

## THE SEVERN FISHERIES

by Colin Green

The recent discovery on the foreshore area affected by the Second Severn Crossing off Sudbrook Point of the remains of fishing baskets and other hurdle structures provides firm evidence of the existence of fisheries in this vicinity as far back as the tenth century A.D. (Godbold and Turner above, pp. 45-55).

There seems little doubt that fishing was one of the primary activities of men who dwelt along the coast of the Severn estuary even before this date, but it is remarkable that the methods practiced 1000 years ago can still be seen to this day in several places up and down the river.

Although many species of fish are caught in the estuary, the salmon is the prize and the ingenuity of man has been applied over the centuries to the task of devising methods of capturing this fish. Of the many such methods practised over the years only three now survive, although even one of these is currently moribund.

One method is directly traceable to those baskets found at Sudbrook and that is the 'fixed engine' or putcher rank, of which there are still at least twelve examples on the river (listed in Appendix 1). A simple wooden framework is erected on the foreshore where it will be covered by the tide at high water and upon this are mounted conical baskets (Figure 35), some of which face the flood tide and others the ebb tide. Fish swimming with the tide enter the baskets and are trapped because, as one old fisherman once said, "salmon don't have a reverse gear". The baskets were, until a few years ago, made from the willow which grows abundantly in the riverside areas. Recently, metal wire has been used to make the baskets. This material is cheaper and lasts longer but

does not have the appeal and artistry of the willow. There are still men on the river who possess the skills to make willow putchers but they are in the evening of their lives and the skills may inevitably be lost within the next few years.

Actually, the putcher is a relatively recent adaptation of the more venerable Putt. Figures 30 and 31 in Godbold and Turner's paper above shows photographs of the Goldcliff Putts in 1938. Putts are larger and more complicated baskets which are closer woven and have three sections, the kype (or kipe), the butt, and the forewheel. The kype, which is the open end, is about 1.5 m in diameter and the whole basket is about 4 m long. The putts are normally placed directly on the foreshore and secured with stakes: they are not removed from the river during the close season as are the putchers and, therefore, have to be partially blocked at the mouth to prevent the entry of salmon. A stopper at the end of the forewheel can also be removed to permit the free passage of salmon parr during certain seasons. The putt can, of course, be used to catch other fish and eels and is, therefore, a more efficient taker of fish than the putcher.

The first mention of putcher fisheries is encountered in 1838 (Glos. Record Office D421/E43), whereas the putt was referred to in 1778 as an "ancient fishery" (Act. 18 George III c.33). There is, in fact, a reference to this type of trap in 1533 (Act. 25 Henry VIII c.7) and it is probable that the Sudbrook baskets are of this type.

The very efficiency of putts and putchers at taking fish led to the appointment of Commissioners in 1860 to inquire into the salmon fisheries of England and Wales. They recommended the suppression of all

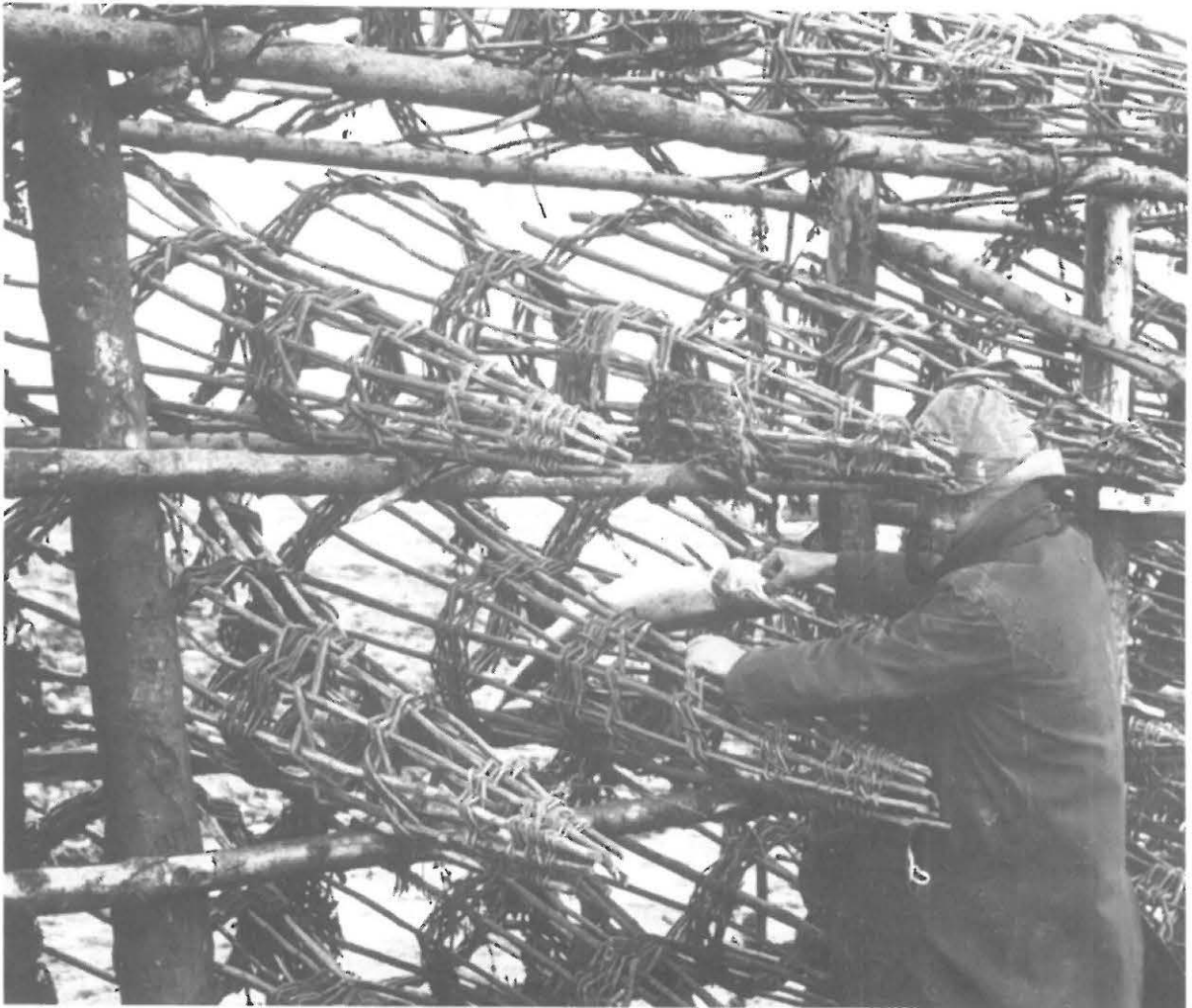


Figure 35. Removing fish from putchers at Goldcliff in 1938.

'fixed engines' as the traps were termed, but objections by large and important landowners who held such fisheries ensured that the Act of 1861 allowed the continuance of those in lawful use at that time. Further complications ensued over the definition of fixed engines and another Act of 1865 was needed to clarify this and to appoint another Commission to inquire specifically into fixed engines. Proof of immemorial usage was required by the Commissioners and they then granted certificates to those fisheries. No new fisheries were then permitted and the location of those certified could not be altered. Certificates were granted at the same time to another form of fixed engine, the stop net fishery.

Although the stop net is termed a fixed engine and is controlled as such, it is fixed only by the fact that the boats which carry the nets are positioned at a particular location which is defined by the certificate issued. At this location a cable is fixed to the bed of the river and the boats are attached to the cable during fishing. Up to six boats may be attached to each cable. On the Severn some 18 certificates were issued and, until recent years, about 12 boats were in operation. Each boat carries a large net which is supported on two poles, the rymes, which slope up from the bottom of the boat and are, in turn, supported on the gunwale. The net is deployed under the boat itself and is counterbalanced by weights and a supporting stick under the control of the

single fisherman in each boat. When a fish strikes the net the stick is knocked away causing the net to rise and close, trapping the fish which is then dispatched by the 'knocker stick'.

Latterly, stop net boats operated at two locations, the Wye at Chepstow, where the boats were moored to poles driven into the bed, and the Severn at Wellhouse Bay near Lydney. The boats which operated at Chepstow were run by the Welsh Water Authority, the fishery having been bought by the Wye Board of Conservators in 1924. The Wellhouse Bay boats were operated by private individuals who held certificates handed down by their original recipients. Most of the upriver boats were operated by the Bayliss family of Gatcombe, a tiny hamlet on the river bank upstream of Wellhouse Bay. Regrettably, both fisheries have now ceased: the Chepstow boats were wound up in 1983 when the Authority decided that the operation was uneconomic and that an already depleted river could no longer support a commercial fishery. This was not the case on the Severn since commercial fishing is of more importance than rods. The Gatcombe boats ceased in 1984 purely because the cost of upkeep of the sturdy boats became too great.

At Gatcombe, much of the original equipment remains and Mrs. Bayliss, who used to make and repair the nets, still has the tools used for this purpose, together with those used for the repair of the boats. The vessels themselves are drawn up on the green near the house although they are deteriorating badly in the weather. Of the Chepstow boats, one is at the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff, a second is lying at Chepstow Museum and another is housed at the Dean Heritage Centre. One boat lies on the river bank at Chepstow in a ruinous condition: a very sad sight.

Figure 36 shows the stop net boat which was operated on the River Usk in 1938. The boat is very similar to the Chepstow and Gatcombe vessels.

There are hopes that at least one stop net boat might be revived at Gatcombe if a steel boat can be built using, perhaps, lines taken off the original boats still on site. It is essential that steel or ferro cement should be used since fibreglass would not have the strength to withstand the severe stresses imposed on the hull by the effect of the current on the net and its timber supports.

The final ancient fishing method used on the Severn is the lave net. The net is composed of a Y-shaped frame from which is suspended a bag net with a cord across the open mouth. The net, which can be carried and operated by one man, is used quite simply to scoop the salmon out of the water. Lave netsmen operate entirely in the shallow parts of the river where sand banks dry out at low tide. Their procedure is to keep a careful look out for salmon swimming through shallow channels (a very skilled craft itself) and to quickly lower the net to intercept the fish. As the salmon enters the net it is raised and the fish taken from its element.

Lave netting is probably the most skilled form of fishing on the river and is also fraught with danger since, should the fisherman remain out on the sandbanks after low water, the returning tide can easily trap and drown him. Many people have perished in this manner over the years and most netsmen carry two watches as an insurance against being caught out if one stops.

It is hoped that these brief notes will serve to show that the craft and skill of the Severn fishermen has been developed over the centuries and, to some degree, is continuing to this day.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the kind help and advice on the preparation of this paper given by several fishery operators and other local people. Notable amongst these was the late Mr. Bill Hardy of Bullo, who was a genuine



Figure 36. Stop net boat at Caerleon in 1938.

mine of information, and Mrs. Anne Bayliss whose family operated the stop net boats at Gatcombe.

### Further Reading

Gloucester City Museums 1974 *Fishing on the Lower Severn* (Gloucester). A slim but very useful booklet on all the methods of fishing on the lower river.

B. Waters 1947 *Severn Tide* (J.M. Dent). Together with *Severn Stream* and *The Bristol Channel*, this is a classic of the river. Still available in paperback and there are even some copies being remaindered.

F.W. Rowbotham 1964 *The Severn Bore* (David and Charles). Not much on the fisheries, but a useful volume on the river and its ways by the acknowledged authority on the Bore who was the District Engineer for the Lower Severn.

E. McKee 1983 *Working Boats of Britain* (Conway Maritime Press). Contains a vast amount of information on working vessels but particularly interesting for a passage, with drawings, on the long net punts of Minsterworth and the stopping boats of Gatcombe and Chepstow.

H.A. Gilbert 1929 *Tale of a Wye Fisherman* (Methuen). Once again, a classic of the River Wye with a long chapter on the nets at Chepstow and the estuary.

J. Geraint Jenkins 1974 *Nets and Coracles* (David and Charles). A comprehensive discourse on all manner of fishing methods in Wales and the lower Severn. Much detail on the fixed engines.

J. Geraint Jenkins 1991 *The Inshore Fishermen of Wales* (University of Wales Press). An updated version of the above with some new material.

### Appendix 1

Locations of known putcher ranks on the lower Severn (NGR reference is given if known).

#### Right Bank

Goldcliff	ST 374820
Porton House*	ST 390827
Redwick - Sea Street Lane*	ST 416834
Lyde Rock, Beachley	ST 552912
Slime Road, Sedbury	ST 554928
Horse Pill, Stroat	ST 582973
Gatcombe	SO 678054
Awre	SO 705072

\* These are currently out of use

#### Left Bank

Berkeley Pill	
Severn House Farm	ST 640983
Sheppardine	
Oldbury	
Littleton Warth	ST 580907

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