

POST OFFICE MIDDLE OUAThe Fish Bones

Fish bones were recovered by sieving the fill of a late Medieval well, (the fill was dated to circa 1540 AD). Over fifty percent of the bones were vertebrae and details of the bones are shown in the table.

The following species were identified: roker (Raja clavata), eel (Anguilla anguilla), conger eel (Conger conger), herring (Clupea harengus), sprat (Sprattus sprattus), smelt (Osmerus eperlanus), dace (Leuciscus leuciscus), roach (Rutilus rutilus), cod (Gadus morhua), haddock (Melanogrammus aeglefinus), whiting (Merlangius merlangius), hake (Merluccius merluccius), tub gurnard (Trigla lucerna), plaice (Pleuronectes platessa).

These species represent a wide variety of habitats and suggest a number of fishing methods. With regard to the marine fish, mature cod would be the deepest water fish present, being found in depths of up to six hundred metres in a variety of habitats. Immature individuals may be found closer in shore. Hake, a moderate to deep water fish is found near the bottom, and haddock live close to the seabed in depths of up to three hundred metres, these three species would have been mainly taken on lines. Whiting is a shallow water, inshore fish and may have been caught with a combination of lines and nets.

Surface shoaling fish found in coastal waters that are seasonally netted include herrings and sprats. The use of draft nets gave rise to the herring fleets and their associated industries (which developed on a large scale in the fourteenth century) from which herrings were marketed smoked or pickled (packed in barrels). Sprats were salted, and are especially common in inshore coastal waters, the young being found in estuaries and at certain times of the year are particularly abundant. The sprat fishery of the Thames is very ancient and was usually carried out using stow nets (Wheeler 1979, 77) in which large numbers of fish can be caught.

Similarly the smelt, being very good to eat, has also been an important tidal fishery of the Thames. The largest catches were made in winter and early spring when the adults are migrating (Ibid 48). This fishery has now declined for a number of reasons including river pollution.

Rays and skates would also be caught on lines as bottom dwelling fish, but the shallow-water dwelling species were also caught in kiddles (shoreline traps) which prevented the fish returning to deeper water after feeding on the shoreline at high tide (Ibid 80). The tub gurnard although quite edible is likely to have been an incidental catch with other bottom living fish.

The conger eel prefers rocky coastlines with niches they can inhabit, and would be caught on lines. Eels are often caught in rivers and streams in eel-bucks, which trap them as they are going downstream, these traps were often used in the Thames strung across a weir or millstream (Ibid 61). Eels were also kept in fishponds. William More who was prior of Worcester from 1518-36 had 6,486 eels in his ponds, which were usually stocked in summer (Hickling 1971, 119).

Roach were also kept in Prior More's ponds, although together with perch they were his least popular fish (Ibid 119). However Izaak Walton (1653 180, 181) thought the roach although not very good to eat made very good sport for the angler. The largest and fattest roach in England were to be found below London Bridge (Ibid 181, 183).

Angling was regarded an aristocratic pastime in the sixteenth century (Vale 1977, 55-57) and many contemporary writers extolled its virtues. Gervase Markham writing in 1615 thought that the first quality of an angler was that he should be a general scholar knowledgeable about the weather, countryside, lakes, rivers and music (Ibid 57).

The salmonid vertebrae may belong to either salmon or trout, but both species could have been caught in the Thames, salmon-bucks trapped the fish on their migration upstream (Wheeler 1979, 61).

All the marine fish could have been caught in the North Sea or off the SE coast except the hake whose range extends to the northern North Sea and the western Channel, it is likely that this fish was brought to London from a northern fishing port probably salted or dried.

Prior to modern freezing methods many fish were preserved in some way for storage and marketing, i.e. dried, salted, smoked or pickled. The price of preserved fish was much lower than that of fresh fish to people in inland areas although this difference would be less at the coast where transport costs would be minimised. (Wilson 1975, 38). Preservation also meant that seasonal catches could be consumed throughout the year. The stockfish hammer was used to beat dried fish prior to its soaking in warm water before it was cooked (Ibid 44).

Sprats were pickled in brine, salmon were also pickled and salted (Ibid 45). Fish were often put into pies, cold pies preserved the fish as they were filled with clarified butter which set and excluded the air (Ibid 42). Saltfish and herrings were put into pies with fruit (Ibid 45).

Although the preserving of fish made it available cheaply throughout the year the position of the site with access close to the largest port in Britain makes it very likely that at least some of the fish was consumed fresh especially fish in season such as herrings, sprats and smelts. Comparisons were made against modern reference specimens of known size and weight, none of the archaeological material proved to be remarkable in size and no knifecuts or other cut marks were observed. Further information about the habitats of the species identified can be found in Wheeler (1978).

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POST OFFICE MIDDLE: THE FISH

P	D	P	S	V	D	U	T
H	E	R	K	E	E	N	O
A	N	R	U	R	M	I	T
R	T	M	L	T	T	D	A
Y	A	A	L	E	I	E	L
N	R	X		E	B	N	
G	Y	I	F	R	C		
E		L	R	A	L		
A		L	A	E			
L		A	G				

RAY	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
ELASMOBRANCH	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	3
EEL	-	-	-	-	36	-	-	36
CONGER EEL	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
HERRING	-	-	-	8	57	-	-	65
SPRAT	-	-	-	-	25	-	-	25
SALMONID	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	4
SMELT	-	-	-	-	8	-	-	8
DACE	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
ROACH	1	-	-	1	2	-	-	4
COD	-	-	-	-	10	-	-	10
HADDOCK	-	-	-	2	1	-	-	3
WHITING	2	2	3	7	14	-	-	28
HAKE	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	3
TUB GURNARD	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	3
PLAICE	-	-	-	5	9	-	-	14
GADGID	-	-	-	5	1	-	-	6
UNIDENTIFIABLE	-	-	-	12	3	1	124	140

TOTAL	4	2	3	43	177	2	124	355
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