

## *Prizes - and Surprises*

Timothy Benn

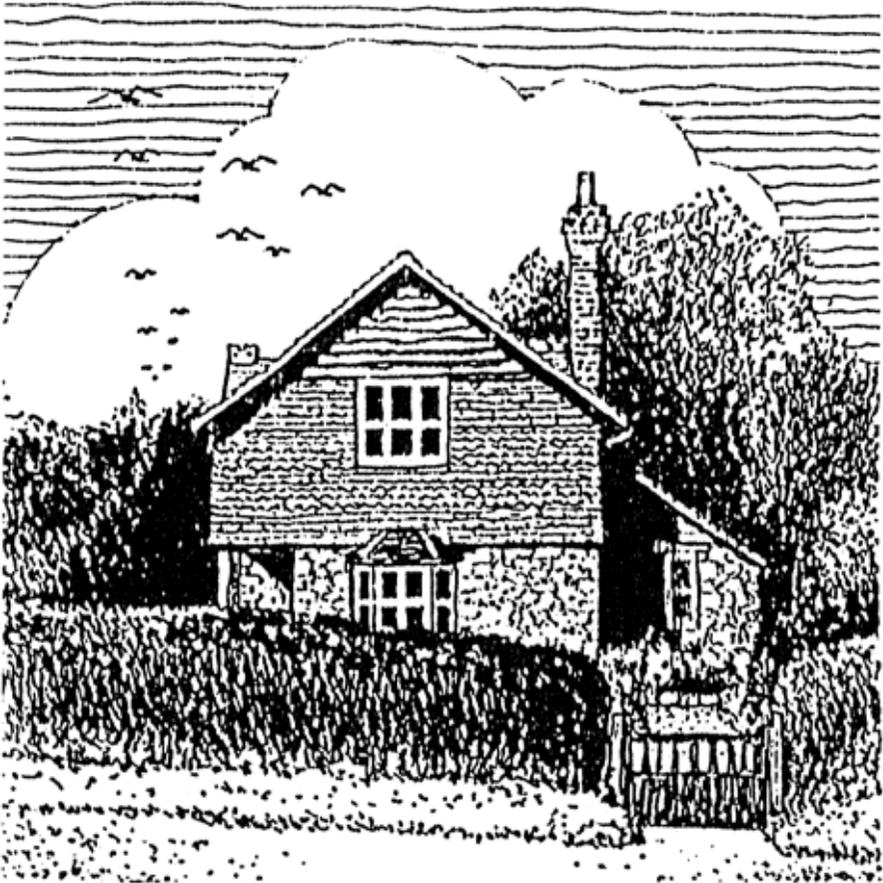
Donald Downs was a most exacting fly tying competition judge. No-one had a better understanding of the mechanics of tying any fly, making him a master of the craft of fly-dressing. And no-one appreciated more than he the subtleties which characterise the truly great fly - perfect proportions of whisks, body, wing and hackle, the perfect set of the wing, the perfect blend of colour of the different materials, all these the hallmarks of the fly-dresser as artist.

Donald lived in a little cottage on Hosey Hill just outside Westerham in Kent. A visit to him there was always as hugely entertaining as it was instructive. The tiny front room where he received visitors was awash with every conceivable (and some inconceivable) pieces of tackle, not just rods and reels but creels, mounted flies, old nets, deerstalker hats, innumerable capes, boxes of silks, books, all jumbled everywhere.

Therefore, I wasn't prepared for the orderly response on one of my first visits, when I asked Donald how he would set out to tie flies for a competition. Donald grinned, cleared a space and proceeded to lay out a sheet of white paper to provide as sharp a background to tie against as possible.

He then carefully put out on the paper *all* the materials needed for the six *Invictas* he was going to tie, making sure that each and every item was exactly the same size and that the blend of colours he was seeking in the finished fly would be achieved. This applied to the tag, the silk for the body, gold wire for the ribbing, the wings themselves and finally the hackle for the throat.

Donald was meticulous about the wings. Taking a matched pair of hen pheasant wings, he deftly split both down the shaft with a scalpel; then taking some silk, he tied the outer right and left pieces together. He was then able to mark out exactly matched slips from this composite feather with a dubbing needle and snip them out with scissors.



Finally Donald checked that all the hooks were perfect and, as I had asked for them to be debarbed, he did so before tying (to avoid wasting a tying in case the hook was to break in the debarbing process).

He then made sure that the hook was inserted at exactly the right angle in the jaws of the hand vice which he invariably used and then checked with his thumb that the point was buried.

As he tied the first fly, Donald paused between each stage to note down on the paper he was using as background exactly the number of turns of silk he had made first to secure the tag, then the ribbing, then the dubbing for the body, the same for wings and finally for the hackle. He also noted the number of turns he had taken of dubbing for the body, of the ribbing and of the throat hackle.

When he came to tie the second and subsequent flies, he was thus able exactly to replicate the first in every particular.

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An hour or so passed and, as if by magic, six wonderfully well-tied Invictas were in the palm of my hand, each and every one a competition winner. But that was Donald. And it was those skills, combining craft and artistry, which made him so pre-eminent a Guild President.

As Donald tied, I noticed to my surprise a set of the flies I had given Donald a couple of seasons previously when he, John Veniard and I had fished together at Bough Beech. He had framed these and had put them by his mantelpiece. I have never entered a fly dressing competition, but it was rewarding nevertheless to know that some of the flies I had tied had passed muster with the old maestro - even if I hadn't been so meticulous in my preparation for the tying!