

Curiosities of Angling.

BY FRAMLEY STEELCROFT.



NOTHING is so universal as a hobby. The *haut ton* of New Guinea collect human heads, and would doubtless marvel greatly on learning that we tamely confine our energies to autographs, foreign stamps, and things of that sort. Now, angling may be defined as the collecting of fish in a pleasurable and scientific manner; and unquestionably the gentle art exercises strange fascination over all classes—statesmen, poets, artists, authors. The Princess of Wales herself is a pronounced expert in wielding the rod and landing trout or even salmon.

Chantry declared that the taking of two salmon in one morning gave him more satisfaction than the completion of his best statue. Nelson continued to fish with the left hand after he had lost the right; and Gordon Cumming preferred gaffing a Tweed salmon to an elephant or rhinoceros hunt in the heart of Equatorial Africa. Again, Sir Walter Scott (ever an enthusiastic angler), when he tried to form an idea of Paradise, always imagined a trout stream running through it.

One more instance. The theologian and philosopher, Paley, was one day asked by the Bishop of Durham when one of his most important works was likely to be finished. "My lord," replied Paley, earnestly, "I shall work steadily at it when the fly-fishing season is over."

Pondering these things, I came to think—like the lady at the palmist's—that "there must be something in it." Accordingly, I approached one of the foremost English angling clubs—The Pis-

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catorial Society—and periodically cross-examined its members after the manner of a special correspondent in an Armenian village. The president of the society, Mr. T. R. Sachs, whose portrait is given on this page in the robes of immortal Izaak, is the *doyen* of the angling fraternity—a mine of anecdote and wonderful adventure, mainly Piscatorial; he is now eighty-two. Mr. Sachs is now the only living angler who is allowed to fish in the Serpentine; and his permit, dated from Cambridge House, 8th of June, 1846, and signed "Adolphus, Ranger," is before me as I write.

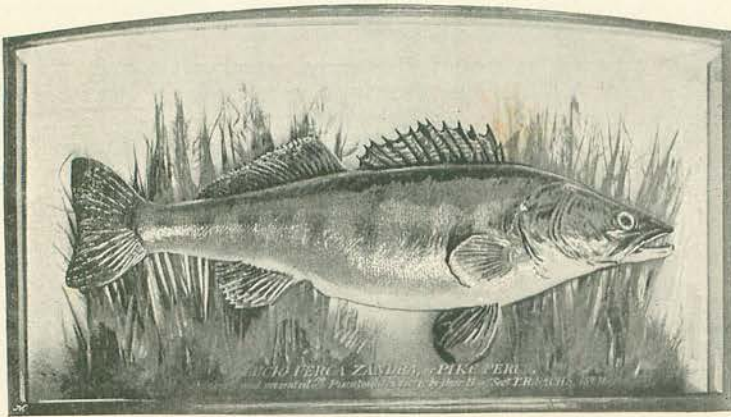
The Piscatorial Society was established on October 16th, 1836, having first met at a house in South Audley Street. There were then only about a dozen members; and the regulations respecting "fish to be preserved at the expense of the society" contain some funny reading—especially those dealing with half-ounce prickles-backs and two-ounce minnows. Fancy sending these to Rowland Ward! Very different, indeed, are the specimens that now adorn the walls of the society's

museum at the Holborn Restaurant; and several of these figure in the following pages, accompanied by the details of their capture.

The very first Rhine salmon caught with rod and line fell to the venerable president of the Piscatorial Society, who has followed the gentle art in many lands. It was near Schaffhausen; and this particular fish weighed 16½ lb. So extraordinary was the feat considered by the English, American, French, and Swiss visitors, that the hotel-keeper effusively



MR. T. R. SACHS, PRESIDENT OF THE PISCATORIAL SOCIETY.



MR. SACHS' PIKE-PERCH, CAUGHT IN THE ELBE.

knocked three francs in the pound off Mr. Sachs' bill, chiefly in consideration of the great advertisement gained.

Another of the president's fish is the weird-looking pike-perch shown in the next illustration. In 1865 Mr. Sachs went to Heidelberg to bring home his eldest son, who was studying at the famous University. From Heidelberg the two went on to Leipsic, and from there to Dresden. Here the old man resolved to fish in the Elbe, so, armed with a general rod and a fly-rod, the two made their way about three miles up the stream. Presently they came upon some men fishing in primitive style, their apparatus consisting of a pole, a string, a float, and a worm. Like the apostles on a memorable occasion, they had laboured long and caught nothing—or next to nothing.

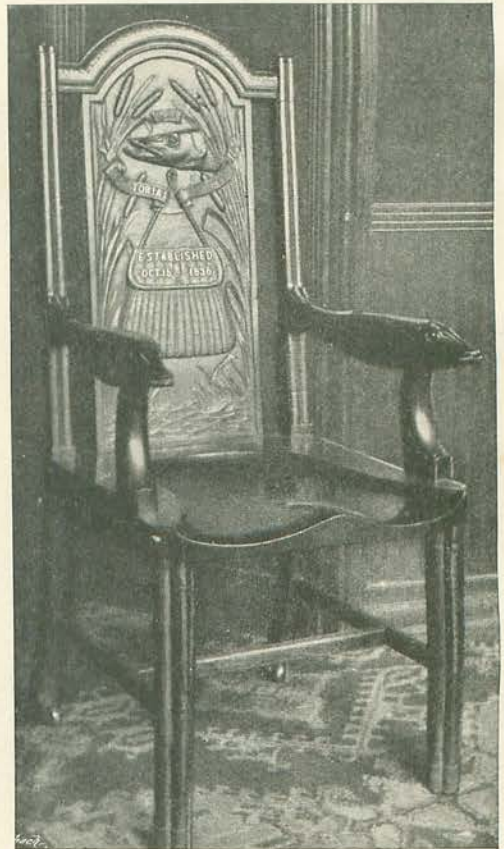
"I promptly set to work with my 'pater-noster,'" remarked Mr. Sachs: "that's a line with three hooks; my bait was dace or bleak. I caught a lot of trout, and gave them away to my fellow-fishers, who displayed great astonishment at the sight of such big fish. This astonishment grew greater as the items of my 'take' increased in size; and when I pulled out this 9lb. pike-perch, you would have thought it was a sperm whale, so great was the fuss those fellows made.

"In his haste to examine my prize, one man actually fell into the Elbe with a terrific splash, and certainly would have been drowned had not my son 'fished' him with the fly-rod until assistance could be procured. Worse still, these men, to whom I had presented most of my catch, actually gave information to the police that I was fishing without a license; and shortly after they left me, a couple of detectives haled me before

a magistrate, my son following with the rods and the pike-perch. I was, however, discharged with a caution."

Here is the presidential chair of the Piscatorial Society—a weighty piece of oak furniture, of decidedly "fishy" design, dating back for half a century. The framework of the back represents bundles of rods; so do the front legs. The president's arms rest

on a brace of truculent-looking jack; and the back panel is quite a Piscatorial picture in carved oak. Next is shown the quaint loving-cup of the society, and the chairman's hammers—all three fashioned from the heads of real fish. The silver cup itself reposes in the capacious mouth of a



THE PRESIDENT'S CHAIR; PISCATORIAL SOCIETY.

20lb. jack. Startling fishing stories are not, as a general rule, conspicuously veracious — especially when narrated by gentlemen who take part in that mysterious function known as a “peg-down match.” This contest is usually held by non-aristocratic clubs. Each member has a station “pegged out,” or allocated to him, and there he is supposed to fish all day for dear life and, perhaps, a Colonial joint. A pistol-shot is the signal to commence, and a bell is rung when the “match” is over. The catches are then weighed at the inn, and prizes awarded—nothing fantastic, mind you, but something useful in the way of blankets, potatoes, or coals.

During many such matches liquor is consumed in large or small quantities—generally large. The writer of this article himself attended one of these interesting events at Ware. The anglers, on taking their stations, merely placed their rods in position, and then cast about them for means to beguile the tedium of waiting for a bite. They jumped ditches, being then greatly exhilarated; they boxed, ran races, stalked bulls in the adjacent meadows, and finally fought gamely among themselves. They did everything, in fact—except fish; and on climbing into the brake for the homeward journey, everybody declared it had been a most successful day.

I was speaking of “tall” angling stories; but every one of the 22,000 fishermen in London will bear me out when I say that anglers do occasionally have some surprising adventures which are absolutely authentic, as well as very remarkable.

Mr. Sachs was out fishing one day with Rolfe, the artist, when a huge pike took both their baits simultaneously. It was Sachs who struck,



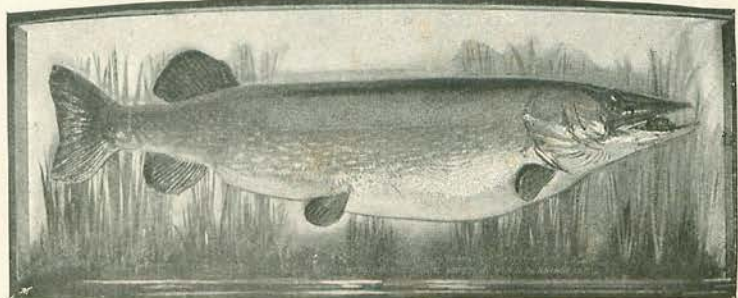
THE LOVING-CUP AND CHAIRMAN'S HAMMERS;
PISCATORIAL SOCIETY.

however, consequently the fish was his. It is shown in the accompanying reproduction, and is known to members of the Piscatorial Society (in whose museum it is placed) by the name of the “Union Jack Pike.” The largest pike the president remembers was one of 82lb., caught in Lake Constance. It was for some time kept in a moat round a castle, and thousands came to see it. This monster, nearly 6ft. long, was ultimately served

up at a banquet given to the Austrian Emperor; and although Mr. Sachs tried hard to secure the head for the society's museum, he did not succeed in obtaining any relic of that giant pike.

This veteran angler was one day fishing for codlings from the end of Deal Pier, and had secured quite a number, when he missed a thirty-guinea diamond ring from the third finger of his left hand. This ring being an heirloom, Mr. Sachs resolved to send to London for a diver, so that the bottom of the sea thereabouts might be searched. Next day, however, the missing ring was found inside one of the codlings, into whose mouth it had dropped during the process of unhooking. Many similar instances—more or less true—are recorded; but this is absolutely authentic.

Mr. Sachs was one day fishing at Laleham with Mr. William Maxwell, the well-known law publisher, and former president of the Thames Angling Preservation Society. The latter, being then an unsophisticated fisher-



THE “UNION JACK” PIKE.

man, did actually hook a big pike and lost it. His line got entangled in some bushes and the rod broke. Next day Mr. Sachs caught the very same fish—a twelve-pounder—in the very same spot. How did he recognise it? Well, there was Mr. Maxwell's tackle hanging from the pike's mouth! This reminds me that all manner of queer things have been found in captured pikes—tooth-brushes (a Piscatorial dandy, surely!), bits of glass, and metal fragments of watch-chains, and lots of impotent hooks. And I may say that herein lies one of the great temptations of the Piscatorial story-teller. Yet there are perfectly well-authenticated instances of pikeish voracity. A member of the society once took an 18lb. pike in Gloucestershire, by trolling; and inside this fish was found one of its own species, undigested, weighing 4lb. More extraordinary still, a 1lb. fish was further discovered in the stomach of the 4lb. pike; so that the angler took three fish with the one bait.

On another occasion a large pike was caught in the Ouse; it weighed 28lb., and was sold for a guinea to a certain gentleman, whose cook found in it a watch with black ribbon and keys attached. The maker's name was on the dial, and when inquiries were made, it transpired that the watch had belonged to a valet, out of employment, who had drowned himself in despair.

The next photograph reproduced shows the Ham Mill Pool on the Piscatorial Society's own water at Newbury, about fifteen

practically the only trout water within easy reach of London.

A fine basket of five trout, weighing altogether 20lb., was caught by the society's hon. secretary, Mr. W. T. Galloway, in two days in June, 1894. These five were the pick of some twenty fish taken while spinning and live-baiting the Ham Mill Pool. The others were returned to the water in accordance with those weight regulations that are so faithfully observed by all good anglers. "The capture of these trout," writes Mr. Galloway, "seemed to have cleared the way, as it were, for Mr. E. M. Mayes, who caught his eleven-pound fish the following week, in precisely the same spot."

The trout referred to is next shown; strictly speaking, it weighs 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. On the evening of June 24th, 1894, Mr. Mayes was fishing the mill pool near the Weir with a greenheart fly-rod, baited with a live gudgeon. His companions were also trying to tempt the big trout that had so often baffled them in the same spot, when they heard a great shout from Mayes. Leaving their own rods they went to his assistance, and then saw he had a big fish on. Immediately on striking, the trout went off down stream, making for a sunken willow about 40yds. away. Presently the miller and his men arrived on the scene, and shut down the two sluices of the weir. Beyond question this favoured the angler; and, after a few frantic rushes, Mr. Trout began to feel the heavy strain, and came quietly towards the excited fisherman.

The moment the trout saw the landing net, however, he plunged madly for dear life, and another quarter of an hour's grand sport was obtained before the net could be slipped under him.

Mr. Mayes had only just joined the society, but it is often thus, as every angler knows. The merest tyro, taken out for a day's fishing, will often catch finer

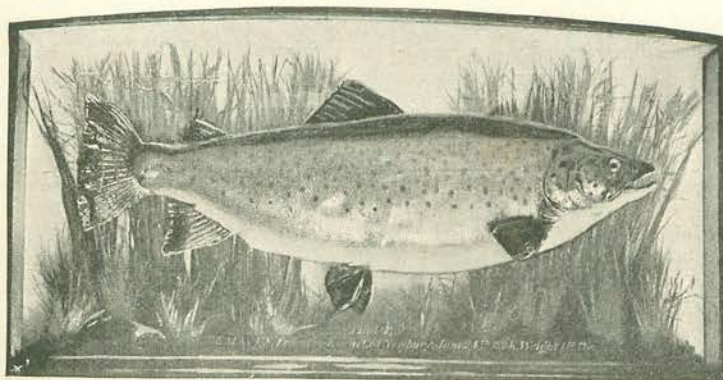
fish than the greatest expert that ever wielded the rod.

Almost every water known to a body of



THE HAM MILL POOL; PISCATORIAL SOCIETY'S WATER AT NEWBURY.

miles from Reading. The society pays about £250 a year for two and a half miles of the Kennet; but it also rents water at Radlett—

MR. MAYES' TROUT; WEIGHT 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ LB.

anglers contains a more or less mythical "big fish." This legend at one time attached to Elstree reservoir, and wonderful stories were told by Piscatorials concerning a gigantic pike that haunted that water. One angler after another related his adventures in search of that pike; and one day a particularly expert member, fishing with several others, roared out that he had the great fish "on." Without doubt he had cause for excitement, because the water was agitated and his rod bent to a perilous degree. The others were quite as excited as he, and they hastened to him with advice dictated by years of experience. "Keep him, Jones" (I will call this angler Jones); "play him—don't be in a hurry." Jones brought into play every device he knew. He must have travelled miles round that water, gesticulating strangely and working dreadfully hard. And for what? *An open carriage umbrella!* Yes, there it was, decorated here and there with the broken hooks and lines of bygone disappointed anglers. It was left for a dignified sportsman, of twenty years' experience, to fish up that hideous thing after a furious, scientific battle that lasted three-quarters of an hour.

Somewhat similarly, two Piscatorials were fishing

for barbel at Richmond one day, when one of them suddenly declared he had the biggest barbel on record at the end of his line. It was a tin kettle! This brings me to comical catches—an interesting part of angling. Consider for a moment the accompanying illustration, which depicts an incident that actually happened. It is reproduced from an

album of water-colour drawings belonging to the Piscatorial Society; and every pictorial anecdote is more than "founded on fact," with the exception of two or three caricatures. The society commissioned an artist to perpetuate in this way some of the most curious adventures of its members.

The swan incident is very curious. Three members of the society were one day bottom-fishing for jack, using live dace as bait; and when one of these anglers wound in his line the swan seized the bait, hook and all, greatly to its own detriment. But swans are often a nuisance to fishermen, as also are ducks; and here is a unique—and perfectly true—angling incident concerning one of the last-named birds. A couple of Piscatorial men were once assiduously fly-fishing, heedless of



"A QUEER FISH."

the unwelcome attention of half-a-dozen ducks. One of these, more daring than her fellows, *would* insist on investigating things; and at last the line accidentally passed across the bird, who suddenly turned round, twisted the gut about her own neck, and fixed the hook of the dropper-fly in her own breast. Thus entangled and hooked, she soon broke off the gut above the dropper, and sailed down the stream with the end of the fly trailing behind her in a manner that would have done credit to a veteran angler.

Naturally enough, the duck had not gone far before a trout of about a pound and a half took the fly effectually. Then commenced a most extraordinary struggle. Whenever the trout exerted itself, the duck's terror was most manifest; she fluttered her wings wildly, and dragged her "take" under some bushes, the human anglers following closely.

Presently, by chance, the gut that united unwilling angler and angled got across a branch that drooped into the water; whereupon the duck, taking advantage of the purchase given her in this way, dragged her fish from its hole and compelled it to show its head above water. At this point the specta-

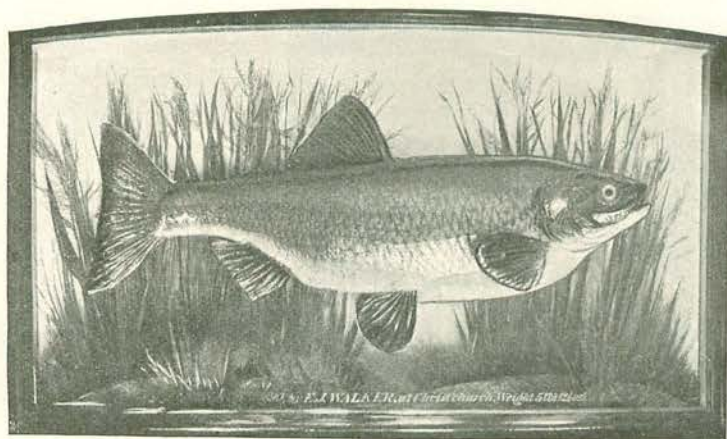
tors put an end to the novel contest by releasing the exhausted bird.

Sea-gulls and water-rats have also taken the bait; but here is a still more peculiar case of a queer catch in another element. One of my informants had occasion once to wade across a stream, carrying his rod on his shoulder. A brisk breeze presently carried out the spare line, fly-hooks and all; and immediately after, a *swallow*, evidently mistaking the hook for a real fly, snapped at it like lightning, and was made fast. More than this, many an amiable Piscatorial has become for the nonce a "fisher of men"; in other words, his hook has caught in the clothes of a drowned person. Such dismal "takes" are, of course, handed over to the police.

I reproduce here another of the cartoons in the Piscatorial Society's album; needless to say, it does *not* illustrate an actual incident. But it serves to emphasize the well-known solicitude displayed for his piscine charges by Mr. W. H. Brougham, the popular secretary of the Thames Angling Preservation Society. This corporate body, as is well known, is vested with power to search the well of any angler's punt in search of undersized fish; and if necessary it prosecutes those fisher-



FACSIMILE OF CARTOON FROM PISCATORIAL SOCIETY'S ALBUM.



MR. E. J. WALKER'S CHUB; WEIGHT 5LB. 12½OZ.

men who offend against the regulations. The T.A.P.S. employs a number of detectives who are known as river bailiffs; and it is owing to the exertions of similar societies that such enormities as shooting pike and salmon-spearing on horseback have been steadily discouraged.

The pastime of angling inculcates many virtues—especially patience. The fine chub shown in this photograph weighs 5lb. 12½oz.; and it was caught by Mr. E. J. Walker, an ardent Piscatorial member, after seven hours' steady fishing without a single bite. On being hooked, it went some twenty yards across the river, but immediately returned and plunged into a bed of weeds in three feet of water.

"I put my two feet there, also," writes Mr. Walker, facetiously (they are jolly dogs, these anglers), "and slipped the net under my beauty in a moment."

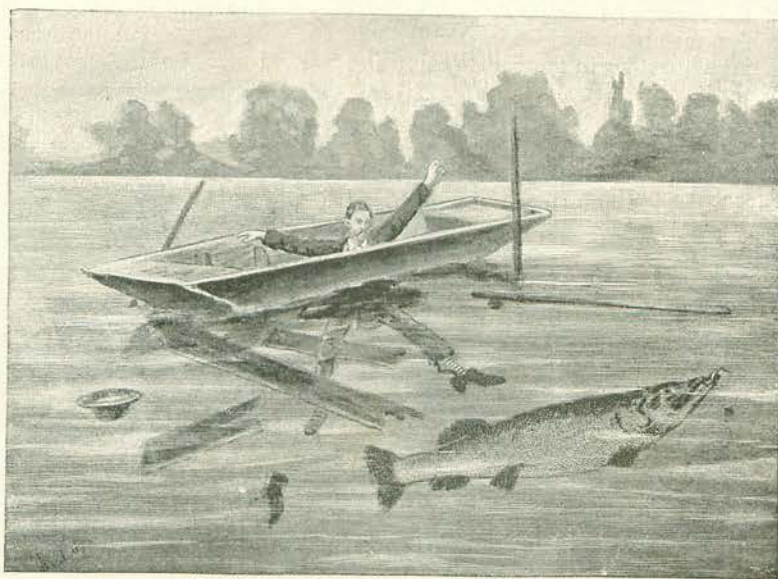
The fisherman's luck is exceedingly capricious; and it sometimes happens that the rod will catch fish on its own account. Another Piscatorial, Dr. Head, was one day fishing the Ham Mill Pool, and chanced to leave his rod on

the weir for a few minutes, the line dangling in the water. When he came back the whole apparatus had vanished. About an hour after this, another member, Dr. Startin, also left his rod in the same place—quite unwittingly, though. This disappeared, too. Of course, then the forlorn anglers organized an expedition to search for those rods. They put off in a punt down stream, armed only with a hay-rake. Presently one of their

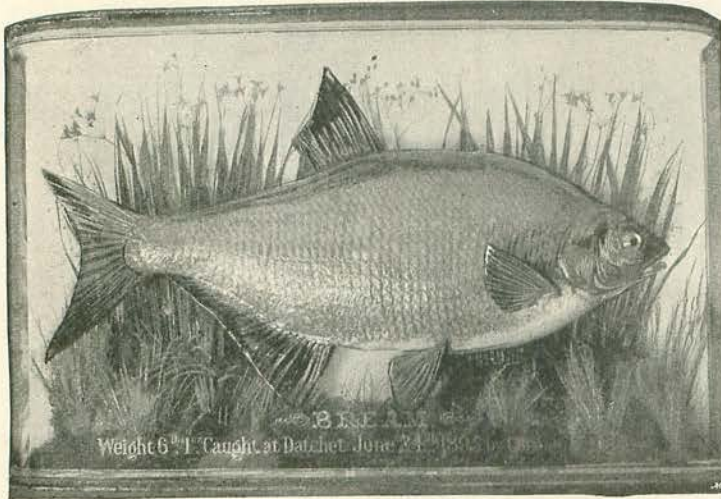
number descried a wooden reel gyrating spasmodically in the water ahead. They pursued that reel, landed it with the hay-rake, and then recovered Dr. Startin's rod. The line was run right out, and on the end was a 7lb. trout, who was towing the whole concern. Dr. Head's rod was never recovered.

No one can appreciate an angler's enthusiasm but an angler. Men will wade for hours in a cold stream, hoping to catch a fish of decent size. One enthusiast was actually dragged off a precarious perch (a narrow plank bridge) by a big pike; and, notwithstanding his tumble into the river, he maintained his hold on his rod while he was actually towed a little way by the fish.

This leads up to another picture in the



ACTUAL RESULT OF A STRUGGLE WITH A BIG PIKE.



MR. CORMAC O'DOWD'S BREAM.

Piscatorial Society's album. The situation will be appreciated by non-anglers, also. This actually happened to a member while pike-fishing. So violently did the fish struggle, and so keen was the angler on its capture, that the bottom came out of the punt!

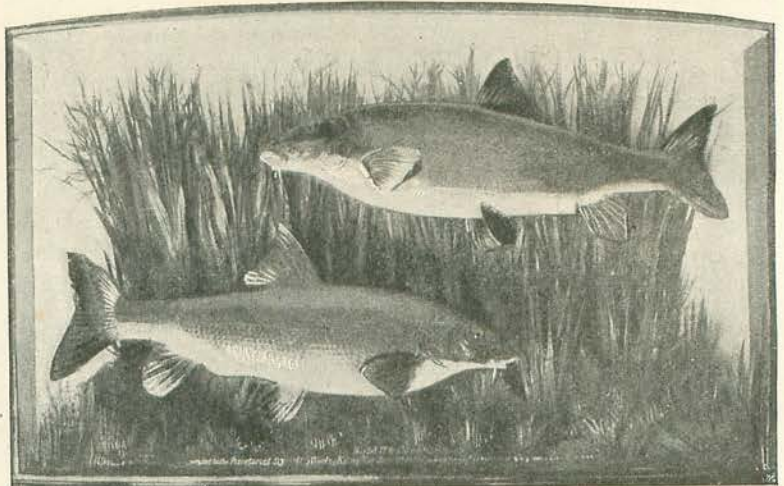
Next is seen a fine bream, one of three caught at Datchet, one morning before breakfast, by Mr. Cormac O'Dowd, the genial secretary of the Press Club. In the afternoon it weighed 6lb. 10oz., but at ten o'clock that night it only scaled 6lb. 1oz. Bream, it is well known, lose a great deal of weight after being caught; which reminds me of a curious story recorded in the minutes of the Piscatorial Society.

Two members were fishing the barbel competition together in the same punt; and one of them, in order to distinguish his own fish from his companion's, cut off each a portion of the tail fin. When the competitors' fish were weighed in that night, it was proved that if this marking process had not taken place, the angler would have won the first prize, his neighbour in the punt having beaten him by less than half an ounce. On another occa-

sion, a couple of members were fishing the dace competition together; and they had such a grand day's sport that each felt confident of winning a prize. In the evening the big basket of fish was placed on the flat space at the head of the punt, when a passing steam launch caused such a wash that the precious basket was swept overboard into the river.

The last Piscatorial trophy shown is a splendid brace of barbel, caught by Mr.

Woolley Kelsey in the society's own water at Newbury, in August, 1894. Here is Mr. Kelsey's own account of the capture: "I had often been told of the giant barbel that were sometimes seen disporting themselves in the Kennet; so, one glorious morning, I opened an attack upon them, or their humbler brethren; I was accompanied by a fellow-member. The water was slightly coloured and in fair quantity. I tackled the Mill Pool; and the miller amused me with incredible stories of the 20lb. barbel he had seen in that very spot. For two days I fruitlessly fished every inch of the pool, although I tried every known delicacy, from a paste of ancient Gorgonzola down to fresh, well-scoured lob-worms. On the third day I was on the spot at five o'clock in the



A SPLENDID BRACE OF BARBEL.

morning—and a raw morning it was for August. I put on a very fine and long Hercules gut cast, and threaded a tempting lob on a No. 1 Alcock round-bend hook. Soon the 'knock' came, and I answered; my reel whizzed as a big fish sailed off to the deep pool. It was useless to try to stop him; I could only hope that he would keep clear of the submerged piles. I dared not put any strain on my light tackle.

"At last the fish made for the river bank, thus enabling my friend to judge his size. The result was that my companion dashed off, with a shout, to the inn for a large landing net, and, on his return, we landed a splendid barbel of 10lb. 8oz., measuring 29in. After breakfast I had several smaller barbel of from 2lb. to 4½lb., returning to the water all under 3½lb.

"At last another big 'knock' was given, and away went yet another big fish into deep water. I had hard work to keep him clear of the piles and the bottom. Again I sent for

the big net, but there was really no hurry, for the fish was game, if I may say so. Up and down the pool he careered, and then he tried the old plan of boring. When he was just on the bottom, I risked a smash, and put the strain on. My rod was a 10ft. light cane specially built for me, with a tapered thin plaited silk line; and the fine gut was simply perfection.

"My second big barbel was grassed after half an hour's hard fight. He weighed 12¾lb. and measured 33in. Altogether I took 40lb. weight of barbel that day in the pool."

The last illustration depicts the interesting process of weighing-in which takes place at the Piscatorial Society's head-quarters every Monday night. The hon. secretary, Mr. W. T. Galloway, notes the weights, the librarian weighs, and the curator of the museum stands by, on the look-out for record fish that may be preserved and hung on the walls.



WEIGHING IN THE FISH.