

Broad Character: Fishing

Character Type: Aquaculture

Regional Perspective: Southern England

Compiled by Seazone Solutions Ltd / M A Ltd, January 2011, after comment from D Hooley, English Heritage

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING/DISTINGUISHING ATTRIBUTES

Fish farming is limited in this region, the exception being parts of Langstone and Chichester Harbours which are designated as a sea bass nursery area and important spawning ground for demersal fish (Hampshire County Council, 2010).

Shellfish farming is the main form of aquaculture undertaken in the Southern England region. Oysters have been laid and dredged at various points along the Hampshire coast, for example at Emsworth, from at least medieval times onwards, and this continues today in the Solent. Other shellfish farmed include mussels and clams, fisheries of which are predominantly found in Poole Harbour.



Emsworth oyster beds (© HWTMA/ Emsworth Maritime & Historical Trust)

HISTORICAL PROCESSES; COMPONENTS, FEATURES AND VARIABILITY

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Oysters have been laid and dredged at various points along the Hampshire coast from medieval times onwards. The fishery at Emsworth was of some value in the fourteenth century and the reputed oyster fishery at Hamble dates from medieval times. Other chief oyster beds included Hayling Island, Wootton Creek and the Newtown, Beaulieu and Medina rivers (Hewitt, 1912). In 1856, fifty sails were engaged in oyster dredging in Langstone and Chichester Harbours. The season began on 4th September and oysters fetched an average of 1s per 100. The old salterns on Hayling Island were also utilised for oyster ponds in the early modern period, the most renowned ones being Mill Rife, My Lord's Pond, the Sinar and Gutnar Lakes. These local beds in North Hayling were acclaimed as being the largest and best constructed in England in the early 19th

century, with huge quantities of Langstone oysters being sent all over the country (Humphrey, undated).

Many oyster fishermen were engaged in the widespread clearing of land on which to store young oysters, so that they might grow and fatten. However, in the 1840s they encountered problems with the new Lord of the Manor who claimed his right to the soil and brought court actions for trespass against the fishermen (Humphrey, undated). A further problem facing the oyster fishermen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was that of pollution. The most notorious example of this occurred when council workers in Warblington re-laid a number of sewers and drains, which emptied onto the Emsworth foreshore. One of the eminent Emsworth oyster merchants then constructed a number of ponds in close proximity to the outflow and seeded them with a considerable quantity of young oysters. In 1902 there was a mayoral banquet with one of the courses consisting of the oysters for which Emsworth and Hayling had by then become famous. Unfortunately some of the shellfish had been contaminated by the outflow and several of the diners, including the Dean of Winchester, died of typhoid. The oyster industry in the area collapsed almost overnight (Humphrey, undated).

The industry remained effectively dormant from the 1920s to 1960s but has continued despite setbacks including inadvertent introduction and competition from non-native species such as slipper limpets, and the spread of disease from marine snails in the mid 1970s. However, harbour oysters still command a strong market value in mainland Europe, and today, some of the northwest Hayling beds have been recently restored (Hampshire County Council 2010).

The Solent and its surrounding harbours continue to be one of the few regions in the UK supporting a healthy self-generating native oyster fishery. Both Pacific and native oysters are cultivated within Chichester Harbour and native oysters are also dredged from naturally-occurring beds. Two orders have been granted for oyster beds in Stanswood Bay and Calshot which are administered by fishermen's co-operatives and may be seeded from the wild stock (Walmslet and Pawwon, 2006).



A local oyster industry continues to thrive in Chichester Harbour (© Maritime Archaeology Ltd)

This area is now one of the largest and most productive self-sustaining oyster grounds in Europe and is of international conservation importance (James et al, 2010). Today the oyster fishery is tightly regulated and both public and private fisheries exist within the Solent. Fishery is managed through byelaws setting a closed season from 1 April and 31 October, a maximum dredge length and a ban on night fishing. Regulated fishery vessels much obtain one of 90 available Solent oyster licences issued by the Southern Sea Fisheries District Committee. During the first week of the season approximately 50% of the oysters are marketable and the other 50% are sold as seed (James et al, 2010). Most of the oysters caught before Christmas are exported to the continent although, with the recovery of continental oyster stocks, this market is declining.

Poole Harbour contains important mussel and clam fisheries. An area of over 500 acres is seeded regularly with mussels from Portland and was established in the 1980s when the local oyster fishery was wiped out by *Bonamia* (Pawson et al, 2002). The manila clam was first introduced into the UK in 1992 by Othinie Shell Fisheries who seeded Poole Harbour with juvenile clams (Utting and Spencer 1992). By 1994 it was evidence that successful reproduction has occurred in the harbour and fishermen were exploiting the new intertidal resource at high tide (Jensen et al, 2004). In an effort to ensure the sustainability of this fishery the Southern Sea Fisheries Committee licensed the fishery and introduced an 8-10 week season (October to January) as well as regulations for allowable fishing techniques (James et al, 2010). The harbour also contains a fishery for cockles (Franklin, 1972).



Poole Harbour (© Hampshire & Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology)

Mussel beds have been identified to the east of the Isle of Wight by Plumb (1996) but the Sussex Sea Fisheries Committee byelaws prevent this from becoming commercial fishery.

VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS

Aquaculture is still deeply engrained in the perception and economy of some

communities in the region (for example at Emsworth, and also in Hastings). As such, it is valued for the distinctiveness it affords such areas and as an important element in their local economy.



Fishing boats and equipment in Hastings (© Maritime Archaeology Ltd)

This Character Type has been an important part of the character of some of the harbours of the region for centuries, for example Poole, Langstone and Chichester Harbours.

It continues to provide valuable employment in the region and can also act as an attraction to tourists and visitors to the area.

RESEARCH, AMENITY AND EDUCATION

The Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology has undertaken a number of research projects in Langstone and Chichester Harbours since the 1990s (www.hwtma.org.uk). These have included the survey of abandoned oyster beds on the Emsworth foreshore. The project recorded the remains of several timber lined beds on the foreshore that were dug to store oysters for the thriving industry there in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Fieldwork included a significant volunteer and outreach component, enabling communities to become involved with, and learn about their local heritage, and culminated in a special display on the oyster industry at the Emsworth Museum that incorporated volunteers' plans and records of the site.



Archaeological investigations at Emsworth (© Hampshire & Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology)

Further research, being undertaken by the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), is also taking place on the current fishing industry addressing socio-economic impacts (http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp_en.htm).

CONDITION AND FORCES FOR CHANGE

Pressures on the shellfish farming industry in Southern England include the sea level rise and erosion of low lying features such as the oyster beds (Walmslet and Pawwon, 2006)

Other threats include the recovering continental oyster stocks and poor export prices (Walmslet and Pawwon, 2006). The sustainability of this type of fishery has been questioned by some (Cappell and Nimmo, 2007) and it is believed that one year of poor recruitment could be enough to cause its collapse.

On a more positive note, a demand for seed to restock national oyster fisheries does remain (Pawson et al, 2002).

The industry is also set to undergo regulatory change as, under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, the Sea Fisheries Committees are replaced by Inshore Fishery Conservation Authorities (IFCAs), with a differing membership and differing objectives.

RARITY AND VULNERABILITY

Aquaculture in the Southern England region has a long and complex history and contributes to a distinctive and important aspect in the history of fisheries in England. The industry continues to thrive within certain harbours and remains a distinctive character type of the region.

Its vulnerability in the region comes mainly from economic pressures on its export trade from increasing continental shellfish stocks and poor export prices.

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