THE FISH TRADE IN MEDIEVAL WALES AND THE MARCHES

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INTRODUCTION

The discovery of fishtraps, particularly from the medieval and post-medieval periods, is becoming widespread around the sea coasts of northern Europe. Wales and the Severn Estuary have been happy hunting grounds for coastal archaeologists for twenty years, and they have pioneered the recording of fishtraps (Godbold and Turner 1994, Turner 2002, Brown *et al* 2010, Chadwick and Catchpole this volume). There are clear regional variations in the style and construction of these traps. These reflect a combination of factors: the width and character of the foreshore, tidal conditions and range, the availability of different building materials, the habits of the fish and particularly the migratory species that were the focus of the catch, and local tradition.

At the other end of the spectrum, is the interest in the evidence for medieval cookery and the wide range of dishes that cooks could prepare (Brears 2008, Spencer 2002). These recipes can be compared with the remains of fish bones recovered from archaeological deposits found in latrines, cesspits and middens of food waste, which represent the far end of the fish food-chain (see the published works of A Wheeler and A K G Jones in particular). The purpose of this paper is to try and assemble the historical and archaeological evidence for the fish trade, which brought the fish from where they were caught to where they were eaten. It will focus on evidence for Wales and the Marches, and will look in some detail at the trading of fish in two of the main towns in the March, Chester and Gloucester.

FISHING METHODS AND THEIR PATRONS

The archaeological record for medieval fishing is dominated by the *in situ* remains of 'fixed engines' on the foreshores and within the estuaries of the Welsh coast. Other fishing methods are archaeologically opaque, even though many survived to be recorded by folk-tradition historians (Jenkins 1974), or are described in medieval documentation. On the small scale, there are different types of hand netting, spearing and the use of lines and hooks. On the large scale, there are a variety of techniques using boats and nets; coracles, trammel netting, stop and compass netting, as well as inshore and deep water fishing using larger vessels with bigger nets and longer lines. There is very little archaeological evidence for these practices.

What is also hidden from study is the evidence for the local trading of fish. Again, reliance has to be put on recent 'ethnographic' evidence. For example, there are the recollections of the last gored keeper of the stone fishtraps on the Cardigan Bay coast at Aberarth. She described how her daily life was so hard. She had to visit the traps on every low tide, so the fish would not spoil or be stolen, and then she would walk around the local villages selling her catch from a basket (Lewes 1924).

Rights over the foreshore were jealously guarded as they could provide a number of different types of income. Shipwrecks and beached whales provided occasional lucrative windfalls. However, the construction, operation and licensing of 'fixed engines' provided a more regular cash-flow. In the Middle Ages, and after the conquest of Wales, the foreshore of the lands owned by the king was the property of the Crown, whilst elsewhere it was the property of the Marcher lord. (This situation remains today with, for example, the duke of Beaufort still owning much of the foreshore of the Caldicot Level.) These landlords could then either grant the fishery (normally to a religious house) or lease them for profit to private individuals. These transactions for the Welsh Severn Estuary have been explored in some detail (Godbold and Turner 1994, 43-5).

THE ORIGINS OF THE FISH TRADE

The great driver for the development of a long-distance fish trade was the number of days on which the Norman Catholic church decreed that fish should replace meet. These included every Friday, Saturday, the vigils of major Christian feast days and during Lent, giving a total of nearly 150 days (Laughton 2008, 136-7). For many of the poorer classes in rural areas, this would not present a problem as fish and meat only formed an occasional part of their diet. However, larger centres of population, monasteries and great houses needed an organised trade in fish to comply with their religious obligations.

It is inevitable that within England and Wales, it was in London where the trade in fish was at its largest and most structured. There were separate guilds for fresh fishmongers and for stock (dried) fishmongers. They grouped around the north end of London Bridge and were required to land their fish at the Fresh Wharf immediately to the east of the bridge, with the Fish Street Hill market, nearby, being the main point of sale. The trade was carefully regulated by the guilds, but to avoid tolls, fish would be landed clandestinely at night and sold illicitly within the taverns around Fish Street. In London, the fishmongers had to deal with the purveyors of the royal court, who had powers to take the best fish for the king and his household at fixed prices (Woodward 1945, 63 -5). There were always risks in dealing in a perishable product, but many fishmongers made substantial fortunes and became prominent citizens. During the 14th century, several members of the fishmongers were able to make considerable gifts to their churches and the richest merchant of the mid-15th century, Sir John Crosby, began as a fishmonger's son (Schofield 1984, 111 and 123).

CHESTER

In the Middle Ages, Chester was a very significant regional centre for its hinterland, Cheshire, the north-west Midlands, and north Wales, and through trade around the Irish sea coasts (Fig. 1). It was the 'capital' of the county palatine of Cheshire and was a centre of administration and justice. It had a thriving merchant class, who became prominent when Chester acted as the base for Edward I's base for his campaigns in north Wales. In some ways, it was London in miniature, though with only about 4,600 inhabitants it had about one tenth of the population. Chester had its own fishery, known as the King's Pool, which incorporated traps mounted within the arches of the Old Dee Bridge. This was owned and let by the earl of Chester. When this was Edward I in the late-13th century, he let the fishery to two of the engineers involved in building his castles in north Wales (Turner 2010, 52). Further downstream, the banks of the River Dee were lined with fish stalls, their nets and other devices causing some problems for navigation (Laughton 2008, 136).

However, the majority of the fish traded in Chester was caught within the Irish Sea and its estuaries. It was brought into the city through the Northgate and the Watergate, where tolls were paid. The sale of fish was restricted by local regulations to the guild of fishers. There were on average six or seven fishmongers active in the city at any one time. They traded in fresh and preserved fish, and were usually involved in shipping and other trade. Their wives played a role in the business, often going out of the city to intercept fishermen bringing in their catches and secure the fish at favourable prices for resale at their family's shop. As in London, there was much illegal trading in fish in houses in the extra-mural suburbs, or of fish smuggled inside the city walls and sold in the back rooms of inns (Laughton 2008, 136-7).

Records show that herring was traded in by far the greatest volume as white (or salted) herring or red (smoked) herring, and this was a staple food of the urban poor. The Chester merchants effectively set up a triangular trade in the Irish Sea based on this fish. Salt from the wich towns of Cheshire was sailed west from Frodsham – one of the creek ports of Chester - to Anglesey, then across to the Pale ports and Carrickfergus in Ireland, returning via the Isle of Man, picking up preserved herring, salmon and hake on the way. These links were strengthened when a Cheshire fishmonger married his daughter to a Beaumaris man. A few years earlier, Thomas Sherwin moved from Chester to Beaumaris by 1448, and leased a fishery at the nearby Llanfaes Friary. Subsequently he became the master of a ship trading back to Chester. The Corbet family were from the Isle of Man and became prominent fishmongers in Chester from the mid-15th century. As well as their shipping interests, they took a lease on the fisheries in the Bann estuary, as far away as Coleraine in Ulster (Laughton 2008, 175-6).

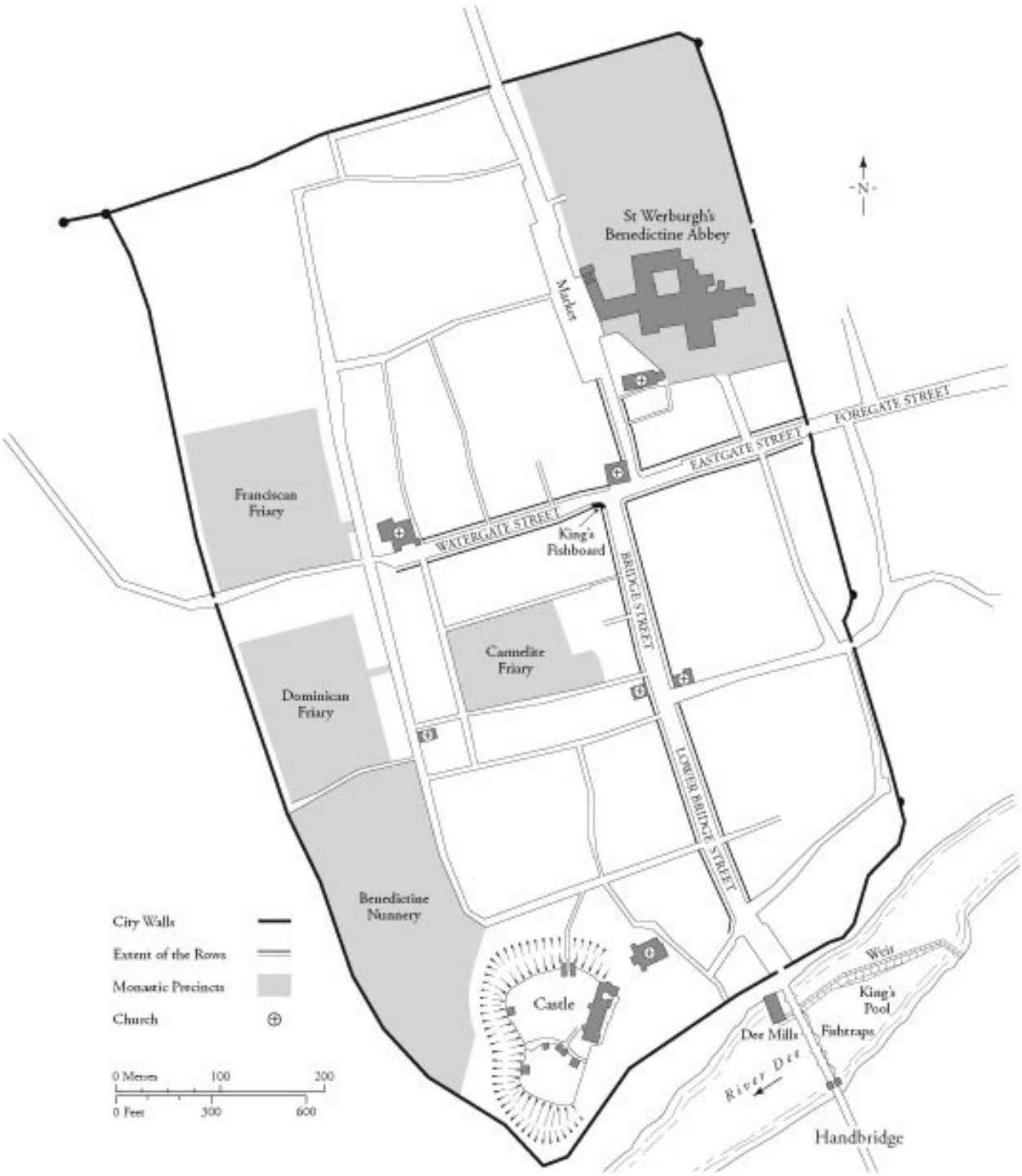

Figure 1. Map of Medieval Chester showing the fishtraps, King's pool and King's Fishward (Crown copyright: Cadw).

Something of this trade can be seen in the Welsh Port Books of the second half of the 16th century. In 1595, a ship from Chester brought 20 dozen herring nets into Beaumaris, and another imported eight tons of salt and casks into Caernarfon (Lewis 1927, 276). In three weeks in the winter of 1602, two ships bound for Chester and one for Liverpool carried cargoes of salt herrings from Beaumaris (Lewis 1927, 298). Lewis' analysis of the wholesale prices contained in these port books gives an idea of the relative value of the fish traded – with the exception of Newland (Newfoundland) dried cod which was unavailable in the Middle Ages (Lewis 1927, xlvii).

In Chester, the trade was highly regulated. In the 14th century, one main point of sale was the 'King's' fishboard, which was set up on the north-east corner of Bridge Street, but by 1588, it had moved to the south side of Watergate Street opposite the butchers. Inevitably, members of the guild of fishers moved into houses in the Rows of Watergate Street, where inventories showed that stocks of salted salmon, herring, eels and other fish were stored in barrels in the undercrofts. Wherever you have fish you have smells, and the stone undercrofts would help to contain these. However one record, from 1585, describes how the Sheriff and his guests were put off their food by the 'very stinking smell' coming from one of the cellars (Laughton 2008, 79).

Finally, the documentary evidence from Chester shows that along two of the street frontages of the Rows, cookshops were set over fires, sometimes with stools on the pavements for their customers. These were the fast-food shops and takeaways of their day. They sold a wide range of meat, poultry and fish, including dishes made with salmon, ling, stockfish and herring bought from the fishmongers (Laughton 2008, 137 -8).

GLOUCESTER AND THE SEVERN ESTUARY

For south Wales and the southern Marches, Gloucester served a similar role to Chester in the north. It could draw upon the wide range of fish caught in the fishtraps of the Severn Estuary, as well as fish caught in fresh water higher up the river itself. During the 13th century in particular, one of the key roles of the steward of the royal castle in Gloucester was to procure salmon, lampreys and shad (a member of the herring family) for the king's household. These records appear in the Close Rolls, and during the reign of Henry III, fish was sent for the use of the queen in Marlborough, and also sent to the king to take with him on a peace-seeking mission to the king of France (Turner 2007, 163).

For the fishmongers of Gloucester, it was the migratory sea lamprey that was the single most valuable fish. A single fish could cost as much as 10s in Lent (Holt 1985, 154), and even higher prices were achieved over the Christmas period, when they were at the beginning of their run up the Severn Estuary (Pennant 1776, III, 68). Lampreys, like eels, can be kept alive out of water for period, and the Gloucester Folk Museum has a special basket for their transport in its collections. They could also be cooked within special pies and then be sent off to grace a lord's or king's table. The city of Gloucester maintained a tradition of presenting a lamprey pie to the monarch at Christmas and on their coronation (Herbert, 1988, 25).

I have argued elsewhere that the sea lamprey commanded such high prices because it was thought to be an aphrodisiac. This argument is supported by a number of literary references, and provides an explanation for the accusation that Henry I died from a 'surfeit of lampreys'. This was perhaps as much a judgement on his lascivious behaviour as his dietary preferences (Turner 2007,166-7).

THE PROCUREMENT OF FISH BY MARCHER HOUSEHOLDS

Having looked at the evidence for the fish trade in two cities within the Welsh Marches, it is worth considering how fish was bought for Marcher lords, ladies and their households, for cooking in the kitchens of their great castles.

In early 1295, the countess of Norfolk and her household stayed in Chepstow Castle for their safekeeping during a revolt, which affected much of Wales. Records have survived for the daily purchase of food over a period of twelve days. Her steward, Sir Goscelin, only bought fish on the Friday and Saturday, and on the vigil and feast day of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which fell during the week. This implies that the fish was bought locally and fresh, and was cooked on the day of purchase (National Archives NA E101/531/12). The earl of Norfolk and later lords of Chepstow were entitled under the charter of Chepstow to receive a prise (a tax in kind) of one good fish from every boat bringing fresh fish into the borough, but nothing from those carrying salted fish (NA C133/167). In 1312/3, when the castle was in the hands of Edward II, a new weir was built across the River Wye, upstream of the castle at Lancaut for £56.This cost included for a lodging, iron tools and nets for the fisherman, so providing an independent supply of fish for the lord (NA SC6/922/10). An account for the year 1394/5, shows that the treasurer, Thomas Cobbe, supplied lampreys and salmon from Chepstow to the countess of Norfolk at her castle in Framlingham, Suffolk, paying 30s for their carriage on each occasion (College of Arms Arundel Ms. 49).

Higher up the River Wye, the steward of Goodrich Castle, Herefordshire, kept detailed records of the purchase of fish for Joan de Valence, the countess of Pembroke's household in the year 1296/7. He bought 24,000 preserved herring from Southampton, which were carted to Gloucester, where 3,600 – the equivalent of 30s – were sold off to pay for the carriage. He also obtained salt cod from the Valence's Pembroke estates, which were taken by sea to Bristol, transhipped to Chepstow and then taken by packhorse to Goodrich. Other purchases of fish were made in Chepstow and by sending Roger the Cook to Gloucester. Freshwater fish were also recorded in that year with salmon being caught in the weir at Goodrich, and a net and fisherman coming up from Abergavenny to fish in the river. During the year 1296/7, £37 was spent on staple fish (preserved herring, salt and dried fish) making up 39% of the budget spent by the kitchen (Woolgar 1999, 113 and 119-21).

The scale of procurement and the diversity of sources of fish that would have to have been co-ordinated by the steward can be seen in a feast given at Usk Castle in Lent 1358, by Elizabeth de Burgh, with the Black Prince and the Bishop of Llandaff as her principal guests (Green 2007, 114). The feast consisted of 81 messes (communal dishes to be shared by four people) and required: 568 herrings, 10 stockfish, 4 saltfish, 3 cod, 1½ salmon, 8 pike, 6 lampreys, 4 sturgeon, 6 crayfish, 650 whelks, 42 codling, 1 conger eel, 12 mullet, 24 skate, 50 whiting, 3 eels, 3 sole, 400 oysters and ¼ of a porpoise.

The role of freshwater fish in the diet of great and monastic houses was small and confined to special occasions. There is no well-documented example from Wales and the Marches, but in 1431/2, John de Vere, earl of Oxford's household consumed only 215 freshwater fish compared to 26,000 sea fish. Bishop John Hales of Coventry and Lichfield invited 60 guests for the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on 15/8/1461. The feast fell on a Saturday and the menu was exclusively of fish which could be caught in freshwater, and was therefore something very special (Dyer 1994, 101-112). The fish were: 2 salmon, 24 eels, 2 chub, 3 pickerel, 24 grayling, 6 trout, 4 perch and 6 dace.

By contrast, stockfish were one of the most widespread and year-round foodstuffs of the Middle Ages. They were dried fish of the cod family (Kurlansky 1997, 55), produced in huge quantities in countries around the north of the North Sea and Iceland. Stockfish were light in weight, easy to transport and long lasting. It was nutritious, if not very appetising, and required relatively little water to rehydrate it, compared to saltfish. It was therefore particularly suitable to provide as rations for soldiers on campaign, for sailors on board ship and for the defenders of castles under siege. It is no surprise that stockfish has been recovered from environmental samples taken from inside the Newport Ship (Trett 2010). In 1325, Hugh Despenser ordered Caerphilly Castle to be provisioned for King Edward II, himself and their forces in advance of the expected siege by Queen Isabella's and Roger Mortimer's army. He had 6000 stockfish sent from London to the castle, amongst other foodstuffs (Society of Antiquaries Ms.122 f.43).

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR EATING FISH IN MEDIEVAL WALES

There still remains relatively little archaeological evidence for the consumption of fish in medieval Wales. By far the best and stratigraphically-complex assemblage of fish bones comes from the excavations at Dryslwyn Castle, Carmarthenshire. The site was developed by the Welsh lords of Dryslwyn as their main residence during the 13th century (marked by phases up to 4b on the table below). The castle was successfully besieged in 1287, and then was garrisoned by troops of the English crown (Caple 2007).

Table 1 shows the wide range of deep sea, inshore and freshwater fish identified in the assemblage. Dryslwyn Castle overlooks the River Towy, and is about 10km from the market town of Carmarthen, with its direct access to the Towy Estuary and the sea beyond. In terms of the number of bones, herring and the cod family were dominant, with eels and spurdog being consistently represented (Locker 2007). Other species may have added variety, or been part of a single mess, like those served at Elizabeth de Burgh's Lenten feast.

The only comparison with Dryslwyn Castle's fish assemblage from a town in Wales comes from the latrine in the Tudor Merchant's House in Tenby, Pembrokeshire (Caseldine 1990, 107). The Welsh name for Tenby is Dinbych-y-

Pisgod, the town of fish, and it was famous for its seasonal herring fishery. Herring and bass bones were the most common in the latrine deposits, but the latter were very small and may have been eaten as whitebait. Eel was also present but the range of species is much more restricted than that found at Dryslwyn Castle.

CONCLUSION

The archaeological evidence for the construction of fishtraps around the coast of Wales and the wider Severn Estuary has come to dominate the study of medieval fishing in the area. It has implied that there was a considerable investment in the construction of 'fixed engines' from the 12th century onwards, with an increasing size and technological sophistication. It is tempting to link this to the Norman Conquest and the development of Marcher lordships. The Normans introduced towns and market economies into much of Wales. Their Catholic church and their foundation of a host of monastic houses stimulated the demand for fish. It needed a considerable investment to increase the supply and develop the trading networks necessary to ensure the delivery of the fish. The evidence for this fish trade remains patchy and tends to be dominated by the provisioning of the court and great houses, whilst little is known about local networks and the consumption of fish lower down the social scale.

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	Phase																					
	1a	**1b**	**2a**	**2b**	**2c**	**2d**	**3a**	**3b**	**3c**	**3d**	**4a**	**4b**	**4c**	**4d**	**5a**	**5b**	**5c**	**5d**	**6a**	**6b**	**6c**	**6d**	**Total**
Elasmobranch								4				1											5
Ray								16				2											18
Roker				3		2		1			1	3	1										11
Sturgeon								1															1
Pike				1																			1
Eel	1	4	1	20		1	1	224			8	91	1										352
Conger	1		2		1		1	27			20	5	6		3								66
Herring						1	5	562			44	425	3		6								1046
Salmonid				6		1	1	50			7	24	1		1	2			1				94
Smelt												2											2
Dace								56				13											69
Chub								3															3
Minnow								2															2
Cyprinidae								211				3											214
Cod			1	1	2		1	20			6	15											46
Haddock				1			1	11			4	9											26
Ling						2						3	3										8
Hake				1			1	6			7	46	2		2		1						66
Large Gadid	1		2		3	3	8	36			5	2	4		4								68
Stickleback								6				1				1							8
Gurnard				1		1	1	3			20	40											66
Bullhead								3				2											5
Bass		1			1			2			3		1										8
Perch								1				3											4
Scad								10															10
Red Sea Bream								1															1
Sea Bream																						1	1
T L G Mullet	1			1				1				1											4
Mullet				2							1												3
Scombrid								17				1											18
Turbot/Brill								6															6
Plaice/flounder				18	1	1	3	13			13	37	5	2	3						1		97
Flatfish			1	9		1	3	4			5	4	1		1								29
Spurdog	2	1	3	31	5	6	15	103			47	91	11	2	8	1					1	1	328
Total	4	5	7	64	8	13	26	1297			144	733	28	2	20	3	1		1		1	1	2358

Table 1. Fish species found in the different archaeological phases excavated at Dryslwyn Castle, Carmarthenshire (by kind permission of Chris Caple).

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