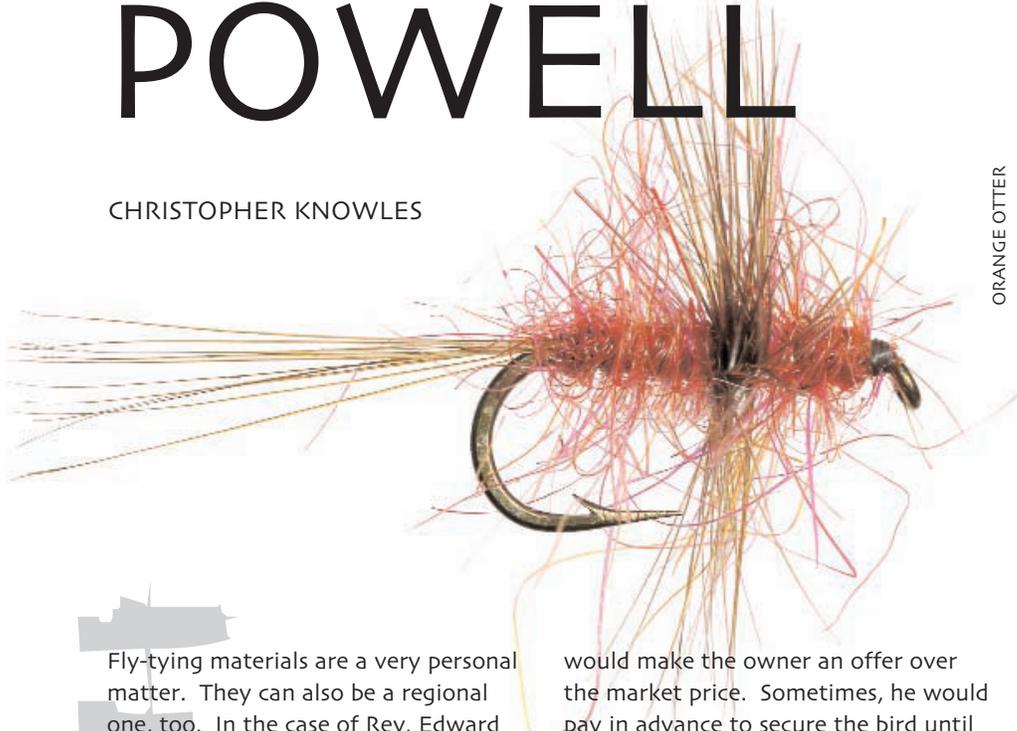


REV. EDWARD POWELL

CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES



ORANGE OTTER

Fly-tying materials are a very personal matter. They can also be a regional one, too. In the case of Rev. Edward Powell, they were both. The Shropshire-Welsh Borders on which his parish of Munslow lay were not only full of sheep, but also chickens; the fields of Salop were the breeding grounds of rabbits, and the rivers home to otters. He had practically all he needed on his doorstep: wool and rabbit fur for bodies, domestic fowl for hackles. As to otter, we'll see about that later on.

Powell described himself as "feather-brained". He could not pass a field of chickens without eyeing their upholstery. If the feathers were right, he

would make the owner an offer over the market price. Sometimes, he would pay in advance to secure the bird until it came of the right age to produce the best feathers. He also kept his own flock in his large rectory garden and plucked them periodically, allowing their feathers to grow back again for the next harvest, very much in the manner of the French poultry breeders round Corrèze to this day. Why waste a good bird? Powell would also go off to Woods, the poulterers at nearby Craven Arms, especially towards Christmas when they had the largest stock of the year. He must have had something of a conscience about this activity, because he used to turn up his coat lapels to hide his dog-collar before

going into the back room to sift painstakingly through the rows of birds. Why, you might ask, did he go to all this trouble? Because he was meticulous in his choice of feathers and because the fly-tying dealers at that time did not supply whole capes, as there was not enough money in them. You could get a wallet of feathers, arranged in rows according to size, but this did not offer him enough control over quality, colour or size. A good bird was a thing to be prized. One Christmas, his brother Tom gave him an Andalusian cock (blue dun) reared by Mrs. Farrington, a gift of such importance that it was noted both by Powell in his diaries and by Tom in his book *Here and There a Lusty Trout*.

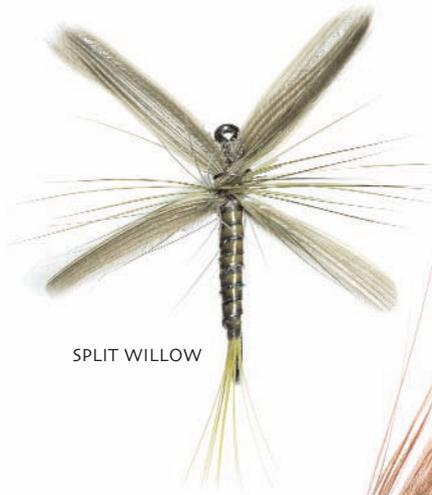
His experience of rearing birds led him to enter into a correspondence with other feather-buffs. One such was Major Jack Evans who bred gamecocks at his home near Brecon on the Usk. Evans, who also corresponded extensively with Skues on the subject, was an uncompromising judge of any feathers submitted to him. He was appreciative of Powell's Andalusians, but observed that the blue was "weak" and that the list down the sides was too prominent. The colour that made Powell go weak at the knees and trout rise from the depths was a bluish-red, a shade which Baigent also valued. If Powell could not get feathers of the right quality in this hue, he would wind a light red through a blue to achieve it rather than go without.

Another feather he went to great lengths to obtain in the right quality

was the coch-y-bonddu, literally red with a black base - a search which assumed the importance of the quest for the Holy Grail. His own definition ran thus: a cock's feather (for it never occurs among hens) which has a black centre and fringe with a deep red insertion on either side between them. The red should be almost equally deep in the reverse side and on the upper surface. Many would-be coch-y-bonddhu (his spelling) hackles are much lighter underneath than on the top. The genuine article, he opined in true parsonic fashion, was worth "a price above rubies", for he suspected that a good one was actually a freak - though characterised by a pretty strong strain of Indian game - and could not be bred to order. This definition is the modern one given by Frank Elder in *The Book of the Hackle*: the coch-y-bonddu is black/red/black, the furnace hackle black/red only. It is the black fringes (i.e. black tips on the barbs) which make the coch-y-bonddu so distinctive and such a serviceable feather for hackles, being suggestive of an insect's legs. Time was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the names furnace and coch-y-bonddu were thought by some to be interchangeable. Indeed, Halford said as much in print. But Wales (especially in the North) and the Border country, where coch-y-bonddu hackles were appreciated, knew better.

As for body material, you might be forgiven for thinking that rabbit was not something to write home about.





SPLIT WILLOW

COCH-Y-BONDDU



FURNACE



RUSTY DUN



HONEY DUN



PINK PARAGON

MODEL PERFECT HOOK
WITH TAPERED EYE CIRCA 1940



ERMINE MOTH



HONEY DUN
OLD ENGLISH GAME COCK CAPE

However, it was the part of the rabbit that was unusual in Powell's case. He found that the face, especially the triangle defined by the mouth and the eyes, suited his purpose, because its fur was particularly sharp and springy, and it contained not just the blue underfur and black top fur, but also brown. Therefore it offered three colours in one place and three colours which blended well for fly-tying. Wool was readily available in its raw state in the fields and in domestic form in his wife's sewing box. But the material most closely associated with his name is otter, as used in his famous Orange Otter, an outstanding trout and grayling fly to this day. It is true that there were otters roaming his home water, the Corve, and there was a pack of otter hounds which hunted them periodically, but, according to Powell's son Michael, now in his eighties, his father's otter fur was not sourced in nature, but from Messeen's, the famous dealers who for many years had their shop in their East End, until the Blitz forced them to a more peaceful location in Leamington Spa.

The Powell patterns are simple creations of silk, fur and feather. They require no special tying techniques or great dexterity. The skill – and the difficulty for the modern fly-tyer – is in the selection of materials of the highest quality and the right colour. Powell was a colourist and spent a considerable time experimenting with different combinations of hackles and furs, and various dyes. The Orange Otter is prime example of the lengths to which

he would go to achieve the desired effect. The pattern started out life as a representation of a Soldier Beetle, but he eventually realised that it was an outstanding general pattern in late Summer and early Autumn. The body consists of two blobs of otter divided by a central hackle. The fur comes from a small patch of pale biscuity colour on the otter's neck, which is dyed in Picric Acid overnight to turn it yellow and then boiled in the same solution + Stephen's red ink + water to turn it into an orange-brown. The hackle is a red cock, wound on as many as ten times to aid buoyancy. A blend of seal's fur is an acceptable modern substitute to the fish, although Powell himself was adamant that nothing but otter would do.

Contrary to popular belief and practice, Powell often used hen hackles for dry flies, particularly when imitating sedges, as he held that the softer, hairier barbs were better suited to represent the legs of the naturals. In order to achieve floatation, he would mix a Rhode Island Red hen hackle with an Andalusian cock, which provided his beloved bluish-red shade. The Pink Paragon, a variant of his own modification of his mentor Dai Lewis' Paragon, used this hackle combination, which was matched by a body of fur from the back of a fox's neck, sometimes with the addition of his favourite fur from the rabbit's face. He also added whisks for better floatation, claiming that the fish did not seem to mind these unnatural appendages – they don't! Like most of Powell's patterns and unlike

most of Halford's, the hackle is very bushy to make it visible to the fish in the boisterous border waters and to keep it afloat. Powell would have anointed it thoroughly in paraffin, and I often wonder whether the name Pink Paragon is not a pun on pink paraffin, a fuel on which the Powell household depended for heating, cooking and lighting in their Georgian rectory. Another fly with a punning title is his Split Willow, a small stone fly representation which makes one think of cricket bats and the song that Ko-Ko sings (Tit Willow) in Gilbert and Sullivan's opera The Mikado. It is also one of the few Powell patterns which incorporates wings, a bunch of thrush primaries rolled and split to suggest the needle-like proportions of the natural. Powell was an imitative tyer and, as such, was always rather frustrated when an artificial he had devised to imitate one insect was evidently taken by the fish for another. He noted with disappointment that his Split Willow caught well during a hatch of Dark Spring Olives. Such is a fisherman's life! The use of stripped peacock herl (dyed in picric acid) for the body is also unusual for a Powell pattern, although it does represent perfectly the slender shape of the natural. Again a whisk was added for buoyancy - of olive cock or a minute tag of yellow wool to suggest an egg sack.

Anything which gave Powell extra fishing time was to be welcomed and he valued his Ermine Moth, not least because it showed up in the water after

dusk, adding a good half-an-hour to his day. Designed to imitate the many white moths that come out on summer evenings, this pattern was also prone to being taken by trout during the day after the mayfly fest - as Powell described it in his characteristically high-flown language, a pick-me-up for dyspeptic farios. Its black and white appearance led James Evans to call it a liquorice allsort. White rabbit fur ribbed with black wool, a generous partridge hackle and an all-important tag of orange wool, the colour of the flesh of an orange, not the rind, make this a first-class fly on rivers and stillwaters. I tend to replace the wool rib with black horsehair to increase durability. Powell's pet theory on the attraction of an orange tag dated back to the time he was pondering the question of beetle imitations and hit upon the idea that, while the outside of the beetle is black, its innards are precisely this pale orange. To his mind, this explained why an orange tag was more attractive to trout than a red one. That rather debatable conclusion resulted in his Squashed Beetle pattern, which in turn spawned a number of patterns with orange tags.

When trying to re-create the Powell patterns, the fly-dresser of the twenty-first century is faced with a number of major problems. Many materials Powell used regularly are no longer available, either because they are now illegal and/or because they are extremely hard to source. But it is not just the software that causes problems.



The ironmongery has disappeared, too. Very few hooks are marketed in odd-numbered sizes and the Model Perfects that came nearest to Powell's ideal are now made by one Redditch maker only. And who will take up the baton, when that maker goes to his own? As far as I am aware, it is now impossible to obtain the MP hooks in the long shank form that Powell often specified.

Therefore, compromises have to be made and substitutes found. Fortunately, rabbit is not hard to come by, and a whole skin, including face and paws, is the best bet for all the colours and textures Powell recommends. I have got round the problem of red hen hackles, by choosing the webbie feathers from an Indian cock cape, and it has to be said that the Pink Paragon is no less effective. The coch-y-bonddu is a much bigger headache. The true feather, from a male bird, is extremely fine, glossy and brilliant, and is not matched by the dingy so-called cybd which come from Indian hen capes. Although I have not tried it and it sounds sacreligious, I imagine that you could achieve the same effect by lightly brushing the tips of the barbs of a first-class cock furnace hackle with a black permanent marker pen. Otherwise, the auction room is the only place to find them. Michael Powell kindly gave me some honey-dun hackles from the family archives and they indicate the general quality of hackle that his father was constantly looking for. Modern genetic capes look very contrived beside them. The nearest I have seen in quality and

brilliance are the French Coqs du Limousin, but these are a subtle brownish blue-dun with an almost golden sheen, not unlike the rare and most highly prized rusty dun, and, although they are of the right quality, they are not the right colour match. As indicated above, MP hooks are still manufactured by Sprite of Redditch (they are wonderfully delicate dry-fly hooks), and it is possible to find longshank hooks which are reasonably fine in the wire, though they are often designated for nymph or mayfly use and are therefore not quite as fine as one would like.

But, although Powell was dogmatic and uncompromising about his own tyings, his patterns, dressed with substitute materials, are wonderful fish-catchers and remind us of the simple effectiveness of fur and feather in an age in which fly-dressers turn increasingly to synthetics.

Chris Knowles' book on Rev. Edward Powell, titled, *Orange Otter* will be published in October by Medlar Press. Chris also offers a talk on the same subject to FDG Branches.

