped back on and I even offered to do that for him. He insisted that it should never be touched since that is exactly how Jack would have fished with it (and the sticky tape may have some of Jack's DNA on it.)



**The very last fish Frank caught - a dreaded bream - captured with his friend Jeff Woodhouse**

He also has an original Richard Walker Mk IV carp rod that Dick gave to him before the transfers bearing Dick's signature had been made, so Dick signed the rod for him. He also has a Peter Stone Ledgerstrike that Peter gave to him and a collection of the floats that Peter Drennan submitted back in the 1960's for a float making competition. There's lots of other stuff too, it's almost like walking into a museum and that's before you get to the books, virtually every one signed by the author to Frank.

I would never have believed back in 60s that the very man who wrote that inspiring book that galvanised me to go fishing again would end up being a really good friend. So I keep telling others that one of the best friends you'll have in your life may be someone you haven't even met yet. So it was with Frank Guttfield, a name almost forgotten to me, became a very good friend and angling buddy.

There's a piece written about the 'dash', the bit on gravestones between the date of someone's birth and the date of their death, i.e.: 1939 – 2015. As short as that 'dash' is, it represents a person's full life. During that life, he or she will have enjoyed the company of many people, some are family, some will be friends, and some will

have become very close friends. With Frank Guttfield, I am glad I was a friend and a small part of his dash.

Alav ha-shalom, old friend.