

As secretary to the Shark Angling Club of Great Britain I get the opportunity to meet many people which is one of the great things about the role, but the 30th May was a little bit more special as I was fortunate to be able to meet Alan Dingle who is one of the Looe Sharking Skipper legends. Not many skippers have had two customers, both of which still hold British Records from as far back as 1970 and 1971.

Alan is a man of the sea and as you talk to him you realise that although he is now 90 years of age he still has a clear picture of all the marks around Looe and further into the Channel. His memory is exceptional and its immediately obvious he still retains a strong passion for the sea, sharking and the Shark Angling Club of Great Britain.

I ask him how did it all start. Like many fishermen of his age whose parents remembered very hard times, he was encouraged to get a trade, "to fall back on", if the fishing went poor again. Reluctantly he chose to be a carpenter which thankfully for us he gave up and went to sea. He says that one day he was working on a roof which gave him a view out across Looe bay. The sight of the fishing fleet heading out to sea became too much for him and gathering up his tools he said to his boss that he wouldn't be back the following day. The rest as they say, is history. Alan went to sea and became one of the Looe Skipper Legends.

Back then the Looe fishing fleet took recreational anglers out during the summer months then went commercial fishing during the winter. Sharks were always a challenge for the fishermen who regularly had their nets torn to pieces as the sharks feasted on the trapped fish and with sharks having little commercial value they were considered a nuisance to put it politely. In the early 50's Brigadier Caunter who had the Swordfish began fishing for sharks using rod and line. Alan remembers him being considered an eccentric by some locals when he regularly returned to port with two or three blue sharks hung by their tails on the boat. He goes on to say, "it wasn't long however until the locals worked out that the Brigadiers antics were creating shoals of customers willing to pay to catch a shark. Looking after people and helping them catch a shark or, if they were lucky, a qualifier for the SACGB was easier than shooting and hauling pilchard nets".

Alan stopped working for his father and began to skipper the Talisman which was owned by Miss Bennett who he believes lived near Leicester. Miss Bennet also owned 3 miles of game fishing rights on the river Wye. His wage was £10 week plus he had his stamp paid which Alan and his wife recall as a good wage, well above that of a tradesman. What was there not to like about this sharking business?

At the time to charter a boat for three anglers cost around £8 per day. Rods and reels were rented from Jack Brays tackle shop who still have a tackle shop in Looe today. The cost of rod hire for three anglers was £1.50 which left £6.50 to cover the boats expenses, wages for the skipper and some return for the boat owner. With 27 boats available for shark charter this was a commercially successful venture for skippers, boat owners, local tackle suppliers and many other local businesses.

I ask him about Joyce Yallops Mako ... how did that happen? On the day the Mako was caught, Joyce and her husband had chartered Alan to do some bottom fishing and were have good success with pollack. Suddenly a big fish broke the surface about 20 yards away which Joyce immediately identified as a basking shark. Alan says he wasn't sure as the tail didn't look right. About 15 minutes later it broke the surface again and this time Alan was sure. It wasn't a basking shark, it was a Mako. Since the boat had been chartered for bottom fishing Alan had only one sharking rod aboard which was one of his older and well used ones. In addition, they had only one jumbo mackerel which could be used as bait.

Undeterred, Alan marked the anchor with a buoy, started the engine and set a course parallel to the shark. As he got closer he coiled up around 15 fathoms of line and threw the hook, baited with the only mackerel they had, in the path of the Mako. It took it immediately.

Once hooked the fish jumped and set off on its first run. Alan recalls it launched itself around 30 feet clear of the water and he could clearly see the trace hanging loosely from its mouth. He says, "at that point in time I thought it was lost, and when the line went slack after the fish hit the water we thought that was the last we would see of it". However, they quickly realised that the Mako was heading directly for the boat, so Alan quickly went astern just in time to see it pass across the front of the bow.

Joyce was both an experienced and a strong angler says Alan. She could tame 40lb congers as well as any man, but this was a challenge on a different scale. He rigged her up with a Hardy harness and clipped the rod to it. The rig used a Fortuna reel which Alan says was a great benefit as she could lean into the fish through the harness and take her hands off the rod to give her arms a rest. The centre pin design allowed that to happen as it sat underneath the rod.

It was an old set of gear and the line, which was 120lbs breaking strain Dacron had two knots in it! Alan recalls seeing the knots go out through the rod eyes and back on each of the four occasions that the fish ran long. This he says, was a nail biting experience. Each time it went on a long run it jumped 20 to 30 feet. Around 2 ¾ hours later it came to the boat and Alan managed to gaff it.

When the shark was first hooked it launched itself into the air and this was seen by another boat which was close. Not knowing the shark was hooked they came close and began to put baits in the water. They quickly realised it was already hooked and gave Joyce space, so the shark could be played. Apart from the use of the harness, Joyce received no further assistance. Her husband had a bad heart, so he was unable to help Alan. Alan is aware that the fight was filmed from one of the boats who came along side who hadn't realised the shark was already hooked. He doesn't know the whereabouts of that film but if anyone does we would love to hear from you.

The Mako gave Joyce the British Ladies All Tackle Record which still stands today and at the time it was also the European Ladies Record

He goes on to talk about Pat Smith's 369lb Porbeagle which was not only almost twice as long as Pat was high, but at the time earned Pat a World record and a British Record. Pat still holds the British Ladies All Tackle Porbeagle Record and the British 130lb Line Class Record with that shark today. Alan says they were sharking that day and at one point during the drift he tipped an 8 stone box of particularly "ripe" mackerel heads and tails over the side. It was 10 minutes after that the Porbeagle took Pat's bait. During the 2-hour fight that followed it never showed itself, choosing to lie deep. Pat recovered line 8 times only to watch the shark dive to the bottom once again. Alan says, "this was a very different challenge to the Mako and in some respects the fight was a harder one".

Alan says that both ladies were exceptional and very determined anglers, but he praises the centre pin set up as the reel hangs underneath the rod. When this is used in conjunction with a harness it is possible to give your arms a rest, whereas with a multiplier you always have one hand on the rod.

On days when there were lots of sharks around, they would often catch the same shark more than once. On one such day they had around 40 sharks around the boat. The customer soon came tired of

catching them and since most were small to medium fish he decided to have a rest. Alan thought this would be a good opportunity to try sharking on light gear, so he set up his pollack rod rigged with a conger trace and put a bait in the water. He quickly hooked into a blue which turned out to be a 122.5lbs fish. He caught this on 30lbs breaking strain line and held the British 30lbs Line Class Record for Blue Sharks from 1971 until 1988.

Just when I thought we had reached the end of the big shark stories Alan remembers taking a group from the London Illustrated out sharking. One of them hooked into what Alan knew was a big shark which took over an hour to break the surface. On three occasions they managed to get the shark to the boat and on each occasion, Alan managed to get his arm around its tail, but the fish was so strong it broke away each time. He says, "that was a big powerful shark". I ask what it was, he replies "a Mako", followed by, "and it was a lot bigger than Mrs Yallops".

On another day a customer hooked into a big shark which set off on an unstoppable run. Realising they were down to their last 40 yards of line Alan looked around for a knife to cut the line but before he could do so the rod and reel were pulled over the side. "We never saw that fish", he says.

He also recalls seeing a pod of killer whales when fishing out of Looe. The look on his face confirms he was impressed by the power of this top of the food chain predator. He says one came up alongside the boat and rolled, showing its gleaming white underbelly. His next move was to start up the engine and move away. A pod of killer whales, some of which he estimated to be around 1500lbs was beyond even Alans capabilities.

Although he briefed every angler on the dangers of sharking and being close to sharks, he says, "there is always someone who knows better or just doesn't listen". He reinforces his point by telling me about a customer who believed his shark had no teeth. He couldn't see the teeth as sharks have a flap of skin which cover them. To prove it this customer ran his hand along the edge of its mouth. As he stood up and moved away he didn't notice the blood running from his hand. The shark did have teeth and they were so sharp he hadn't even felt them cutting his fingers.

Alans preferred bait was pilchards in brine. His father knew the owner of the Looe Pilchard Factory very well, so he wasn't short of briney oil and lots of pilchard heads and innards which he used for rubby dubby. He didn't use a rubby dubby bag, preferring to use a plastic carton with holes drilled in it which he kept above the water line so the rubby dubby dripped out, falling into the water to create the slick. His father almost never used fresh bait, preferring always to use salted pilchard. Since Alans father, Abb Dingle, was skipper of the Lady Betty when Nigel Sutcliffe caught the British Record Blue Shark of 218lbs, which remains the record today, I begin to think I should find some salted pilchard for my next sharking trip.

They were good times he says. We had some laughs.

His eyes light up as he recalls one customer whose preferred seat was on the wheelhouse roof. One day he hooked into a shark which caught him unawares and took him, rod and all into the water. Alan laughs, "he must have managed to release the harness as we got him back aboard, very wet and a bit shocked but otherwise unharmed".

On another occasion, Alan Hardaker, the former Football League Secretary arranged a pollacking trip with Alan and after catching four boxes of pollack Alan suggested trying for sharks. They quickly caught 12 and Mr Hardaker was of course delighted. Alan laughs and says I should have asked for some match tickets. His wife looks at him and says, "you wouldn't have had any time to go to the football, you were always at sea".

Following a successful couple of hours pollocking with one group, Alan suggested that they try for sharks. One of the group sat in the fighting chair and soon fell sound asleep. The other members of the group attached this gentleman's line to a large galvanised bin which Alan kept aboard. The bin was allowed to fill with water and gently lowered to the bottom. A quick tug on the ratchet and the sleeping angler woke up and struck into the "fish". Feeling its weight, he immediately declared this to be a good shark. Eventually he managed to get this "new specie's" alongside the boat. Alan laughs and says, "he wasn't too pleased".

He shows me one of his photo albums which is impressive for a man who never owned a camera. He says, "people just kept sending photographs to me which was very generous of them". He leaves the room and returns with a red box which he hands to me. I open it and find a gold Omega watch inside. On the back of the watch is inscribed, "*Skipper A Dingle in appreciation from Mrs Joyce Yallop in boating a 500lb Mako 12/5/71*". By this point in the discussion Alan has impressed me deeply. His knowledge of the sea, sharking and fishing in general is exceptional so it comes as no surprise that many of his customers wanted to thank him for days spent with him, many of which would be remembered forever.

Roy Mason, who was the Northern Ireland Secretary at the time, booked a trip with Alan. Since this was during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, his security was extremely tight and the Lady Betty II was thoroughly searched by Mr Mason's minders. Alan recalls that he did quite well and when he got back ashore he gave Alan a large box of cigarettes which had the House of Commons logo on the top.

During Alan's time as a sharking skipper there were many sharks killed and weighed for club membership. Towards the end of Alan's career the movement toward "catch and release" was starting to gain pace and Alan was a strong supporter of this. The foresight of Alan and others is what led the sharking community to where they are today, where catch and release is now a universally accepted practise within the UK. I tell Alan last year we had greater numbers of sharks than the previous year and that the SACGB has more active members than for many years which I can see pleases him greatly. The interview is drawn to a close but as I leave I am confident that if Alan went to sea today still using his clock, compass and landmarks he could locate the marks, and the fish, as accurately as any of our skippers with today's sophisticated navigation equipment.