

Doctor Howard Alexander Bell

Special report
by
Steve Taylor



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Dr. Bell in the Home Guard uniform.
(Photo: Valerie Yeoman)

If he hadn't been such a private and reticent individual, Dr Howard Alexander Bell would be as famous and revered in the history of stillwater fly fishing as Halford, Skues and Sawyer are in the annals of river fly fishing. Not just the inventor of a few good flies - to his credit are the Amber Nymph, the Grenadier, the Blagdon Buzzer- but a pioneer who realised that, by imitating insects that the trout of his beloved Blagdon expected to see and eat, and by presenting them in the way they were expected to behave- moving very slowly indeed, he had arrived at a vastly superior method of catching fish. Just as he left an indelible mark on the development of modern stillwater trout fishing, so those for whom he was first and foremost the local GP in Wrington, Blagdon and surrounding villages remember him with deep affection as a remarkable and original man.

Dr Norman Tricks, who succeeded Dr Bell at his Wrington practice, remembers...

In those days we had a branch surgery at Blagdon and we held surgeries there on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, beside morning surgeries every day of the week including Sundays at Wrington, so it was a fairly full life to manage single-handed. Dr Bell always had Fridays off to go fishing at Blagdon, after a short surgery on Friday morning for urgent cases only; everyone knew he was off on Friday, and if people wanted attention they had to ring Mrs. Bell who would drive up to Blagdon lake and blow her horn, whereupon he would come to find out what the trouble was. People were very used to not being ill on Fridays.

He never went on any refresher courses nor (as far as I could make out) ever read any medical journals, but he seemed remarkably up-to-date in his treatments. Once I asked him how he kept himself up-to-date; he said that, when he sent patients off to a consultant for a second opinion, he always took great note of what they said the latest treatment was, and he felt that that was enough to keep him going; he was remarkable for his age and for the time. He did quite a lot of visiting and he was very, very good with old people, though he didn't suffer fools gladly: he very rarely wrote on his notes, but sometimes he would write things on the back of the envelope like: "This is an impossible woman," or words to that effect- he was usually right! He was very forward- even before the War- in that he advocated a high fibre diet when most people in those days were advocating a low fibre diet. He got the local bakery to make a high fibre loaf, which was called Dr Bell's loaf, and Mrs.

Bell used to get up early in the morning and ride her bicycle round the village to make sure the bakers were stocking this loaf, and also to make sure they were open, because she used to say that the tradespeople should be open at seven. They lived a very Spartan life- they had wooden floors with no carpets, and they had very little heating. They had a vast garden, with a vegetable plot and a large number of fruit trees which Dr Bell had planted himself and which he pruned assiduously, and a lot of hens which Mrs. Bell kept.

Dr Bell was not socially inclined; he told me he had only once been out to a dinner party during the time he'd lived in Wrington; there had been four people and that was three too many, even though the other three were fishermen. He'd only been to Church once, and that was in the War when the King had commanded everybody to go to Church to pray for victory. Of course what he was most famous for was fishing, and really this was because he conducted post- mortems on thousands of trout that were caught at Blagdon, to see what they were eating, and then he tied flies to resemble these creatures. He developed a method of fishing where you cast out and retrieved the fly very slowly, which was quite novel at that time, and which resulted in people writing to him from all over the world about his methods. He was very, very well known for this- he liked certain places on the lake, particularly where there was an old ditch or something like that- there was a bush up at the east end of the south side where he liked to fish - it was called Bell's Bush, but he

never referred to it as that, he always called it 'the bush' because he hated any publicity. He often had his tea at Blagdon Lodge; there were two sisters, Elsie Pearce and Sissy Tyler, who used to do the teas at the fishing hut, and they said he always used to have two boiled eggs as his favourite tea - (mind you I should have thought he had eggs all the time at home judging by the number of hens Mrs. Bell kept.) When he died The Field ran an obituary about how he'd revolutionized fly fishing; he would have turned in his grave if he'd known, because he hated any sort of publicity. Often in letters from consultants, if the consultant was a keen fisherman, there would be a PS. asking what sort of fly to use at Blagdon- Amber Nymph or Grenadier or whatever it might be, and when he was on his rounds he would call in at the fishing hut to dissect some trout and see what was in them, and that's really why he was so famous- because of his fishing and fly tying.

He was mad keen on animals - if he went to visit someone, the first thing he would do was pick up their cats and play with them, and the cats all knew him and loved him: some people would send for him to look at their cat or dog if it was ill. Once I was asked to go and see one of his patients who was ill - they rang up Mrs. Bell, who passed the message on to me, and I only found out when I got there it was a tortoise! Every Summer Dr and Mrs. Bell always went off to the Spey, or maybe the Esk to fish, with their dog, which was called Esk. That's the only time they ever took off as far as I know." 🐾

CELEBRATING
100
YEARS
OF
FISHING
AT
BLAGDON