

Anglers unite to stop archive getting away

By **Dalya Alberge**
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ANGLERS on both sides of the Atlantic have joined forces to save the Staffordshire cottage of Izaak Walton as a museum devoted to the man who published *The Compleat Angler* more than 350 years ago.

Campaigners fear that Stafford Borough Council is planning to close the half-timbered building at Shallowford, which the "father of angling" left to the local community in his will in 1683.

The Compleat Angler, published in 1653, is believed to be the most reprinted book in the English language after the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. It was a pioneering work, becoming the anglers' bible, a classic guide to the joys of fishing and a portrait of life in 17th-century rural England.

Walton, who was born in Stafford in 1593, bought the cottage, together with the nearby farm of Halfhead and surrounding land in 1654. The farm and its land were sold long after his death, leaving the 16th-century building as the only direct link with him.

It now houses a museum of angling memorabilia, including an important collection of antique fishing reels. But the council, in an attempt to halve annual running costs from £35,000 to "under £18,000", has reduced opening times to weekend afternoons.

Members of the 50,000-strong Izaak Walton League in America, a campaigning environmental organisation founded in 1922, are trying to raise funds to run the cottage as an independent charity and keep it as a museum dedicated to Walton.

Tony Bridgett, an Izaak Walton historian and president of the newly formed Izaak Walton Cottage Chapter, a British sister group to the league, said: "Once it's gone, it's gone. The cottage is an important focal point for people all over the world who revere the memory of Izaak Walton."

"It's almost a shrine for people to visit. They come from America, Australia, Canada, Japan and Europe."

It was either in Stafford or at Halfhead Farm in Shallowford that Walton put the finishing touches to the book that

would bring him fame that would last long after his death.

Walton served an apprenticeship in London, and established his own business as a linen draper. He read widely and associated with writers and scholars, beginning his literary career with a biography of John Donne in 1640. A Royalist, he returned to Staffordshire during the Civil War.

Judith Luna, commissioning editor of the Oxford World Classics series at Oxford University Press, which has published *The Compleat Angler* since 1935, said that its readership extended beyond keen anglers. "There's clearly a solid market. It's a classic of English literature," she said.

"It's a very attractively written thing. It's got illustrations, which adds to its charm. Because the book combines philosophical musings on nature and the countryside, as well as being a book of instruction about how to catch and cook fish, I think it is beloved of conservationists and anyone who enjoys unspoilt nature."

A spokeswoman for Stafford Borough Council insisted that there were no plans to close the cottage, although she said that its 3,059 visitors last year paled against the 17,000 that went to the local castle.

Confirming that opening times would be reduced to just weekend afternoons between May and August, she said: "The Audit Commission raised concerns about the cottage and its cost implications. We needed to come up with new proposals, which are due to be discussed at the leisure scrutiny committee. The budget will be finalised in the next two weeks."

ANDREW FOX



The Izaak Walton cottage