

Medieval fishing on the Isle of Dogs

Nathalie Cohen and Nick Stevens review the background to an ephemeral find from the foreshore



“Fishmongers and fishermen lived in Poplar and on the Marsh by the beginning of the 15th century, and quite probably for centuries before they appear in the records. Like all trades in medieval times, fishing was strictly controlled. Orders, issued by the Mayor of London as Admiral of the Thames, governed the size and positioning of nets and traps. These rules were designed to prevent over fishing and keep the river clear for shipping. Disputes sometimes led to legal action and the names of some local fisherman appear in the resulting records. There was Solomon Prat of Poplar, John Thresher of Poplar, Roger Sket and Roger Gromet of Poplar, the last two named describing themselves as ‘of the marsh’. They fished locally to the east of Stebunheath Marsh, probably for sale in the immediate area.”¹

This short note presents the results of fieldwork undertaken at Millwall, on the Isle of Dogs (site code FTH13), by Nathalie Cohen (Thames Discovery Programme) and Nick Stevens (Thames and Field Metal Detecting Society / Society of Thames Mudlarks). During regular fieldwalking and examination of the foreshore during low tide windows, Nick Stevens observed numerous examples of woven basketry panels and in September 2010, a particularly well preserved example (A301) was sampled for radiocarbon dating. After sampling, the remainder of the panel was not lifted and was subsequently reburied on the foreshore.

A fish basket?

The sample was removed from a surviving panel of basket work (c. 1.20m × 0.7m) set in a deposit of Thames clays and gravels within the intertidal zone (NGR 537034 178940) and composed of reed or reed mace from a section of woven reeds. Dating by the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit (OxA) returned a date of cal AD 1415–1450. This structure appears to be part of a portable fish or eel trap. While there is good evidence from inter-tidal zone survey for Anglo-Saxon fishing activity (such as the fixed barrier and v-shaped structures recorded at Putney, Isleworth, Barn Elms, Hammersmith, Chelsea and Nine Elms)², there is considerably less structural evidence for later medieval fishing practice, although numerous artefacts associated with fishing, such as hooks and net weights, have been recorded. The best preserved example

of a fish trap, found during excavations in the Tower of London moat³, is currently on display in the Medieval Gallery at the Museum of London. This largely complete fish or eel trap (constructed of willow or poplar) was dated to the late medieval / early post-medieval period based on the associated ceramic evidence, and comprises a wicker framework with internal baskets. Given the much more fragmentary condition of the Isle of Dogs example, it is possible that its original design also incorporated internal baskets which were eroded away. However, the dimensions of the surviving wickerwork do indicate a somewhat different design.

Conclusions

Further examples of wickerwork have been noted on a number of sites along the Thames foreshore, including other locations on the Isle of Dogs, and on the south bank at Surrey Quays and Woolwich. They are generally located at very low tide levels, and are exposed only for short windows. Extremely fragile features, they are very vulnerable to the dynamic tidal regime: once visible, they are likely to be eroded out in a relatively short time. In spite of careful reburial, the Millwall fish basket had been removed by the tide within eight months of its discovery. It is hoped that other examples of these features can be recorded in detail in the future to provide further information about what must have been a popular method of fishing during the late medieval period.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Hostettler, E 2000 *The Isle of Dogs: 1066-1918: A Brief History, Volume 1* (London: Island History Trust)
2. Cohen, N, 2011 Early Anglo-Saxon Fish Traps on the River Thames in *Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology; Papers in Honour of Martin Welch BAR British Series 527* (eds A. Reynolds, S. Brookes and S. Harrington)
3. Keevill, G 2004 *The Tower of London Moat: Archaeological Excavations 1995-9* Historic Royal Palaces Monograph

For information on foreshore investigations see www.thamesdiscovery.org



Photo: N. Cohen

TOP Woodcut depicting herring fishing in Scania, from *History of the Nordic People*, first published 1555 by Olaus Magnus. The Millwall fish basket may have resembled this
ABOVE Nick Stevens cleaning and recording the fish basket on Millwall foreshore in 2010