

Tench Special

Bob Roberts and Matt Brown



It's definitely the right time to be targeting some tench. This wonderful species is somewhat maligned by the specimen carp brigade but Bob and Matt argue that on the right gear, you can have your string pulled by a fish that offers tremendous sport...

I guess I've enjoyed a lifelong love affair with tench. Growing up in South Yorkshire in an era when the first carp I ever saw in the flesh was in an aquarium at London Zoo meant that tench were veritable monsters and just about the only fish I encountered outside of pike that could truly be said to fight back.

It's not that the tench I caught were exactly big, either. A four-pounder was quite special yet pound for pound they pulled like nothing else I hooked, moving at lightning speed and refusing to come quietly.

The tench fishing adventures I enjoyed so much were mostly played out on farm ponds and estate-type lakes using basic float tactics.

These waters responded best to classic early morning and evening sessions and marked my transition from being a kid who was overjoyed to catch anything to a youth following the doctrines of Richard Walker, Peter Stone and the Taylor brothers.

I lingered over each sentence, adopted their philosophy and then trod my own path.

Getting Serious

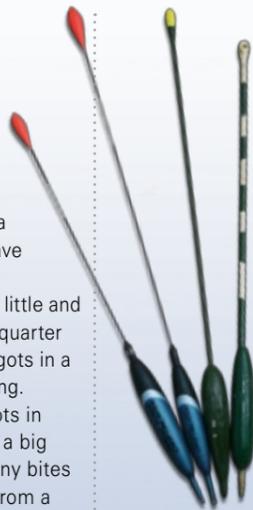
It was because of my desire to catch a 'big' tench from Toll Bar Pond that I saved up to buy a split cane Avon blank and then built my own tench rod, enabling me to step up to 5lb line direct to a Mustad size 8 hook and still have balanced tackle.

While others around me used little and often tactics, feeding maybe a quarter or half a pint of casters or maggots in a session, I went in all guns blazing.

Out went two pints of maggots in one go, over which I'd present a big lobworm. Okay, I didn't get many bites but when I did get one it was from a proper fish, and mostly I'd get it out.

I learned how to make weed rakes from old bike wheels whose spokes were intertwined with barbed wire and weed cutters from two industrial machine saw blades and a flat iron bar.

I learned about groundbaiting, particles, float fishing in the dark and much more. I took to making my own special tench floats, too. Fine antennae and sight bobs are nothing new.



Above: Bob's 40-year-old home-made floats alongside Drennan's state-of-the-art modern Driftbeaters. There's nothing new in angling!

The Magic Of A Misty Dawn

To fly in the face of perceived wisdom from the club's elders requires a degree of bottle when you're still at school, and it didn't go down well in some quarters.

The dogma of, 'You won't catch 'owt on a hook bigger than a twenty' soon became, 'Huh! There's no skill in landing 'em on Bentley Pit winding rope'.

Multiple captures became the norm and bearing in mind this was Yorkshire in the sixties, when the only people who caught five-pounders were liars, I racked up an enviable list of specimens.

Even today, a six pound Yorkshire tench is quite rare but that doesn't matter in the least because size is immaterial if you block it out of your mind.

What truly matters is that you can refine your tactics on smaller fish, knowing full well that if it works here you can go anywhere in the country and catch.

I love fishing for tench in the traditional manner even today, and in many respects am quite happy to catch 3lb tench on corn or flake until the cows come home.

Honestly, it doesn't get much better than watching a red-tipped waggler tight against some lily pads as clouds of pinhead bubbles erupt on the surface on a summer's morning with wisps of mist gyrating slowly in the first rays of weak sunshine.

Tell me you're not hearing the dawn chorus right now. Tell me you can't smell fields and woodland, feel a chill in the air, see dew-laden cobwebs and feel the damp on your trouser legs. Did that coot just make you jump?

With my eyes closed I can drift back to the rickety platforms of Shirley Pool right now, surrounded by tall Norfolk reed, my pulse racing, a tangible aura of anticipation.

Really, I've never in my life felt closer to nature and how I'd love to journey back through time and experience those halcyon days of 25 years ago, just once more.

However, you are more than likely going to find me sitting next to a pair of rods resting on bite alarms beside a gravel pit these days, because it's all fine and dandy learning how to catch, but sooner or later you have to put those skills to the test and this is where you meet the big girls.

Isn't it ironic that the size of gravel pit tench has gone through the roof in the past couple of decades, yet catching them has never been treated with quite so much derision by so many so-called anglers?

I spent 20 years dreaming of catching a seven or eight pound tench, so it rubs against the grain when I witness carp anglers moaning a bucketful after catching one by accident.

It's pretty much the same when a barbel angler on the Trent catches a 7lb bream. Anglers are spoiled these days and, without the benefit of recognising a good thing when it smacks them in the eye.

I guess the fastest way to lose perspective in angling is to become a single species disciple. Specialising in anything, be it carp, barbel, perch, chub or pike to the exclusion of all other species is the road to ruination, mark my words.



It would hardly surprise me to see Fox, or Korum, or some other enterprising outfit launching a range of specialist blinkers, in camou of course, and make a right old killing!

But back to tench fishing.

Traditional Methods On Traditional Waters

By traditional methods I mean float fishing, and it has to be said this is the finest way, without doubt, to catch tench at close range.

Yes, you can get away with any old waggler, fine topped on a calm day, a thicker top if it's windy, but Drennan's Driftbeaters are, in my opinion, the finest close to medium range tench floats ever made.

Shoal tench are neither tackle-shy or sensitive to resistance, so you can afford to use a decent sized Driftbeater.

The tip is resistant to surface drift and you should use a proper sized shot as a tell-tale.

Use a BB or even an AA placed close to the hook and by close I certainly mean less than six inches.

A couple of inches is enough when using small baits like maggots and casters.

Use enough bulk shot around the base of the float to sink the body but leave the fine antenna standing proud. Set it slightly overdepth, with the dropper shot sitting firmly on the deck, and then tighten up so the sight bob is drawn down to sit in the surface film.

This is why you need a heavy tell-tale. The hook-bait must not be dragged around in the drift. Bites are either great big wobbly lifts or positive sail-aways.

There is absolutely no need for sophisticated shooting patterns because 99 times out of a hundred tench are bottom feeders.

Yes, I've caught them off-bottom on commercial fisheries where stocking densities are high but that's not exactly traditional fishing, is it? At least not just yet it isn't.

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Balanced Gear

Rods and lines must be chosen to suit the amount of weed and size of tench likely to be encountered but the infestations of carp in practically every bloody puddle in the country mean you probably have to scale up more than is necessary.

As a rule of thumb I'm happiest using a rod with a 1.25 to 1.5lb test curve matched with five or 6lb line.

It's worth treating your line so it sinks and that can easily be done with a bit of washing up liquid. Fullers Earth was always the stuff recommended in the old days but we just rubbed a bit of wet clay on the line.



If you want to get really cute mix a bit of leam with diluted washing up liquid and store it in an old shot tub or some other similar pot with an airtight lid to prevent it from drying out.

Baits can be as simple as you like, bread, corn, maggots, worms, casters (expensive but brilliant), pastes and pellets are all you really need.

Hemp and Partiblend make excellent holding baits, especially when used in conjunction with maggots, and will keep tench rooting around in the swim for ages.

The thing is, most traditional tench waters have silty bottoms and the fish move around in shoals. Once you get a few fish feeding they will stir up the bottom, colour the water and their confidence grows accordingly.

More often than not you have to gamble and put a fair bit of bait in at

A wide range of baits will catch tench, but I normally go for casters and/or dead maggots over groundbait believing that tiny particles hold groups of tench in the area for longer, thereby improving my chances of a pick-up. In weedy waters, breadflake really comes into its own as it's highly visible and will rest on top of the weed.

the start of your session, even if it's clear there are already feeding fish in your swim.

Bombarding them with feed can spook them but rarely for long. They'll usually return quite quickly.

The downside with traditional tenching is that they normally feed best around dawn and that means you're in for a very early start in summer because the feeding spell frequently dries up as the light intensity increases.

Location is more important on this kind of water because the fish do tend to roam around less than on gravel pits, but you won't go far wrong by simply seeking out the shallow and weedy areas in May and June.

Keep your eyes peeled and look out for signs of bubbling and rolling because these are dead giveaways.

Gravel Pit Tenching

Moving on to gravel pits really opened my eyes where tench fishing is concerned. It's almost as if gravel pit tench are a different species and it has caused me to speculate as to why they grow so big on many occasions.

When I was a kid, the British rod caught record was only 8lb-something (7lb 12oz in Ireland). In 1963 it leapt to 9lb 1oz when Mr J Salisbury caught a veritable monster, allegedly from Hemingford Grey.

There was some speculation that it actually came from a different lake entirely and not the day ticket fishery claimed, but isn't that angling all over? Subterfuge, mistrust and clouds of suspicion.

Some things don't change.

Today a nine pound fish would barely merit a mention in the angling press. Carp anglers complain when they catch them and return near-doubles without even weighing them, yet the legendary Dick Walker never once caught so much as a single six-pounder in his entire life.

So what happened? Where did today's giants spring from?

Apparently humans are about a foot taller than they were 500 years ago. You can put that down to diet, survival of the

fittest or whatever you like but evolution takes centuries, rather than decades.

The dramatic increase in UK tench sizes corresponded with the massive road building programmes of the 1950s and sixties.

Motorway construction required gravel and aggregates on a previously unimaginable scale and the face of the countryside was destined to change forever.

Fortunately planning consents for the extraction of minerals required companies to landscape the quarry sites when extraction finished and that included planting trees, plants and stocking fish.

I take my hat off to the visionary who insisted on taking future recreational use into account because that decision gave us much of the great fishing we enjoy today.

Wonder Of Wonders

I just wonder where they got the fish from? There are literally thousands of gravel pits up and down the country, mostly dug in the past 50 years.

Some of the fish they contain now reach enormous size and the typical gravel pit tench is no more like an estate lake fish than I am to a Chinaman. Compare the two.

Estate lake fish are sleek, frequently dark skinned, huge finned and top out at around five pounds. Gravel pit tench are light coloured, broad shouldered and deeper, with smaller heads. Some are practically shaped like breeze blocks. And they don't fight as well in my opinion.

Can it really be down to diet? Water quality? PH values? Or is it genetics?

Were the fish available to the reclaimers all from the same strain, or perhaps even imported? That would explain a lot, wouldn't it? I just wish I knew the answer.

The other significant difference is that gravel pit tench are quite happy to feed throughout the day. Indeed they will feed confidently in the brightest sunshine only for sport to tail off in the evening when you might be expecting to do better.

On The Tinca Trail

On sparsely stocked gravel pits, location is crucial. If you are not on the fish you cannot possibly catch them. Observation plays a massive part because tench roll on the surface quite regularly.

They move about quite a lot, too, and you'll often see them cruising by in the margins. The same is happening out there in the distance, too.

Bubbling is less obvious on hard-bottomed gravel pits and once you move out from the margins the location of features like bars and plateaux, weedbeds and silt pockets becomes vitally important.

This, in turn, means accurate feeding and bait presentation is essential.

I wouldn't dream of fishing for tench on a gravel pit without a marker and spod rod.



Weed plays a huge part, too, both in terms of fish location and clean hook-bait presentation. In effect we are looking at scaled down carp fishing techniques.

Although carp anglers might moan about tench interfering with their carefully laid traps, I've found boilies to be a pretty poor tench bait.

The tench population in the Carp Society's Horseshoe Lake, for example, is incredible, both in numbers and size of fish, and they far outnumber the carp.

Having said all that, considering the population size you don't hook that many tench on boilies. Mind you, the Korda underwater DVDs show just how cute they can be at ejecting bolt-rigged baits.

Yet stick a grain of corn on the hook or a bunch of maggots and it's a different matter.

I've fished for tench at Horseshoe and caught so many fish that I've had to either reel in or stick out a boily just for a rest.

In one session I took no less than 44 tench averaging between six and nine pounds yet never hooked a single carp, from what is regarded by many to be a very good carp swim.

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Superb Sywell

Reservoirs can also produce big tench, especially if the stocking density is low. However, one reservoir stands out from them all – Sywell in Northamptonshire.

This day ticket water produces as many big tench as any reservoir in the country and it's not just a case of sitting it out hoping for an odd fish every once in a blue moon.

There are shoals of tench here in the seven to eight pound bracket with the potential to throw up a genuine double or two.

The DVSG lads have enjoyed numerous trips to Sywell in the past couple of seasons and I don't think we've ever blanked.

Matt Brown and I spent a cold, wet weekend there last spring and

still caught more than our share of specimens when one of the really important lessons of tenching was hammered home.

When things are quiet it's not just good enough to sit there and hope. Sometimes you have to make things happen.

Our session began with a fair old walk. Arriving in mid-morning on a Saturday meant the popular swims closest to the car park were all taken.

Neither of us fancied hauling a mountain of gear over to the far bank so we squeezed into the last two swims on the near bank before the no-fishing conservation area. It's still a fair walk and it was clear this area had been receiving little attention from anglers.



Be in no doubt that Sywell is a very special water and one of the very few leading big fish waters in the UK that can be fished on a day ticket. If this article inspires you to give it a go please show it the utmost respect.



Raking not only clears a swim, it encourages tench to feed.



A Right Racket And Instant Bites

Shallower than the swims nearer the dam, you can wade out a fair way in chest waders which suited our plan of attack - to rake an area and then feed heavily. The purpose of raking is to clear out any bottom weed that might affect presentation, to stir up the bottom and colour the water slightly and release all manner of natural feed items.

We probably spent a good hour preparing our swims and made a fair old racket before resting things while we hastily erected our shelters and got everything undercover because heavy rain was forecast.

Half an hour later, with everything organised and the kettle on, it was time to cast out. Ten minutes later we had our first bite! You'd have thought the noise we'd made would have scared off every fish within a hundred yards, but clearly not so.

We caught odd fish through the afternoon before all went quiet. Time to put our heads together and come up with a plan. It would have been all too easy to do nothing. After all, our original tactics had worked well enough and this might just be a lull.

"This is no good," I said to Matt. "We've got to make something happen!" I waded out and gave the swim a second raking.

After recasting my feeders I waded out again with a bait bucket and began catapulting bait onto the raked area over the hook-baits. Would you believe I was still up to my waist in water, catapult in hand, when one of my rods ramped off?

You could ask for no more confirmation that rather than being spooked by disturbance, the inquisitive tench is attracted to it.

Repeated raking is a tiring exercise, especially over the course of a long session and it's not exactly much fun in the rain but you can still create a positive noise by catapulting splashy baits like hemp, corn and pellets.

This is exactly what we did to keep a steady trickle of fish coming to our nets over the course of our 24-hour session.

As expected, all activity stopped as dusk fell with the exception of one fish to Matt's rods. Come breakfast the action began again but not until we'd created enough disturbance to terrify any other species of fish.

By noon we were wet, bedraggled and satiated. It was time for home. Be in no doubt that Sywell is a very special water and one of the very few leading big fish waters in the UK that can be fished on a day ticket. If this article inspires you to give it a go please show it the utmost respect.

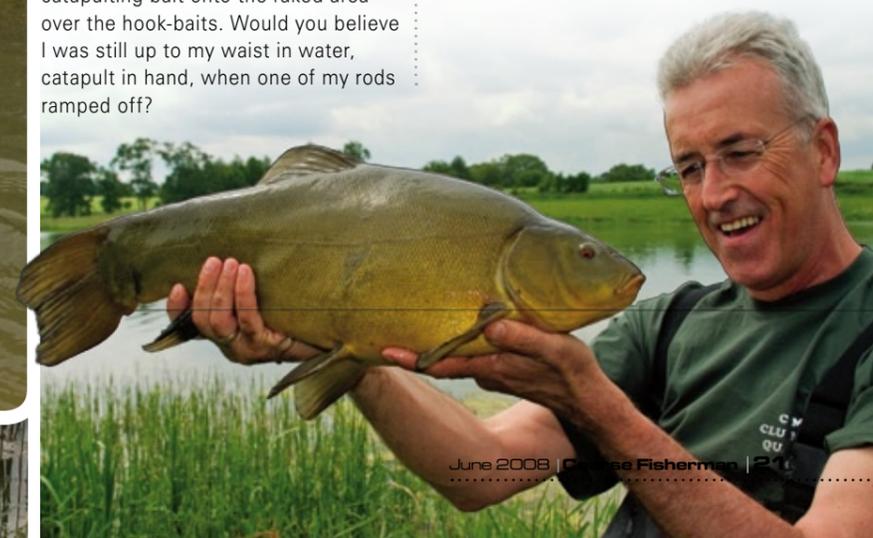
Treat the fish with care, don't leave any litter and try not to get too upset when the occasional inquisitive dog sticks its nose in your bait bucket.

After all, it's a country park and the procession of joggers, bird-watchers and courting couples have as much right to enjoy the facilities as we do.

Day tickets at Sywell are available on the bank.



Sywell tench are of a good average size and certainly don't mind a bit of disturbance.





Matt's Tench Rig

A few years ago I was privileged to fish a water where I could watch quality Yorkshire tench feeding in clear water.

The tench would arrive in pairs or small groups and tip up near vertically and feed on each particle of bait with barely a movement in any direction. Eventually they would move away from the area but usually returned later.

I had already been pointed in the direction of super tight lines and helicopter rigs by fellow DVSG member and tench fanatic Tim Ridge, but what I saw led me to using super short hook-links.

I figured that if the tench were only moving a centimetre or so to pick up the next particle, I had to devise a rig that would practically hook them on the spot.

How To Make Matt's TENCH RIG



Tools for the job.



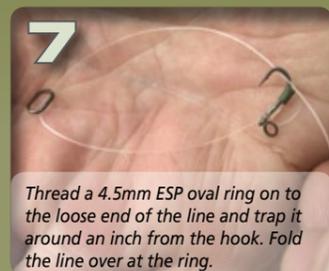
I use the stunning Drennan Barbel Super Specialist hook but I straighten the eye, using a pair of forceps and a Fox tension bar. This makes the hook-link sit at the right angle to give you the best hook-up ratio.



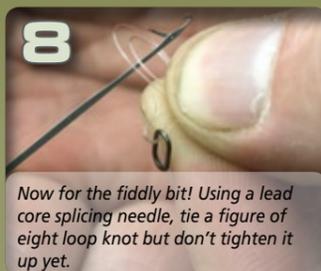
Drennan Super Specialist Barbel hooks - perfect for the small bait approach.



Thread some 10lb ESP Ghost fluorocarbon through a 4mm length of 0.5mm Korda silicone tubing. Carefully slide the hook-point through the tubing.



Thread a 4.5mm ESP oval ring on to the loose end of the line and trap it around an inch from the hook. Fold the line over at the ring.



Now for the fiddly bit! Using a lead core splicing needle, tie a figure of eight loop knot but don't tighten it up yet.



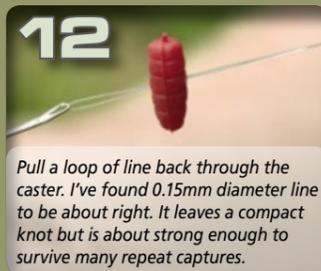
While holding the hook and the tag end in one hand, use the thinner end of a Fox Tension Bar to tease the knot so it's neat and compact. Your goal is to get a loop of around 5mm in diameter



Now for the hook-bait! Pierce an Enterprise artificial rubber caster with a needle.



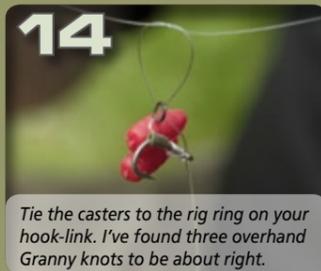
Remove the needle and carefully thread the lead core splicing needle through the hole you just made.



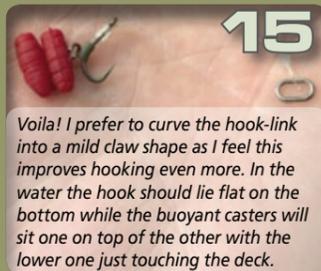
Pull a loop of line back through the caster. I've found 0.15mm diameter line to be about right. It leaves a compact knot but is about strong enough to survive many repeat captures.



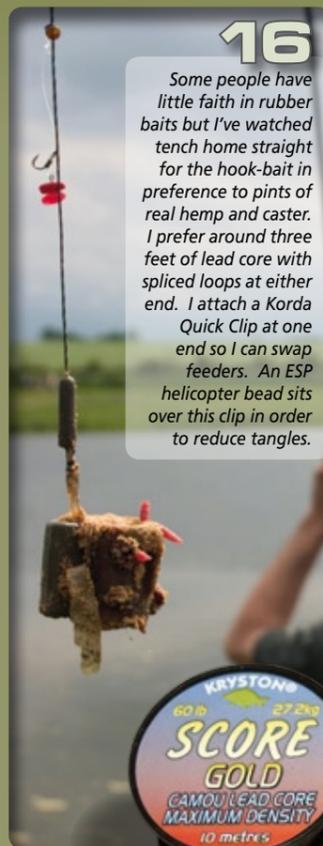
Wrap the loop around a second rubber caster and pull tight.



Tie the casters to the rig ring on your hook-link. I've found three overhand Granny knots to be about right.



Voila! I prefer to curve the hook-link into a mild claw shape as I feel this improves hooking even more. In the water the hook should lie flat on the bottom while the buoyant casters will sit one on top of the other with the lower one just touching the deck.



Some people have little faith in rubber baits but I've watched tench home straight for the hook-bait in preference to pints of real hemp and caster. I prefer around three feet of lead core with spliced loops at either end. I attach a Korda Quick Clip at one end so I can swap feeders. An ESP helicopter bead sits over this clip in order to reduce tangles.



I may be wrong but I think that longer hook-links only hook the fish when they move away from the bed of bait.

There's no such thing as a perfect rig for all situations, but this helicopter adaptation is my first choice on most waters.

It's a little fiddly to tie but gets easier with practice and the time spent tying it will be rewarded in fish captures. I store ready-made rigs in a matchman style hook wallet.

My aim is to create a trap that is effectively sprung loaded with a 2oz feeder that is only just holding bottom, a super tight line and heavy indicators (I use Solar Quiverloks). Super sensitive bite alarms like Delkims complete the job.

A fish that picks up my hook-bait and pulls the line even slightly will be hooked. It takes a little practise to know when you have set the line tight enough, but believe me, it's worth the effort. Any slackness will enable a fish to eject the hook. Too tight and the rig will spring back.

On a clean lakebed I like to set the beads close together in order to maximise the bolt effect, but in weedy or silty waters I will move the top bead as much as a foot away from the lower bead.

Some days the fish will home right in on the feeder so I'll set the hook-link close to the feeder. If the fish are really wary I'll set both beads as much as 18 inches away. If bites aren't forthcoming or start to tail off, try changing things.

In thick weed or over uneven bottoms I'll go for a more traditional running rig and slack line approach, so that the main line follows the contours more naturally. A suspended tight line is a great way to spook the fish!

As with any form of feeder fishing, accuracy is paramount. The more accurate you are with your casting, the sooner the fish will find your hook-bait and the more you'll catch.

Tackle For Tench

One of the great things about tench fishing is that the rods, reels and line I use for barbel fishing are perfectly suited to most situations. With the barbel boom in full flow it means there is a wider choice available than ever before.



Above: Place the knot behind the clip. I really like the accuracy afforded by using the line clip on your reel. I prefer to use a small length of pole elastic, tied using a three-turn water knot, as this doesn't impede casting or damage the main line

I use my Daiwa Infinity 1.75lb test curve barbel rods for large tench or where I might need to cast a long way to reach the fish. I'll couple this with 10lb Infinity main line. With this set-up I can fish at a range of over 80 yards or so, but to be fair, I prefer to fish as close in as I can, as this really helps with accuracy.

When smaller fish are on the cards and the risk of snagging is low, I'll use my 1.5lb test curve Twilight Specialists and 6lb Sensor main line.

This latter set-up is ideal for the majority of float fishing situations. I match both rods with Daiwa Caldia reels which have a wonderfully smooth drag, but most modern reels are up to the task.

I'd be lost without my marker rod and spod gear.

The importance of trying to find a suitable spot where the tench might patrol and feed can often mean the difference between multiple catches and returning home biteless, so I see time spent using a marker float as time wisely invested.

Spodding is a pivotal part of modern tench fishing and a purpose-designed rod and reel will make lighter work of the task and give you the freedom to bait accurately at greater range. **CF**

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