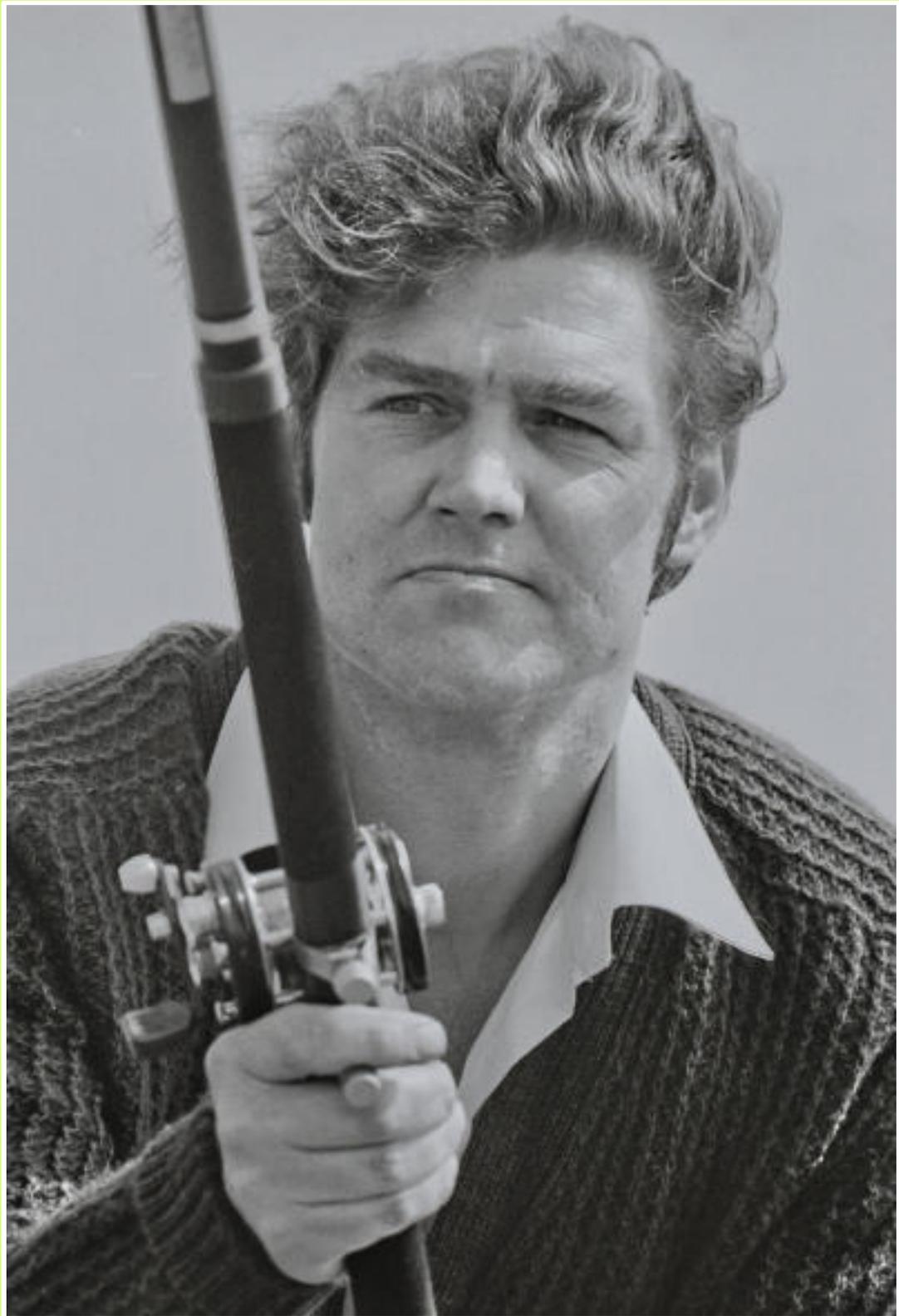


The Story of Breakaway Tackle

And memories of Nigel Forrest, a friend and partner for over 40 years



by Norman Bickers

The Story of Breakaway Tackle

I was 23 when I opened my little tackle shop on 1st January 1968 on the corner of Bramford Road and Chevalier Street in Ipswich. Actually, to call it a tackle shop is a bit of an exaggeration because I purchased the whole contents of my opening stock with the £50 I had left over from my wedding to Sandie. A local wholesaler did give me £50 worth of credit, but even in those days £100 worth of fishing tackle didn't look much in a shop.

I am not good with dates, but for the past 45 years Sandie has reminded me that Xmas and our honeymoon were spent pricing up fishing tackle - we were married on the 23rd December 1967. In those days the range of available tackle was very small. Bait was the most important item that brought people in the shop. I had started as a bait digger and before I was married my long suffering parents and sister sold the lugworm from home. After I married and opened the shop, I thought my wife could work there and I would continue to dig bait every day. All good business plans can easily be derailed with the birth of your first child. Sandie didn't have an easy pregnancy and didn't really fancy sticking her hands in tins of maggots to get the neat ones at the bottom of the tin, as she was often requested to do.

Nigel Forrest

Nigel at this time was a factory foreman at Manganese Bronze in Ipswich. An all round sportsman, he had been a very good boxer and Eastern Counties champion at schoolboy level a number of times. His main passion was rugby. He used to play in the YM team who were exceptionally good. But as a former Ipswich School boy this was against the tradition because most Ipswich boys went to the Ipswich club. He had been asked on a number of occasions to switch, but he said that the team was selected from the ones who purchased the most alcohol, not on ability. It was more of an old boys' drinking club than a true rugby club.

As with most committed rugby players, injuries took a toll on Nigel who had just married Rosemary. Training whilst working night shifts didn't really fit in, so the rugby was discarded.

Many sportsmen find life hard after the commitment of weekly participation, and I think Nigel was the same. What could he do to occupy his competitive mind without putting his body through the exertions of a contact sport?

Manganese Bronze at this time was a major employer in the town and held fishing matches. Nigel thought he would go fishing with the boys. At this time a quality rod was made from solid glass-fibre. Only a few hollow glass rods were available to those who could afford them. Most anglers still used Burma poles and centre pin reels. Intrepid reels had just been launched, including the mighty Seastreak multiplier and a chunky fixed spool reel for sea anglers.

My first contact with Nigel was through his friend Albert who came into my shop and asked if I had in stock an ABU 484 beach rod. I was dumbstruck. This rod retailed at about £60, and considering I was selling lugworm at 45

pence a hundred this was unheard of. To make matters worse they wanted two of them.

Like the good businessman I am, I tried to put them off. Why on earth do you want to waste your money on such expensive, newly launched rods that have not really been tested? Really, I didn't want to tell them that I couldn't afford to purchase two 484s, especially as when the rods arrived they might not even like them. This could be two weeks' takings down the drain - and most of my stock would have been converted into two fishing rods.

"Don't worry," Albert said. "We will pay up front." The rods were ordered and duly arrived. They were nothing like any fishing rod I had seen. The tip was fine even by today's standards. The two sections were joined by a screw-down metal ferrule. The whippings were black and gold with gold metallic tape. The aluminium butt was nigh impossible to flex, and the whole rod weighed more than 4lb. But in our eyes it looked like a Rolls Royce.

Albert often popped into the shop, but at this point I don't think I had met Nigel. In those days he was a very shy and quiet person who would never engage in conversation unless extremely important.

Albert was amazed at what Nigel had done with this rod. I remember him telling me that he had invented a whole new casting technique. The distances he was achieving were impossible to believe. The average fisherman would cast about 70 yards, and here was Albert telling me that Nigel would soon be the first angler to break the 200yd barrier. And this was with a rod that he had purchased from my humble fishing tackle shop.



Nigel had permission to use his old school playing field to practise on, and the cast he invented was the pendulum cast now used by anglers around the world. The mechanics of the cast are still the same today, and necessary to compress this brute of a rod to get the maximum distance.

Most anglers use rods that are far too powerful for their ability, and this was certainly the case with the 484. Any angler could bend the tip of the rod, but true distance came from feeling the aluminium butt flexing between your hands.

Early photos show Nigel bending this unyielding butt like a banana at the point of release. The build up was slow. The power came from using the right hand as a boxer does, by punching from the shoulder (you would never knock anyone out with a sideways slap) and at the same time pulling down hard with the left hand.

As expected Nigel took the casting scene by storm. Not only was he the first person to cast over 200 yards in a tournament. He was also the first person to cast over 250 yards in a tournament. He held many records some of which he still holds today. In those days competitors had three casts using 2oz leads, three casts using 4oz and three with 6oz. Then there would be a level line event (no shock leader). Just as you mastered one event, it was all change. The courts would be set up the night before and it wouldn't matter if you had a gale in your face on tournament day - it would be the same for everyone. Tournaments were held all over the country. Nigel made many friends on the casting field. He was always determined to be the best, and this determination stayed with him throughout his life.

How we met Ian Gillespie

Ian Gillespie at this time was a local school teacher. Many people tell me to this day that he was a passionate teacher who made learning fun. They still talk about his fishing club where his favourite trick was to get a lad to hold a fishing line while Ian ran 100 yards down a field holding a hook in his hand. "When I shout, strike as if I am a fish and drive this hook into my hand." These kids couldn't believe their luck. They might even inflict some pain into their teacher. But try as they might, because of the stretch on mono line over 100 yards, the hook would not move. This is why I seldom strike to this day except in a moment of panic

Ian was a regular contributor to the angling press and many of his articles are still available today. His main passion was to make angling an enjoyable sport, not just a means to put food on the table. He wrote an article that highlighted the problems of lead weights. At this time, the spikes on the lead were of heavy brass wire, or welding rod in some cases. To get a lead back to the beach needed a lot of effort and heavy line. No 12-15lb line would be any good. And because of the lead's dragging on the seabed you would not know if you had caught anything until the rig came out of the water. Sporting fishing was not an option, and very seldom did you feel the pull of a fish.

Ian also campaigned to produce a rod that weighed less than a pound, which he called the Bare Bones. He was critical of the 484 which had become very popular on the back of Nigel's exploits. But as today, most anglers thought that by buying the most expensive rod available they would all be casting 200 yards without putting in the days and weeks of practice that Nigel had. The 484 was the most exchanged rod ever produced.

Following Ian's article, a few ideas were sent in including one where the wires were detached from the lead on the strike and trailed behind on a length of nylon. The wires plugged back into a hole in the nose of the lead for the next cast. This was the best idea until Nigel came into my shop asking

how to get in touch with Ian. Nigel had come up with something better.

Ian's uncle worked at a garage near my shop and they often popped in to buy bait or just to talk fishing. To me, Ian was a celebrity and an author who had written books and articles about fishing. He wrote in the local paper and later did television and local radio. Who can remember the Golden Maggot, a race to catch as many species of fish as possible in 24 hours? Not a television programme for the purist angler, but great entertainment for the masses.

A meeting was arranged and Nigel produced this lead with revolving wires held onto the body with protrusions that were grooved to keep the wires in place. It was obvious from the outset that this would work, but off to the beach they went to test it. This was a Eureka moment. The lead held in the tide, but on the strike the wires collapsed. Ian said. "It's like pulling in a line with no weight - you can even feel a whiting on the other end."

The original Breakaway lead

Problem was, the protrusions would wear off after a few retrieves. That idea was dropped but another meeting was soon arranged after Nigel had made some modifications. Instead of lumps sticking out from the lead's body, holes were introduced so that beads on the grip wires could locate into the the



sides of the lead. Tension and grip could be increased by nipping the wires together,

This was a major breakthrough and remains the principle of Breakaway leads produced to this day. Nobody realised what impact this invention would have on the world of angling. Nobody foresaw that these leads would end up in anglers' tackle boxes around the world.

As with any good invention the first thing you must do is to apply for a patent. Until your priority date is accepted by the Patent Office, everything has to be kept secret. It's not easy to keep such an important invention to yourselves, but we had to. Once we had received confirmation we could then let everyone know. Ian's writing skills and his association with magazines were very important. Nigel's

contacts at work were also invaluable - most of the night shift were engaged in making moulds. First one at a time, and eventually ten at once.

It's all very well having good inventions, but it's just as important to manufacture at a cost that the market will accept and to keep up with

demand. The lead was offered to some tackle companies but none would take it up. The excuse given was that most tackle dealers made their own leads and wouldn't stock ours. Besides, the cost of sending lead weights around would also make them more expensive than those produced in a back shed in the winter by tackle dealers.

No one foresaw the major steps forward that angling in general would experience in the next few years. In my tackle shop back then I would have a few brass paternosters, some nice brass bells, and Kilmore and Clements booms with porcelain eyes that would soon break and fall out. The most popular hook was the beak hook that Ian despised. Any poor non-suspecting angler buying these would get his lecture. Ian would take a hook from the packet of ten and just snap it in his fingers, So most fishermen would end up with nine hooks if they insisted on buying them.

We move to 376 Bramford Road

But match fishing, sea and coarse, was beginning to take off big time. Ardleigh reservoir was opening as a trout fishery. Fishing was on the move, and I felt the time had come to leave my small rented corner shop and purchase my own much larger shop at 376 Bramford Road, Ipswich where we remain to this day.

For a self employed bait digger and tackle shop owner, obtaining a mortgage for £4300 to buy the Doggie in the Window pet shop was as impossible then as it is to borrow £200,000 these days. The bank didn't want to know. No mortgage company would lend the money because this was a business venture, not purely a home. Eventually some unheard of London mortgage broker lent me the money and the move took place, much to the wife's joy.

The living premises were twice as big, with a good size garden. The shop was much bigger, with many out buildings that were put to good use making the first Breakaway leads over a small gas ring. The first leads were moulded by anyone with a bit of time after work. Nigel would come in, or one of the many bait diggers who worked for me at that time would mould a few. These would then be taken home and the wires put in one at a time. Demand soon began to increase. My job was to take orders then pack and despatch them. All orders were payment up front, so as we sold some Breakaways we would get more lead and mould some more. Demand kept growing until we needed someone to pour lead all the time.

Nigel, who wasn't really enjoying life at work, took the decision to give up the security of his job and pension to work full time making leads. I think at that stage it was a risk. Although we had a patent we didn't know if the lead would stand the test of time. At least we would be able to increase production and satisfy the increasing demand. But as demand and production increased, the shop trade also grew.

Before long my bait digging days were all but over. We purchased bait from anyone who wanted to dig. Many diggers such as John, Doug, Pete and Chris

worked full time. Others worked weekends. A normal Saturday saw us counting and selling over 20,000 worms. When times were bad and we couldn't get enough diggers, I would go with them to get the numbers. On a good day I could dig 1500-2000 worms on a tide, and no one could dig more than I could. Even today at 68 there is nothing I enjoy more than a day's bait digging.

Breakaway Tackle Development Company

We now had two successful businesses: the Breakaway lead and the tackle shop. Nigel would make leads and I ran the shop, but at times one would be very busy whilst the other had nothing to do. It made sense to combine the two. In 1974, The Breakaway Tackle Development Company was formed with Nigel, Ian and myself as equal partners.

One of the first products after the Breakaway lead was a device called a Thumbbutton, a simple type of casting trigger that held the line from a fixed spool reel so that the caster would not cut his finger on the power stroke. A similar design is still available to day, but the early models were made with our own plastic injection moulding machine. Ian would melt plastic granules and any other bits of plastic and produce Thumbbuttons in my kitchen. Nobody knew what colour the next one would be.

Lead sales were still increasing, and Nigel's heart wasn't really in the lead production side. He felt that he would be more useful helping in the shop and developing new items of tackle, so we gave the job of making leads to John who quickly increased production by working longer hours on a piecework basis. He would also take the leads out to people who finished them at home.

Production then was about 5000 per week, but soon this wasn't enough. Using his engineering skills, Nigel and some of his mates from Manganese looked at ways to increase production. Out went the four-at-a-time moulds. In came the ten-at-once moulds. Lead was melted in larger quantities, and production went to 2000 per day, sometimes for six days a week. But the leads still had to go to outworkers for finishing.

The first leads had an oversized wire moulded in, which was pulled out to leave holes through the lead. Half-formed grip wires with a bead on one side were passed through the hole. Another bead was put on the other side, then the wire was bent with pliers to complete the lead. Each lead needed two wires, so this was a time consuming job which made your fingers sore. Nigel then designed a lead with open ends so the wire could be machine-formed complete. With the wires in place, the open ends were sealed by air pressure. The novel design enabled us to get another patent. This new process was much quicker and enabled us to keep up with the demand once again,

Match fishing was growing more and more popular. The next invention had a great deal to do with this side of angling. The Felixstowe Festival was the largest match on our part of the coast. In those days the event was pegged for 400 fishermen, and some would not get a ticket. Ian had convinced Nigel that he was going to win this year as he had an ace up his sleeve. All was

secret beforehand, but on the day of the match Ian unleashed his secret weapon. In a tobacco tin he had some clear plastic that would dissolve in water. We looked at it with incredulity.

We all knew plastic didn't dissolve in water, but this was a special type. Ian's idea was to wrap his bait and hook in plastic, and tie it all down to make it streamlined. He realised that locking his bait down would make it more streamlined and so cast farther. And the bait would end up in a better condition on the sea bed. How could he fail to win?

After the match we went straight up to Ian. Had he won? "Well," he said, "all was good on the first cast. It went out like a dream. Next cast, all I had left was a sticky mess in the bottom of my tin." Nobody had told him it was raining.

Nigel's streamlined rigs

But this was the start of the next chapter in the development of streamlined beach fishing rigs that Nigel designed, based on the simple idea that if the bait did not cartwheel around and tangle in flight we would cast farther and catch more fish. Thus the cascade rig and bait clips were invented.

At this time we employed Sandie and Linda in the workshop behind the shop, to finish the leads. Doug Titshall, a former bait digger, was helping me out in the retail shop, and John Holden (not the famous caster and writer) was pouring the leads. George worked part time packing and sending out the leads. Neville was running a van service to retail shops around the coast. We had included a few other items of tackle that we had swapped with wholesalers who then sold our leads in other parts of the country. Added to our range were plain leads, egg leads, extra leads, plastic adaptors and the Thumbrake, a spool locking device for multiplier reels. The device worked very well until manufacturers changed to solid reel cages instead of crossbars.

The van service was good for delivering new items into shops quickly. Most tackle shop owners were very keen to stock the latest Breakaway products. At that time most seaside towns had at least one tackle shop, often several. But as with most trades and industries, times were changing. Fish were becoming harder to find due to overfishing and bad breeding years. Then there were all the household products that are poured into our seas every day of the week. Chemicals that kill all household germs cannot do fish fry or eggs any good.

Bait prices were rising alarmingly and match attendances were falling. Add the odd recession, and it was obvious that the UK sea tackle trade was in decline. We have been very lucky over the years because as our own market shrank, more and more other countries around the world needed our products. Shipping was never a major problem.

Other changes were taking place within the trade. Specimen lakes with large carp were becoming a major market. "Paint it camouflage and double the price," was the new motto. The number of gizmos and products that hit the

tackle shops was unprecedented. Fortunately, to this day the average carp is two steps ahead of the angler. Some are never fooled even if you fish over a silt lake bottom with silt coloured line, silt coloured hooks and silt coloured rigs. Surround your rig with a hundred boilies, and next day the only one left is the one with your hook in.

With the lead production sorted, Nigel turned his attention to his rig technology. As fishing became harder, the need to cast farther with better bait presentation became more important. Matches were being won with single fish, which often fell to the angler who put his bait out the farthest.

The Relay Clip is born

The first product at this stage was the relay clip that slid on to the rig body with a small piece of rubber. It acted as a bait clip and also as a relay system, Nigel invented the relay system that is now universally used and accepted. By adding a swivel to the relay clip it was possible to have three baited hooks clipped down for casting. When the rig hit the water, the clips slid up the rig and released the baited hooks.

The relay clip was quickly accepted and used in many rig designs. Even today it still sells in thousands. Once we had the relay clip, we produced pivot booms, beads and a simple clip that would lock down and be released with the relay clip. All this time Nigel was searching for the perfect master release. Rigs had become much more streamlined, miles away from the old running ledger rigs, but Nigel was never content. "That will do" or "that is good enough" were never in his vocabulary. A Breakaway product may have started life on the back of a fag packet, but many, many drawings would be made and prototypes would be lovingly made from aluminium or plastic. Some would take weeks, some took months. And sometimes after months of work another thought, or a way to improve the product, would cross Nigel's mind... and the process would start again.

All the years we have been producing tackle, one company has made every item and helped us all the way: Mike and Colin from Mumford Engineering in Clacton, Essex. They have worked tirelessly and often under extreme pressure to help make Breakaway what it is today. Without them it wouldn't have worked. Yes, if we had had engineering drawings we could have gone to China, but Nigel would change his design many times before completion. Every item had to meet his precise demands. As I said, that will do or that is good enough were not words he knew.

Ian Gillespie passes away

At about this time, 1980, we learned of the sudden death of Ian Gillespie. Ian was an amazing person who was passionate about angling in any form but a very forward-thinking angler. True, he was extremely disorganised, and if anyone would miss the boat over to Orford it would be Ian. My lasting impression of Ian was on a boat to Orford. His friend Bill Roberts from Southend had just sent him a new rod blank to try out for his Bare Bones

project. Ian arrived on the quay in his slippers, rod blank in hand, and proceeded to put on the rings as we crossed the river. By the time we landed he had a fishing rod. This was typical Ian.

My wife still has her memories of her first meeting with Ian. I told her that I had invited an important journalist round to the house. The door bell rang and there stood Ian with his baggy jumper down to his knees. It had odd designer holes all over the place. Could have been moths, but as I said Ian was way ahead of his time so it could have been a fashion icon.

We as a company missed Ian because he was our mouth-piece. He could stand in front of a hundred people and grab their attention. He was a passionate speaker and could talk for ever - something Nigel and I have never been able to do.

Nigel was very proud to win the EMAP invention of the century with the Breakaway lead, but if this was the Number One invention, the next product to hit the world of angling was a close second: enter the Impact Shield, or as some called them magic mushrooms. These were indeed magic to most anglers. At last, a master release you could rely on to work one hundred per cent. No more pulling in your rig to discover that the hook was still clipped up.

Impact Shields and more rig components arrive

As with most good inventions the Impact Shield was a simple device held on to the rig body with a small piece of rubber to stop movement through the cast. On contact with the water, the Impact Shield would tip and release the baited hook. As with most new items, you can't wait to get to the beach to try them out. On this occasion we wondered if the shield would move enough to eject the bait. On the first cast we just put the shield onto the leader behind the lead without a stop and cast out to sea. When the lead was retrieved we found the shield had gone right up the shock leader and over the knot; we never realised how much movement there would be. This simple test made us realise the power of impact. We use this principle on many of our products.

Some items we didn't have to go to the beach to test. Nigel would drop prototype products into his water-butt. If it released after a fall of two feet, it passed the test. With the master release sorted and UK patents obtained, Nigel wanted to make the rest of the rig more streamlined without compromising safety, an aspect overlooked by some rig makers from across the seas.

Along came the cascade swivel: neat and small but strong enough to land any fish. We were not in the swivel market so we asked Dexter Products to make them for us and this they have done ever since.

Dave Brown becomes our shop manager

By now all-round angler Dave Brown had joined our shop staff. His helpfulness towards anglers old and new is invaluable. He always goes out of his way to help and advise. After Doug left to set up his own shop, Dave was made manager and has always run the shop exceptionally well. Any notices written by Dave are always worth a read. Now he has a computer, anglers around the world are learning new ways to spell.

Whilst working on the rig side of things, we started to produce other rig-making products such as beads and hooks. Hooks in the early days were pretty basic and normally hand-me-downs from the commercial fishing side. If you are using 15-30lb main line you don't need a hook that wouldn't break with a 500lb load. We needed hooks that would take little effort to penetrate 100yd away, with a small barb and small eye that you could push bait over. The first hooks we had made by Partridge of Redditch were the Spear-spade with an offset sharp spade that kept the worm up the hook shank, but these were not popular because few anglers had mastered tying spade end knots.

We introduced an eyed version which we called the Spearpoint hooks. Straight away these became very popular and are sought after today. Many anglers couldn't understand why we stopped making them. Partridge were one of the oldest hook makers in Redditch. Most of their hooks were hand made and finished. But this type of firm was unable to compete with automated hooks from China. When Partridge were taken over by Mustad and production moved to China, we dropped these hooks as we knew it wouldn't be long before identical hooks would be available under another brand.

Over the years we have had a great deal of success by producing and marketing our own products. Some of our biggest disappointments have come from items that Nigel developed which for whatever reason we thought another company could do a better job of making for us. Sometimes costs were the problem; other times we did not have the right contacts to get to the people that mattered. Too often the big tackle companies treat you like idiots and pass you around the Indians without ever meeting the Big White Chief.

Massive disappointment for Nigel

Without doubt the biggest disappointment, and most probably one of the worst management decision ever taken in the angling trade, was Nigel's fixed spool reel. During Nigel's casting days he quickly saw the shortcomings of the fixed spool reel. The spools were narrow and deep, and the line was laid on haphazardly. Beyond a hundred yards, spool lip friction imposed a lot of line drag. Casting was hard work and you could watch your lead die in the air. The answer was a long, shallow spool coupled with a superior, more criss-crossed, line-lay so that the coils would not dig into themselves even under pressure. The best reel makers at that time were Mitchell, a French company with a good reputation among British anglers. Barrie Welham, the

UK managing director, had watched Nigel's casting career blossom, and very much wanted him on board with Mitchell. In return Nigel was given any item of tackle he needed. He even went on an angling holiday to Mozambique - and not many anglers have been there. I think that in one week Nigel broke six rods. That's most probably why he was never asked again.

Using the basic Mitchell 386, Nigel welded the level-wind system of an Abu multiplier reel onto the shaft that held the spool of the fixed spool. He made the body longer, and in the casing he used the level-wind pick-up. He made the spool six inches long. The line-lay pattern covered the length of the spool. Even today, some spools are longer than the spool can travel back and forth, which leaves holes in the line pattern. Nigel's fixed spool even had a star drag. What a bonus that would be for today's carp anglers.

One of the first people to use this reel was my son Steven, whose distances immediately increased dramatically. We were so sure this would be a winner and the making of our company that we filed for a provisional patent of the line-lay system. The first people to see the reel were Mitchell as it had been constructed using Mitchell parts. Nigel took the reel down to Southampton to show Barrie Welham, who was impressed.

He was a distributor not a manufacturer, but he would take it to France and show it to head office. All good news so far. Surely there would be no way that Mitchell would reject Nigel's design? They were losing out to the big companies such as Daiwa and Shimano, yet this reel could put Mitchell back on the map big time. And with the patent they could have the whole reel market worldwide. This is what we expected. But we were wrong.

Mitchell decided that the sea reel market was too small to invest in a new reel. To say we were gob-smacked was an understatement. Perhaps we had picked the wrong company? Mitchell were losing their market so we thought we would go to Daiwa, a company that was on the up and producing more and more quality tackle for the British market. The man in charge of Daiwa at that time was John Loftus who seemed very interested in seeing the reel. Daiwa UK didn't make reels, but he would send it to China for their appraisal.

As is normal with these things a few months passed and no decision had been reached. Filing a patent gives you a year to get your product sorted. After the year is up, you have to pay for a full patent through a patent attorney. We didn't want to do this until we had a manufacturer on board, because they would want their own people involved to protect their investment. By now the year was up and Mr Loftus told us that Daiwa were not interested; this is after much pushing on our part because we didn't want the patent process to lapse.

When we eventually got the reel back we sent photos and articles to Sea Angler and many other publications. Nearly all of them ran full page spreads about the reel and sang its virtues loud and clear. We hoped someone would contact us and offer to produce the reel. All we wanted was a small royalty per reel, and we would have been happy.

Mr Loftus left Daiwa and went to Shimano. They soon brought out the first reel using what appeared to us to be a very similar principle to Nigel's. The majority of reels produced in the world now use this system of line lay - carp reels, match reels and sea reels. With patent protection, any company could have had the reel market in their hands. But nobody was able to get a patent, and as a result everyone can use the system. So perhaps Nigel did get the last laugh

Some people would say that it was tough luck. Those who knew Nigel would appreciate that it was much worse. Whatever Nigel did, he did to the best of his ability which was pretty substantial. He would leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of excellence. It wasn't just a case of making a reel that worked. Development might involve ten different drive shafts, each one turned on a lathe and hardened. Each would have a different level-wind spiral. On some the spool would go forward quickly and come back slowly. Some would have the spiral in the middle, some in the end. A different spool would be designed and machined for each shaft. In all, I reckon two years of work was just tossed away. This wasn't the only rejection, but it was the worst.

Yet another of Nigel's great ideas

Nigel always loved his cars. One of his first company cars was a custom Saab with lowered suspension, souped up performance, wide wheels and specially made walnut dashboard and trim. Under the bonnet was another invention that never saw the light of day. I personally have never experienced this, but they tell me that if you get up early in the morning you can get frost on the windscreen.

Nigel installed a reservoir in the windscreen washer pipe that he could heat up with a flick of a switch. In seconds this would give him a jet of warm water to defrost his screen. In the summer you could wash off the dead insects with hot water. The system was cheap and easy to make, and with Saab being in Sweden where they have lots of snow and ice, he thought it would be well received. The idea most probably never got beyond the Saab garage in Ipswich.

I don't want to make too much of the negatives so I will continue with the pluses. Mr Zanco who lives around Basildon and Southend pier has also helped us to produce anything made with wire. Italian by birth, Bert (we never did get his real first name but Bert is easy to spell and remember), can do remarkable things with a piece of wire. He made the first Fast-link and still today makes most of the tail wires for the Impact Lead, one at a time in his shed. He also makes our Coil Crimps. These are items most companies

said couldn't be made. Well done Bert - and thanks. We hope you keep catching those bass for years to come.

The Breakaway Backrest

Inventions often start with a problem that needs solving. Next came one of the best products that we make to this day. Walking back across Orford Island one day after fishing a little longer than he should, and scared of missing the boat, Nigel suddenly blacked out for a short time. He put this down to his heavy tackle box with a single strap around his neck. He thought the strap had cut off or restricted the airflow thus causing him to black out.

Why do we have a single strap when a harness type system would enable us to carry tackle boxes more comfortably? Thus the Breakaway Backrest was born. It was not a simple, cheap job. The backrest needs lots of moulds to produce, making it a major investment at the time but one of the best items we produce now.

After the backrest along came the tripod. With these larger products, the time had come to move out of the buildings behind the shop and into a warehouse at Gt Blakenham just outside Ipswich. Lead production and other larger items like tripods and backrests could be done there. And we could keep a better stock to cover the fluctuations in trade.

One of the best bonuses from the move was not having two tonnes of lead dumped on the shop forecourt each week. We had to barrow it through the shop to the workshop at the bottom of the garden, which meant the door being open and closed for some time - not good in the middle of the winter.

Most of the small plastic items we produce are packed at home by outworkers, mainly my daughter Hayley who started packing hooks at home when she was old enough to count to ten because I wouldn't give her any pocket money. She got one penny per packet. She is now 42 and still getting a penny a packet. Neville's wife Jane packs many products, a boring job but one they both enjoy. It would take a braver man than I to tell either of them that there's no work today.

Business continues to grow

Neville gave up the van service when trade from around Europe started to increase. We were sending leads out by the pallet load. It's very strange that the lead side of the business has remained constant over the 35 year period, despite recessions and shortages of fish. Yes, we now produce a bigger range. But there is more competition now and fewer anglers. Even so, to this day we still produce 10-12,000 leads per week, 51.5 weeks per year (we let them have two days off at Xmas).

The standard Breakaway lead had been a brilliant success but was beginning to date. Few products stand the test of time like this lead has, but times move

on and technology improves. So along came the Impact Lead which incorporates the advantages of the Impact Shield into the lead. Originally we had planned to drop the Breakaway lead and just make the Impact Lead as we felt most anglers would switch. But as the standard lead was just starting to sell in the USA we continued to produce it, and today we sell nearly as many Breakaways as Impact Leads.

Can you imagine the impact on this company if the European idiots had banned lead weights for use in the sea? At one time this was a real possibility and remains a threat today. Only this week, I had a phone call from a Dutch distributor about the subject.

I wrote an article about lead usage entitled: "The first cup of tea on a Monday morning tastes horrible because our water at the shop is delivered in lead pipes." And I thought, if it's good enough for me to drink I don't think the fish should be given the choice, especially as it's okay to wrap nuclear waste in lead and drop it into the world's oceans. To us the proposed lead ban was a major shock. I likened it to Ford being told that as from next week we are banning the sale of petrol.

The first non-toxic sea weight

This didn't deter Nigel. It gave him the impetus he needed to create the world's first non-toxic wired sea weight (hard not to call it a lead). We had to design and produce a weight that could be injection moulded to make a zinc body with no moving parts. The wires and clips would have to be added later. This little enterprise cost us nearly £30,000. On completion, we found out that the European Union had decided not to impose a lead ban yet, though it remains a possibility. But when they do we will be ready. We would almost certainly go to the Ultra System and make a simple zinc body. Something else may materialise in the future.

We have never really liked doing shows and have never been good at promoting our company or ourselves, but we did do the National Angling Show at the NEC a couple of times. Neville had the misfortune of sharing a room with Nigel. This was the first time he had ever stayed in a five star hotel. He spent most of the night trying to get to sleep in the bath as Nigel snored so loudly that sleep was impossible. Every time Nigel started to snore, Neville clapped his hands to wake him up, but Nigel thought he was being applauded and promptly fell asleep again and snored even louder.

As I said earlier, Nigel was an all round sportsman who enjoyed competition and winning. But match fishing is a strange sport because the best anglers don't always win. If you are a Grand Prix driver and you have the fastest car and you are the best driver, you expect to win. If you are the quickest runner over 100yd you expect to win. Match fishing has never been like that. Years ago Nigel would outcast anyone on the beach. He would have the best bait and tackle, yet still be beaten by an angler on the next peg using all the

products Nigel had invented. He felt there was no justice in the world of angling.

Nigel did win many matches including most of the big local events fished by 200-400 other anglers. The biggest problem around here was there were not enough matches, so Nigel, Sandy Powell, Bill Crocker and Mick Buttery started the East Anglian Sea League run over five matches on a points basis. Thirty-five teams of five started the league which was run with military



precision by Bill and Sandy. I think they would have brought back hanging for not putting your name on your match card. This project put a lot more people on the beaches, and Nigel's team won the league a number of times and fished the national finals around the country.

Nigel was popular on the beaches, and because he was well known other anglers wanted to talk to him or just watch him when he was fishing. I think it was the final straw when his rod bent over with a good fish. He leapt out of his Beach Buddy on the Felixstowe prom and tripped over someone who was talking to him. He fell on his back and his line broke. He was second that day, losing by seven ounces... and he never fished again.

After he gave up fishing he took up shooting, not just on a casual basis to pass the time away. He was determined to be the best once again, and spent hours and hours clay pigeon shooting. He spent even longer working on the butt of his gun than he ever did shooting it. Every day for weeks on end the gun would be rubbed down and oiled. Next day the same. This went on for months until on day I remarked that the butt looked more like plastic than wood. Catastrophe struck: the burr walnut had developed a hairline crack. So it was a new wooden rough butt and another 6 months of oil and polish. That gun saw more man hours of effort than they took to reach Mars.

Whilst I am on the gun subject, another invention that was a disappointment was his laser sight. To check the accuracy of a gun and to set up the sights you would normally fire a round at a large piece of board to see if the gun was true to your aim. This was time-consuming and not very practicable so Nigel made a laser device that fitted into the gun barrel. When you pressed the trigger a beam of light hit the target. The spot of light showed straight away if your aim was true. These were produced and sold and offered to gun companies. None took it up at the time but now they are widely available - without any recognition to Nigel.

I hope this story has given you an insight into our company and its workings. Forty years have flown by and I have enjoyed every minute. As the last man standing, I needed to get as much on paper as I could so all will not be forgotten. Next time you pick up a Breakaway lead, think of Nigel.

I am sure you will.

Norman Bickers



Nigel Forrest, a friend and business partner for over 40 years, passed away suddenly on 29th October 2011.