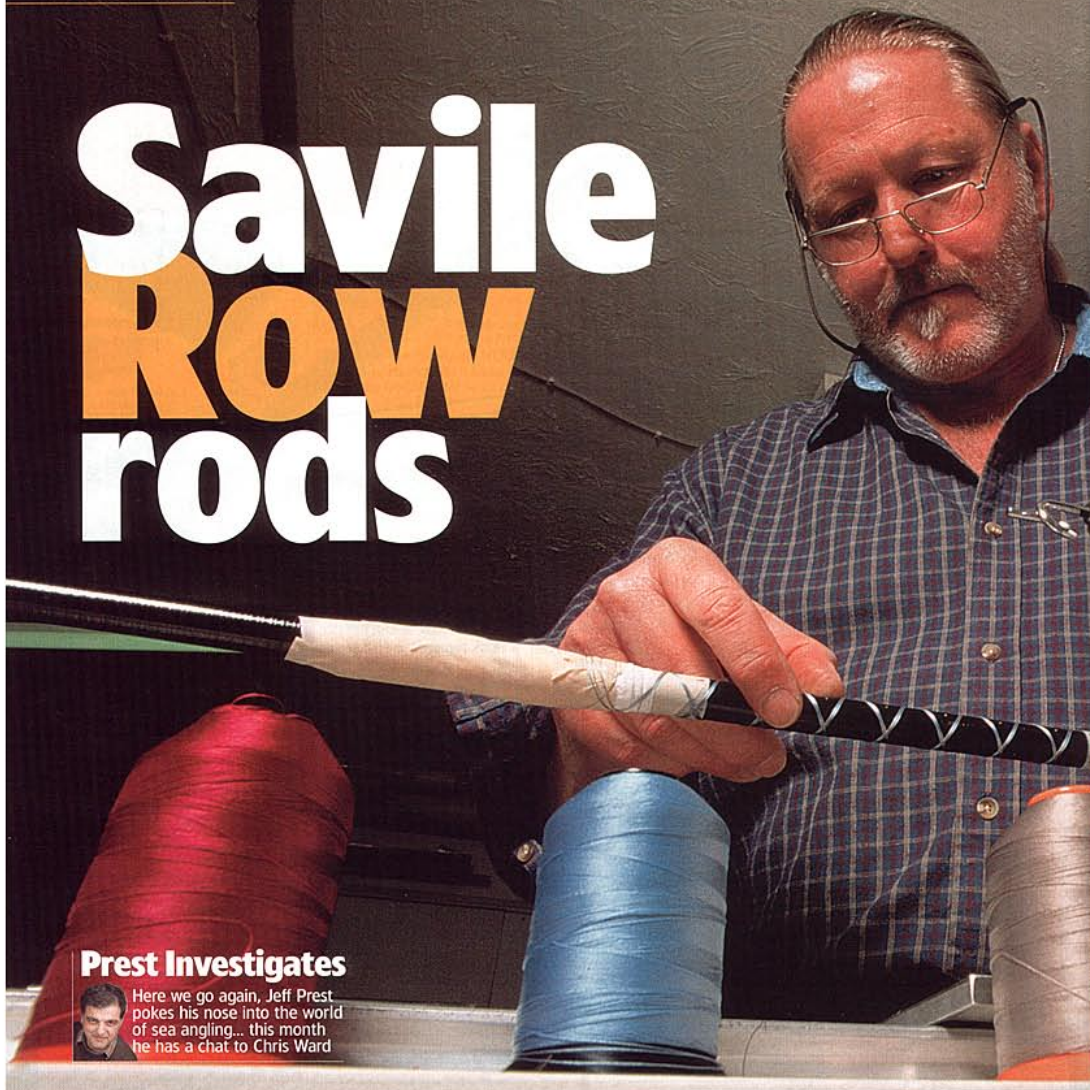


Savile Row rods



Prest Investigates

Here we go again, Jeff Prest pokes his nose into the world of sea angling... this month he has a chat to Chris Ward

When you want your suits made-to-measure you head for Savile Row rather than Marks and Sparks, but what of the angler who wants a customised rod? He beats a path to deepest Hampshire and Chris Ward...

INTO every life, a little irony must fall. The 18-stone couch potato has an exercise bike gathering dust in the corner of his room; the world's worst golfer owns the world's largest collection of golf instruction manuals and the woman whose house resembles a bomb site looks forward all year to visiting the Ideal Homes exhibition.

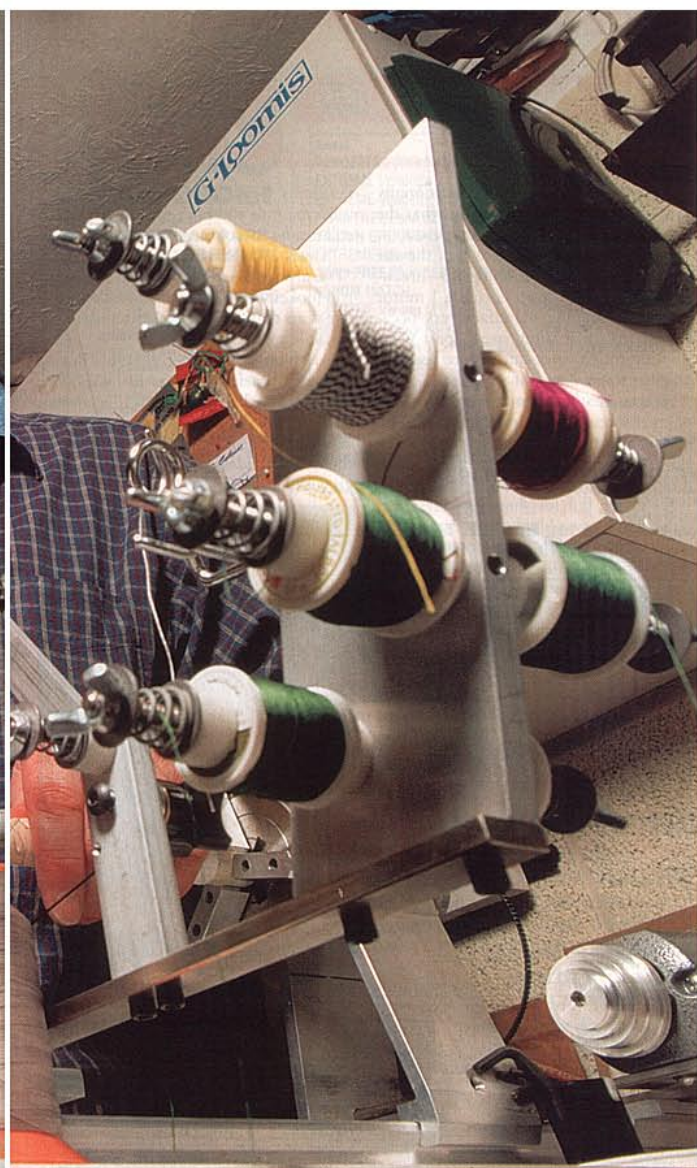
In Chris Ward's case, it is a model of Britain's most famous Reliant Robin, tucked away on one of the shelves in his study. 'Trotters Independent Trading Co.' emblazoned on its side.

Fools and horses. Del Boy and Rodney. Cons and scams, corners cut, standards

abandoned. Everything Chris Ward isn't is embodied within those few cubic inches of yellow plastic.

True, there is one person who gets the raw end of the deal whenever this custom rod builder turns soulless blanks into works of art. Ward bumps into him whenever he looks in a mirror.

Beavering away over a lathe in a cosy workshop overlooking his garden, he recalls numerous tales of many hours' work being condemned to the dustbin for the kind of minute imperfection his clients would never have spotted in a hundred years, yet which to this Essex-born perfectionist stood out as glaringly



as a zit on a supermodel.

With slender threads woven into colourful patterns around the blank his stock-in-trade, the 55-year-old pushes his eyes as hard as he does his patience, a visor with built-in magnifier giving him the look of Robocop as he trusses up his latest rod in a meticulous crossover pattern of blue and violet threads. Does he worry about his sight going?

"It's already gone," he replies.

Suffering for your art. If custom rod building were a fledgling trade in this country, the way in which Ward goes about it would have your grandparents purring with nostalgic delight.

He doesn't have 'customers', but 'clients'. Each rod is a 'commission' rather than a 'job' and his advertising is exclusively word-of-mouth.

The work required by each project means that he would not want to entertain more than 30 rods a year, and he will happily settle for the ten he expects to pass through his hands in 2002.

With a pension from his life on civvy street and fees for rod repairs and angling coaching to take up any slack, this sole trader enjoys a commodity that many multinational corporations can only dream of in an impatient world. The time to do a proper job. ▶

AT ARM'S LENGTH

At an age when many men would be glad to have the choice, Chris decided to celebrate retirement by rediscovering the long hair of his youth. The type of ponytail that looks plain daft on certain Arsenal goalkeepers sits rather well with a man who, as an occasional builder and photographer, is clearly driven by creativity.

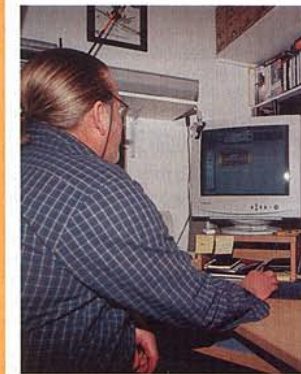
It lends him a certain Biblical zeal as he describes his job, while picking away at threads with an array of dental tools, which, like their owner, are enjoying a whole new way of life in retirement.

"A rod lives, to me," he reflects. "It's an extension of the arm. How did Man fish once he put his spear away? He held a line across his fingertip, the most sensitive part of the hand, and waited to feel a bite.

"The rod is an extension of that. Its tip should give us that same sensitivity. If we all had hands like Pinocchio's, we wouldn't need rods."

It is a timely moment to make the point, because if anyone was to get the impression that custom rod-building is little more than glorified embroidery, we would be doing Chris Ward a disservice. Those endless hours behind whirring bobbins of thread are spent with a view to wooing the eye, but it is the sombre carbon beneath the patterns that must win over the mind.

"The only thing an angler wants to know is if it will catch more fish for him than his existing rod...and the answer is always yes"



Chris uses a computer to assess how a weave pattern will look in reality

Spinal tip

ONE OF only a handful of European members of the Rodcrafters' Association of America - arguably the spiritual home of rod-building - the vast majority of Ward's clients entrust him with the choice of blank and its trimmings and he runs his fingers along each rod-to-be like a prospective racehorse owner feeling the flanks of a thoroughbred.

Somewhere in the construction process, a blank inadvertently acquires a 'spine', a part that is stronger than the rest. Place the rod under load and it will attempt to rotate so that the spine is aligned over the top of the curve.

Ward's job is to ensure that the spine is in its correct position from the outset, by attaching the rings so that upon the arrival of a fish, line, rings and blank are immediately all pulling in the same direction, like the planets on a lucky day.

He also ensures that the number and location of rings is sufficient to avoid line and rod coming into abrasive contact, when the latter arches in response to a catch.

These objectives are not always taken into account by those who mass-produce rods of the off-the-rack variety, and the fact that Ward's business stands or falls by

his attention to such details occasionally earns him a sneak preview into what the industry's big guns are planning next.

Rather like the way in which the car industry adapts technological breakthroughs gleaned from Formula 1 motor racing, so angling manufacturers occasionally run their latest 'tweak' past Ward for a thorough work-out, before deciding whether to produce it in numbers.

He's currently taken a shine to a Fuji palm-rest reel fitting, in which the reel is attached to the rod by a clip similar to a ski-boot fastener, which he feels offers more grip than the traditional coaster.

It's smart, but for sheer funkiness it is outscored by two blanks leant against his study wall, one of them boasting six sides, the other with its rings positioned in a 180-degree spiral along the rod's length.

Christened 'Cape Fear', you soon realise why he found the hunky hexagon's combination of lightness and power irresistible when he first saw it. The blank's lower half barely breaks sweat in your hands as he sets about bending the tip almost into the shape of a Polo mint.

As for the spiral, its aim is to improve a rod's stability under load. It's a long way,

Spinning a yarn

IT'S A good job he loves what he calls 'thread art', for if the client's artistic demands are particularly detailed it is the most painstaking component of his craft.

A computer helps him in the visualisation of the tartans, fish, flags and countless other patterns and images that he is asked to produce, but turning graphics into reality still comes down to many hours of intense communion with the lathe, its motor turning the rod while he binds the threads tight to the blank, careful layering gradually picking out the required image.

The rod is then coated in resin and dried in a purpose-built cabinet which keeps the temperature sufficiently high to stop air bubbles leaking into the resin and which also turns the rod to ensure that the resin dries level. The rod is then lightly sanded down and finally polished.

When he is not working on the blank, Ward turns his attention to the other area of the rod ripe for customisation, the grip, where foam inlays are painstakingly designed, cut and installed to make up the image or pattern required by the client.

"It's actually very therapeutic," he insists, in response to your suggestion that rodbuilders need the patience of a saint. "I

am patient but I have a fuse that blows occasionally. I'm due to become a grandfather shortly and the family joke is that I'll be known as 'Grumps' rather than 'Gramps'."

A little hesitation, then, before we finish with an awkward point. We have seen with our own eyes the craftsmanship, dedication and sheer man hours for which he charges between £300 and £800, and we're believers, but many sea anglers measure aesthetics purely in pounds and ounces. How many of them will view buying into Chris Ward's expertise as a luxury purchase rather than an investment?

"The only thing an angler wants to know is if it will catch more fish for him than his existing rod," he responds unhesitatingly, "and the answer is always 'yes', because a rod designed purely with that angler in mind - his rod in every sense - will always be the one he uses."

Even mealtimes are custom-built in this house. Lunch is an array of raw ingredients; meats, cheeses, salads, sauces, snacks and bread. How they are combined is left to the judgement of a writer and photographer who haven't eaten since sunrise.

It is Chris Ward's turn to be taught a thing or two about creativity.

he admits, from his very first 'commission', a Burma pole rod built for himself which still resides in a corner of his workshop.

"I was 14 when I made it," he recalls. "I've always been interested in the way a rod looked but it's only in the last four or five years that I've been able to concentrate on building my own."

A rich tan colour, the venerable Burma exudes a timeless style amid its modern counterparts, like Lauren Bacall in a room full of Demi Moores. Several bands of coloured threads show that even back then, Ward's ideal rod had personality to go with its performance.



Past and present: Chris shows off his very first design and a patriotic contemporary creation

CONTACT DETAILS

HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

- Tel/Fax: +44 (0) 23 9259 8714
- Email: roddoctor@rodcraftsman.com
- Website: www.rodcraftsman.com



If you're online, check out Chris' website. It has a shed load of info and is very well laid out