

How the Dutch went British

Hans van der Pauw

At the beginning of the 1970s the British style of carp fishing crossed the North Sea and started to conquer Holland. Purpose-built carp rods of no less than ten feet became a common sight on the banks, and the Dutch vanguard had to work on mastering new, foreign words like 'test curve' and 'freelining' and their correct meaning, before these terms could be casually inserted into their expert conversations. Here's a short impression of how the Dutch adopted the British way of carp angling.

Before the 1970s only a minority of anglers had specialised in carp fishing in the Netherlands. Bream, roach, rudd and perch were the main quarry and especially in the colder months pike fishing was popular. To the traditional pole anglers carp was often an unwanted guest, an unstoppable submarine that calmly tightened and snapped their fine roach and bream tackle. Still, some anglers were challenged by carp and went after them. But the majority considered carp fishing a waste of time. To them it meant long waiting hours with often little result. You had to be *lucky* to catch a carp, they felt; catching them in numbers was too much to hope for. Only a few anglers had figured out how to catch carp on a more or less regular basis. Some of them could even catch several carp a day, although usually these were small fish, most of them well under five pounds. Big carp, in those days meaning fish of ten pounds or more, were not caught very often.

Before the war and into the 1950s Dirk de Vries, from Zaandam in the north-west of Holland, was considered an expert angler, especially in the field of carp fishing. This is what he wrote about his accomplishments in the angling magazine *De Sportvisser* of February 1953:



"In my life I have caught several thousands of carp, of which only 3 weighed between 10 and 11 [metric] pound; some 50 to 60 carp weighed between 7 and 8 pound, while the rest weighed less, and by far the most of them between 2 and 3 pound. Of these 3 carp of 10 to 11 pound, I caught two in one-and-a-half-a-day of vacation, when I was allowed to fish a private pond that only held big carp. The third one I caught as a great exception to the thousands of carp I caught in similar waters [i.e. in common 'polder' waters]."

Those were the early years of carp fishing in the Netherlands, when specimen hunting was still unheard of and catching big fish by design wasn't even considered possible yet. The 'Walker revolution' that took place in England in the 1950s and 60s remained almost unnoticed in Holland, even though a Dutch edition of Richard Walker's book *Still-water Angling* had been published as early as 1954.* A few leading anglers were aware of the new tackle that was designed by Walker, like the Mark IV carp rod and improved rod rests, and they were eager to use it too. But Walker's approach itself, of fishing specifically for big fish, was not adopted, nor were his techniques.

* See my article 'Kanjers!,' in *Waterlog*, No. 79, Spring 2012.

In the early 1970s things slowly began to change in Holland. In March 1970 the book *Karpervissen* ('Carp Fishing') was published, written by the painter, sculptor and avid carp angler Jan B. de Winter. De Winter was much interested in the development in the field of carp fishing that had taken place in the England. He also respected and admired Richard Walker, both for the famous Mark IV carp rod he developed, and for his approach and techniques. De Winter was probably also the first Dutchman to join the British vanguard of carp anglers. He had several British angling friends who regularly visited Holland to fish for carp and he was one of the mere sixteen members of the National Carp Club, formed in 1968, one year before the more famous British Carp Study Group. Yet De Winter stuck largely to the old proven methods of short range float fishing and ledgering potatoes. His book hardly introduced any new techniques, but it was so thoroughly captivating in describing the quest for carp and enjoying nature at the same time, that it inspired many Dutch anglers to go carp fishing. And in this way it has been very influential.



Jan B. de Winter pictured on the cover of his book *Karpervissen* (1970).

In the years that followed other Dutch anglers discovered the British carp scene as well. Some of them, e.g. Rini Groothuis, joined the British Carp Study Group and introduced British tactics and tackle to the Netherlands. Groothuis wrote that other great Dutch carp book of the 1970s: *Karper*, published in 1977. Now finally all the novelties developed in Britain were revealed to Dutch carp anglers, from baits like luncheon meat, cat food and high protein pellets to long range fishing. And the pictures showed Groothuis and his friends with their captures as well: carp in numbers and weights that were without precedent in the Netherlands. British style carp fishing, including specimen hunting, was now embraced by the Dutch and it quickly became the mainstream in carp fishing in Holland.

The first thing the Dutch needed for their carp fishing was of course proper tackle, specialised carp rods in particular. By the mid-1970s several good quality carp rods were already imported from the UK into Holland. The most sought after brands were Hardy, with its superb 10-foot Richard Walker Carp rod in fibreglass (made from 1970 in the original 1½ lb test curve version, and from 1977 also in 2¼ lb) and Bruce & Walker, who made a similar but less expensive rod, the Mark IV G, a translation into glass of Walker's split cane original. This fine rod was also a 10-footer with a 1½ lb test curve, but 11-foot and stepped-up versions soon followed. Nevertheless to many anglers the Hardy Richard Walker Carp was certainly the most desirable carp rod (and frankly, to me it still is).

In those years, the mid-1970s, Hardy rods were imported into Holland and distributed throughout the Benelux by the Dutch fishing tackle dealer Ronald Fenger, an international casting celebrity who had won many world championships. Fenger had persuaded Hardy in the early 1970s to produce a series of four rods especially for the Benelux. These rods, the Benelux I - IV, were a 6-foot ultra-light spinning rod, an 8-foot ultra-light bream and zander rod and two 9½- and 10-foot bream cum zander cum light carp fishing rods. They were designed by Fenger and distributed by him exclusively. As this was all rather profitable, Fenger wanted to expand the Benelux series. This was in early 1977. And since carp fishing was booming at that time, his first thoughts were of a Benelux carp rod. Fenger himself favoured fly fishing and spinning, and only occasionally went carp fishing. But he had an employee who was a keen carp angler with a decent knowledge about rods and some experience in building them: your humble servant. So Fenger asked me to design a rod that would be suited to fulfil the specific needs of the Dutch carp angler.



In my view the ultimate tackle for general carp fishing in the 1970s: a Hardy Richard Walker Carp rod and ABU Cardinal 44 reel.

In my opinion that rod already existed: the 10 ft. Hardy Richard Walker Carp rod. It was light enough for stalking and yet had plenty of power reserve, and it was supple but tough enough to counter any close-in explosion of power. In short the ideal rod for general carp fishing as it was practiced in those days. I told this to Fenger, and he agreed. But he also tactfully pointed out to me that I was a fine, honest boy, but not a commercial genius - which, however I shouldn't worry about. All I needed to do was 'fill a niche'. Now, what kind of rod would be best suited for the new techniques in carp fishing, and especially so in Dutch circumstances? To that question I had an answer. It was the rod I was using a lot for light float fishing and for freelining, where very fast striking ('twitcher-hitting') was often necessary. I had built it from a Hardy Fibatube blank, a 10-foot fast taper Avon, but a bit heavier than the Hardy built Fibalite Avon of 1 lb test curve. Such a rod, I felt, would be a useful addition, and a little bit of extra length wouldn't hurt either. So starting from that I designed the Hardy Benelux V carp rod - although 'designed' is a large word, as I could leave all the difficult technical aspects like dimensions of the glass cloth etc. to the expertise of Hardy's. (Jim Hardy told me much later that he himself had been the one responsible for turning the designs of the various Benelux rods into production rods.)

The Benelux V carp rod measured 10½ feet and had a test curve of 1¼ lb. It was a fast taper fibreglass rod. A nice rod for sure, but I never owned one myself. In those days I could only afford what I really needed and so I made do with my home built Avon which had similar properties. Besides, in many cases I still preferred my Hardy Richard Walker Carp rod, especially because it felt more gentle and pleasant when fighting a carp and countering its runs. That flexible rod combined with the elasticity of a 7 lb regular nylon line was just too much for almost any carp. It seemed like they quickly found themselves discouraged by fighting against some kind of bungee that kept them under constant pressure. They were not overpowered with brute force, but politely convinced to surrender.

In the summer of 1977 the Benelux V carp rod came on the market (soon labelled as Benelux C-IV, perhaps to associate them with the famous Mark-IV rod) and I believe a fair amount of them were sold. But the success was short-lived, because soon after and in rapid succession ever newer carp rods were marketed and anglers were ready to believe any kind of sensational promotional talk spread about them, especially when it was beefed up with pictures of heavyweight anglers showing heavyweight carp. In that respect very little has changed since the 1970s.



Low Fat - Pure Muscle! A fast and furious Dutch 'wildie' from the polder, caught by the author on a 1½ lb Hardy Richard Walker fibreglass carp rod, an ABU Cardinal 4 reel and 7 lb nylon.

The high-profile British carp anglers of those years, like Jack Hilton, Jim Gibbinson, Bruce Ashby and Kevin Maddocks, soon all had rods bearing their names on the market. And these were often very good rods too. But with very few exceptions (the light Bruce Ashby rods) they also became much heavier through the years. Two pound rods soon became the standard, but certainly not the upper limit. To some extent this was what the changing techniques (heavy leads) demanded, but I've always felt it was a pity. Carp deserved better. Didn't Richard Walker catch his 44 lb British record carp with a 1½ lb rod? And didn't Chris Yates break that record with a 51 lb 8 oz carp caught on a 1 lb Avon rod? And weren't these rods both made of split cane, a much more vulnerable material than glass or carbon? So was it really necessary to step up to 2 or 3 lb rods? For the joy and beauty of fishing it certainly wasn't, I felt. But many anglers seemed to have other priorities.

However, what did happen in Holland, as well as in the UK, was that carp fishing became far more successful than it had ever been. But one of the ways by which this success was achieved, was the development of self-hooking rigs. When these were generally accepted, it meant a dramatic change, because in effect it transformed the character of carp angling from hunting into trapping - two fundamentally different approaches to what the game is all about. Some anglers felt this was a shame, because in their view quantity was now valued more than quality in fishing. But this is probably more an issue to reflect upon than to quarrel about. In the end each angler must find his own way to happiness. ■



A typical Dutch *polder* water with plenty of carp, in this case within cycling distance of the author's home.