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Bait for Hooks

by *Holger Rasmussen*, Brede

In fishing with hooks, chiefly with long lines for cod but also for salmon, eel and plaice, a wide range of types of bait can be found everywhere in Western and Northern Europe. This is also true of Denmark, where different kinds of smaller and bigger fish have been used, the latter often cut up into pieces, as well as molluscs, crayfish, worms, and, under circumstances where it is difficult to get any of these, the intestines of oxen, sheep or pigs, e.g. the liver or spleen. Of fish almost every kind can be used, but normally they will be those of minor importance, such as sand-eel, butter-fish, eel-pout, goby, gurnard. Herring, however, is very often used for long lines for cod and salmon. Of molluscs the horse mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) is by far the most common as bait, but also whelk (*Buccinum undatum*), cuttle fish (*Sepia officinalis*) etc. In the crayfish group it is mainly shrimps and crabs, and amongst the worms almost entirely lug worm, even though earth worms can also be used, as will be discussed later on.

The following gives a general view of a group of the common kinds of bait for hooks in Denmark and the ways in which they are procured.

Designations for bait and for the baiting of hooks

Even though Denmark is a small country, there can be found different designations for bait independent of what sort of bait is used. In the eastern part of the country, and including the northernmost part of Jutland, north of the Lime Fjord, the normal expression is *agn*, (and the corresponding verb: *agne*). In that part of Jutland north of the Lime Fjord and in Bornholm in the Baltic Sea,¹ however, the word *bed(e)* (verb: *bede*) is also in common use. This is cognate with the word in English, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish. In the western part of Denmark the common expression is *es* (verb: *ese*). On Zealand and the islands to the south, the verb *lønne*, which is used for the process of fastening stone sinkers to fishing nets, can also be used for putting baits on hooks, but in this case there is no corresponding noun.²

Different kinds of bait and their procuring

Of all kinds of bait the lug worm (*Arenicola marina*) is the most common in Denmark since it is found everywhere on the Danish

¹ J. C. Espersen, Bornholmsk Ordbog (1908).

² Ole Widding, Ørre og lynde. To ord for at stene et fiskegarn. Sprog og Kultur 13 (1944) 37. For references to the different Danish words for bait, see H. F. Feilberg, Bidrag til en Ordbog over jyske Almuesmaal (1886) passim.

shores. The offshore stretches of Southwestern Jutland are especially abundant in lug worm, and here they are not only exploited for local use, but are also exported not only to other parts of the country but to neighbouring countries such as Sweden and Germany. Over a hundred persons may be employed in digging lug worm at times.³

Digging lug worm

The most wide-spread method for procuring lug worm is by digging when the sandy stretches are laid bare at low tide. This is a method which can be traced far back. In a trial at a court in North Jutland in 1585 fishermen from Raabjerg parish were prosecuted for digging lug worm on the territory of an adjacent parish. In their defence they advanced, that „in Jutland, Zealand and elsewhere in Denmark it had hitherto been free for fishermen to dig for such worms in the sea or on the sea-shore wherever they could get them... and such digging has never been prohibited or taxed”. This opinion was accepted by the court⁴.

Digging was carried out with a spade or more usually a heavy three-pronged fork. It is always possible to find the places where lug worms lie hidden due to the small heaps of sandy upcast on the surface and all that is necessary is to put down the fork and turn worms up. To keep them the digger carries a wooden box, sometimes with two compartments containing about 1000 worms (for two long lines). In former times digging was carried on mainly by old men, women, and children. Often they had a very long way to walk, and it was hard, concentrated work to get enough bait in the few hours when it was low tide (Fig. 1).

In the western part of Denmark the digging was called *ormegrøft* (worm-ditch), an expression found as early as 1585, in the case mentioned above. The people occupied with the digging called it: to be in *æ grøwt* (in the ditch) and the work itself: *at grøfte orm* (to ditch worms).

Pounding lug worm

However, though this is the usual way of procuring lug worm for bait another method occurs in a constricted part of Eastern Denmark,

³ Mortensen/Strubberg, *Dansk Saltvandsfiskeri* (1935) 120. T. Kragelund, *Hjerting som Handels- og Fiskeplads i gamle Dage. Sprog og Kultur* 16 (1947) 60f.

⁴ J. L. A. Kolderup-Rosenvinge, *Udvalg af gamle danske Domme* 4 (1848) 67f.

on the shores stretching from about the northern outskirts of Copenhagen via Elsinore round the northwestern point of Zealand and some distance down in the Great Belt. From oral tradition it has been possible to ascertain that the method was introduced rather recently in the Great Belt and never gained a real foothold there. The classical ground for the method was the Sound where it was predominant on both sides.

The method, which is called: *at stampe orm* (to pound lug worm) has been described in detail for the Swedish side⁵ and seems to conform closely to conditions on the Danish side. This is not surprising since the southern part of Sweden was Danish until 1660, and relations between the populations on both sides of the Sound have always been very intimate.

For the work a few simple implements are used.⁶ The essential one is the *stampe* (rammer), a 2.20–2.50 m long rod with a circular wooden disk, 24–26 cm. in diameter, at one end. The fisherman, wearing big waterproof boots,⁷ proceeds as far out into the water as necessary. Leaning the rod against his shoulder he repeatedly pounds the disk into the bottom until a rather deep cavity is produced. At the moment he stops pounding the muddy water at once grows clear, and he must catch the uncovered worms as quickly as possible before they can hide again, which takes them only a very short time (Fig. 2).

For collecting the worms the fisherman has a hooked cane, or a stick with a comb of wooden pegs (not unlike a rake) at one end. In the fishing-village Hornbæk north west of Elsinore this stick was called a *stampekråle*.⁸ The number of worms could range up to twenty at a time, but could also be as low as one, and sometimes none at all. To hold the worms as he worked, the fisherman had a small wooden trough or a tub, attached to him by a cord and thus floating within reach (Fig. 3, 4).

⁵ Carl Gustav Lekholm, "Stampa orm". Kring Kärnan (1940–41) 29–46.

⁶ In the following I am quoting from the description of the zoologist Henrik Krøyer, who was very interested in the technology and history of fishing. In order to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of Danish fishery he visited almost all the Danish sea-shores in the 1830's. Only a small part of his collected material was ever published. The main part is kept as more or less finished manuscripts in the Royal Danish Library.

⁷ In the equipment from the Swedish part of the Sound are found boots of a peculiar shape and construction, see Lekholm (see note 5 above) figs. 2–5. The boots were made in a cooper's technique, and some of them did not even have a real foot, but were flat bottomed. They were shaped very much like an old-fashioned churn.—I have never seen boots of that construction amongst the Danish material.

Digging earth worms

As mentioned earlier the earth worm (*Lumbricidae*) is also used as bait. In *The Compleat Angler* it is stated *inter alia*, that earth worms are fit for catching eels, and they were commonly used for eel-hooks in the Lime Fjord during the 18th and 19th centuries.⁹ This is above all true of the little island Fur in the central part of the West Lime Fjord. As early as the year 1768 a description was given of the islanders' method of procuring earth worms for their hooks. It runs as follows: "The whole month of April and the beginning of May is used for collecting earth worms for bait far off and near the island. The fishermen travel long distances in order to obtain ground for digging and carry the worms home with them in an amount sufficient for a whole summer's fishing".

In 1832 a colleague of Henrik Krøyer, H. Beck, visited Fur and also noticed the special bait for eel-hooks. He mentions that the fisher-farmers from Fur went to all the country-towns at the shores of the fjord in the month of April, "and offered to dig the ground in all the gardens without payment of any kind except all the earth worms, which they carried home and kept alive for weeks in big clay-pots filled with a special clay (*Diatomite clay*), which is found in this part of the fjord". It was, however, not always easy for the islanders to obtain permission to dig, as they had a reputation for bad work with their digging-forks. Their main concern was to get enough worms. If the digging was badly done from the owner's viewpoint, that was not the digger's problem.

The other kinds of bait were either taken by implements of the same types as for ordinary fishing (traps of basketwork or net, seines etc.) or, less often, were got and used without special methods or implements. None of them will be dealt with in this connection.

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The writer is indebted to his colleagues, C. G. Lekholm for his kind permission to use his drawing, fig. 2, and to A. Fenton who has been kind enough to improve a manuscript in bad English.

⁸ The two types of implements for gathering the uncovered worms were not the only ones in use. In its fishery-collections the Museum of Gilleleje (W. of Elsinore) has two different types, shown here in fig. 4. The same two types, and the rake-type mentioned above, are also known from Sweden. Lekholm (see note 5 above) fig. 7.

⁹ Holger Rasmussen, *Limfjordsfiskeriet før 1825* (1968) 229f. and the references given there. Obviously the lug worm was not found in the brackish water of the Lime Fjord prior to 1825.



Fig. 1. Digging lug worm on the sea-shore north of Esbjerg, Jutland. The pictures show the heavy fork, length about 140 cm., and a bucket for holding the worms, instead of the old-fashioned wooden box. Behind the digger is seen an *orme-groft* (worm-ditch). Photography T. Tobiassen 1942.



Fig. 2. Fisherman pounding lug worm. Drawing by C. G. Lekholm 1941. In his belt the man is carrying a comb for collecting worms, and he has a wooden box for holding them. He wears boots of a special construction on his feet (cf. note 7).



Fig. 3. Danish fisherman with his equipment for pounding lug worm. Drawing by Johan Peter Raadsig, possibly from Hornbæk, Zealand, about 1850. The equipment consists of rammer, comb and wooden tub.

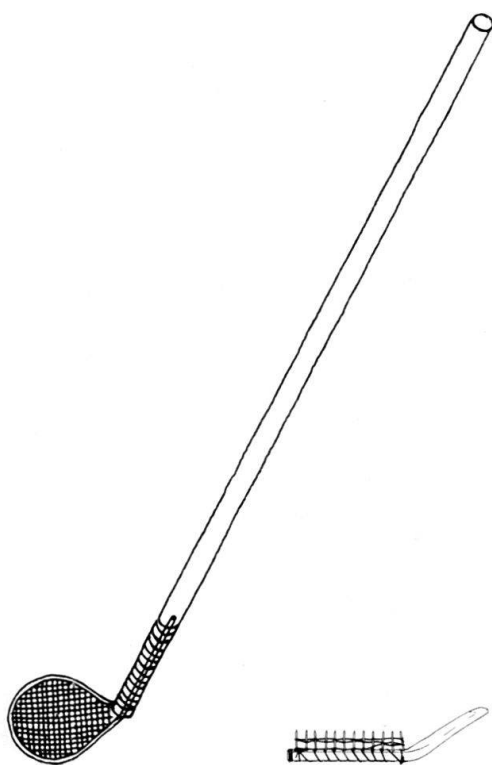


Fig. 4. Two different types of implements for collecting lug worm. The small landing net has a shaft about one metre long. The comb is incomplete as part of the shaft is missing. Museum of Gilleleje: Fishery Collections (cf. note 8)