

Fishing In The Archives

Fiona Tait



Fish and game stalls of the Market Hall in Birmingham, 1901

A trawl through the Archives has netted, as always, a surprising range of references to a subject not perhaps immediately associated with Birmingham.

We have, however, caught almost nothing from the medieval period. Alas, there seem to be no appropriate subject indexes for such a subject, and lack of time has prevented perusal of the murky archival depths for possible fishponds etc. If the City Archives held medieval household or ecclesiastical accounts, then something might have come to the surface more readily.

Fish was, nevertheless, an important part of the food consumed by society at this time. The regulation of diet by the Catholic Church meant that there were days every week when meat was forbidden, and during fasting at Lent, fish also formed a main part of the diet. Freshwater fish may have been the prerogative of the wealthy, but sea fish and salted fish were readily available, even in such inland areas as Birmingham. After all, Birmingham's fish market is *still* said to be the best in the country, despite its distance from the sea!

What's in a name?

Here are a few examples:

From the 15th century there is a quitclaim from Richard Kent of Pakyngton to John Dodington of Pakyngton, of land in Alspath, in the holding of William le ffyssh, 21 December, 1456.¹

In 1547, Richard Chambers of Gaddesby, Leicestershire, passed on by bargain & sale, lands in Castle Bromwich & Yardley, to one Humfrey Knight, citizen & fishmonger of London.²

Susan Fisher (1778-1839), née Penn, wife of Edward Fisher, a hinge maker and coal mine owner in Tipton, published some poems c.1820, called *The Legend of the Puritans*.

Susan's sister married into the Carpenter family and her half sister was Sarah Bache, who ran a celebrated girls' school at Islington House, Broad Street. Susan's poems are religious and melancholy and much concerned with death, especially that of mothers and children. The manuscript copy of these was given to the Library in 1938, by Bache Matthews.

A verse from 'Lines addressed to My Sister P. 1817':

For me the changing seasons bring

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*No hope of health's returning Spring;
Long tenant of my lonely room,
Mine is affliction's deepest gloom.
The painful day, the watchful night,
The glimmering taper's sickly light,
The house from social comfort free.
Then, O my sister, think of me.*³

There are a number of references to property with fishy names in the Archives. Most date after the 17th century, and are usually to meadows, called, for example, 'Fish pools', 'the Fisheys' and , perhaps more understandably, 'Fishers Coppice'.⁴

Some property deeds have conditions of tenure which relate to fish. A lawsuit over trespass in Sutton Coldfield, for example, between the Warden and Thomas Bickley, 1713 - 1833, includes a rental which shows that a previous Bickley was paying a rent of two shillings, and a dish of fish, whenever he fished Hill Hook Pool.⁵ A dish of fish when the pond was fished, was also part of the rent, in 1604, for property including Lyndriche [sic; now Lindridge, presumably,] Coppice, where authority was given to make a pool and a dam.⁶ A lease for 21 years, dated 18 February 1732, of the pond at Mere Green in Sutton, called Mare Pool, included as part of the annual rent 'one good dish of meat fish fit to be eaten'.⁷

A bill book for provisions etc. for Lady Andover, in London, kept weekly from 19 January 1761 to 27 April 1761 shows that the rich could have a wonderfully rich diet, with all sorts of fish. The week's food in this bill book, usually included a fishmonger's bill of about £1. 4 s. and most weeks, other fish were bought in addition. The week beginning 26 January included oysters and six whittings; the following week, one barrel of oysters and a lobster; that beginning 16 February, gudgeons; the next, 'Thames flounders'; that beginning 9 March, shrimps and "crimpt skate"; the week of 23 March included anchovies and prawns. In April, mackerel and a crab were bought.

The bill book also shows a regular payment to a baker, a poulterer, and a butcher and sums for greens, potatoes, salad, butter, eggs, milk and cream, asparagus, lemons, China oranges, radishes, muffins, cheshire cheese, mushrooms, split peas, gooseberries, damsons, oatmeal and coffee. On 9 February "sugar candy" was bought, and on 16 March "Cross bunnis"; hot, I hope!⁸

James Watt, the engineer, had a father and a brother who were both involved in the shipping business, and there are many accounts for salt and barrels, for salted herring in particular, which were both for home consumption and for export. Fish sometimes coasted in from abroad too. Captain John Marr, a military surveyor in Newfoundland and Canada in the 1770s, who was a brother-in-law by marriage of James Watt, wrote from St John's, Newfoundland on 15 March, 1774:

I have sent by the [ship] Rainbow, Andrew Burns, Master, bound for Ayr, a Quintal of the best Fish in the Harbour for my friend Jamey Watt, directed to James Watt, Merchant in Greenock, to whom they

will be delivered by the weekly packet and forwarded by him to Glasgow. One half of them is for himself, and the other half for Doctor Hill. Please to acquaint both those Gentlemen, that the Fish when well dressed and set a swim[m]ing in port Wine after they are eat, will afford a very wholesome Chyle, especially when well Seasoned with some of Jamey's dry Stories, and the doctor's News which he can connive at a minute's Warning, as well as Most Men of My Acquaintance.⁹

On 29 Sep. 1773, when Watt was surveying the route of what was to become the Caledonian Canal, Dr William Small wrote to him from Birmingham about the canal, 'which I am so desirous of seeing executed', and his letter suggests that the current decline of the fishing trade is hardly new:

When the herring Fishery was attempted by the people on the eastern coast, they found their own sea furnished neither plenty of the fish nor fat ones. Therefore they tried to send vessels to the western sea. At the best season these ships could seldom get round by the Orkneys on account of the periodical westerley winds & currents; & the voyage thro' the channels is long & dangerous. Had the canal then existed, I believe the fishery would by this time have been established & for want of it, besides the disappointment in that contingency, a vast number of the fishing people that used to swarm upon the eastern coast have left the kingdom, the People having changed their Diet, now using less fish.The banks of the canal would prove a seminary of Herring Fishers, Whale Fishers, and Newfoundland Fishers; for Canals tend more to breed watermen than even sea towns.¹⁰

William Forman, who worked at Soho from about 1791, and retired from Boulton & Watt's to Coldstream in 1808, where he spent his retirement farming, was in the habit of sending salmon to his previous employers. Sometimes the fish were pickled or kippered and sometimes they arrived 'much moulded'. He wrote to James Watt junr. on 18 January, 1810:

I was honoured with your esteemed letter of the 25th Nov[ember] last which I should have answered long ago; but as I could not procure a Salmon for a Kipper before the closing of the Tweed, & had spoke to my sister to endeavour to get one for me during the close time, I referred [sic] writing until I could know the result of her endeavours, which I am sorry to say has proved as unsuccessful as my own. I will run the risk of two or three being spoiled rather than you shall not have one. I am glad you received the pickled Salmon in good condition. Mr Boulton & you will please accept my best thanks for the Porter & Cheese which I received safe & most excellent they are.

He also invited James Watt junr. to go salmon fishing :

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I wish you could come a little while in the summer & try the Salmon fishing. I would assiduously attend you as carrier provided you promise not to overload me. My Brother has got a good Rod & all the necessary tackling. He has frequently caught ten or twelve in a day...¹¹

Fish was part of Scottish traditional fare, as this letter from James Watt junr. to James Brown, 24 November. 1836, shows :

I am expecting some Scotch friends and as I wish to entertain them in our country fashion, will you

Once James Watt junr. had taken up residence at Aston Hall in 1819, he devoted some time to care of the fish pools there and there is a notebook in which he logs his activities. The small volume is entitled "Memorandums respecting Fish in the Stews at Aston, 1823 - 1846."

There were three stews, and four pools: Potters Pool, Dovehouse Pool, Witton Pool and Staffordshire Pool. At the end of May, 1833, James Watt junr. decided to drain the Staffordshire pool:

the water.....having during this and the two preceding summers being impregnated with greenish matter and smelling offensively during the



A typical fish stall in the Fish Market, 1901

procure for me a good kippered salmon, and some dried haddocks and whittings, if this is the season for them. I see Yarmouth herrings advertised, called bloaters, which I suppose are red herrings of a superior quality. Will you desire Mr Davis to procure me a dozen of them, and a pot of the potted bloaters.¹²

On another dinner party occasion, James Watt junr., at Aston Hall, wrote on 8 September 1830, to John Mosley in London with an order for the following:

I have a party to dine with me on Friday next, who are fond of good things. I wish you to send me Turtle Soup and a Turbot for a party of 12, taking care that the former is newly made and the latter fresh. Also a good pineapple.¹³

months of June, July & August, and even affecting the taste of the fish.....Caught 5 to 6 cwt of eels both brown & white, from $\frac{1}{2}$ to 6lb. weight... the Brown ones are probably old inhabitants and the white ones are those I procured from the Severn in 1826, very small. Also about 60 brace of fine carp, of which 24 Brace given away to sundry friends.....These as well as the eels were in excellent condition and quite free from any taste of mud.....Quere how far the green substance on the water in the summer months may have been occasioned by the fish stirring up the mud? It is to be remarked that this state of the water has taken place entirely since the weeds, the pond weed, pikeweed etc have been destroyed by frequent cutting & tearing up the roots.¹⁴

Sounds like the right answer !

This was an age of experiments, and fish did not escape. In 1828, James Watt junr. wanted to add to the fish in the pools at Aston Hall. He wrote to John Mosley on 24 March:

I want to get down from London, some live Flounders and Soles to put into one of my pools, as it is now said they live well in fresh water. Do you not think they might be sent down in one of Whitehouse's Boats, in a Box or Tub, with holes in the lid, the water of which might be occasionally renewed from the canal upon their passage. This is, I presume, the best season for their removal.

Unfortunately, a further letter to Mosley on 12 January 1829, relates the following:

On my return here [Aston] I found both your letters respecting the Flounders. I think the cause of the death of the fish has been the number put into a small space. If, instead of 400 in each vessel, you had put a dozen, the experiment would have been more fairly tried; and I think it would be desirable to repeat it with that number in one cask & a score in the other. This will probably be better than dragging a box after the boat, as it would have to be taken out at the passing of each lock. However, you may consult with Whitehouse's boatman and try both methods, if he recommends you do so. ¹⁵

Good to know it wasn't the state of the canal water which killed them off!

The Boulton & Watt collection also has an example of a projected experiment with fish and a steam engine, which may be from c.1840, though the document is undated. One George Dodd offered a prospectus of "Remarks on the Utility and Expediency of supplying the Metropolis with LIVE SEA FISH by two sailing sloops, having the auxiliary power of being rapidly propelled by steam engines, during calms, adverse winds and tides."

The point of this? To improve and encourage fishing for the supply of delicious and nutritious food; and to rear hardy & brave seamen, who could join the British Navy in time of danger. There follows a long account of the Dutch fishing industry and the observation that nearly all the fish caught by the Dutch was salted or cured and exported to Catholic countries. Dodd felt that the English did not follow these religious teachings about diet and that generally the British preferred fresh fish to salted. However, huge quantities of fish were wasted because the fish soon ceased to be fresh, taking up to 48 hours to arrive in London. The use of steam power on the ships would speed the journey and the fish would be brought to Billingsgate alive in pure sea water, "and London enjoy a luxury it has never enjoyed before." ¹⁶

Not much help to Birmingham though. What did help Birmingham was the improvement to the fish market. The first minute book of the City's Markets & Fairs Committee mentions that there had been many complaints from

people in Phillip Street, where the wholesale fish market was held, of overcrowding and the breaking of existing regulations on time caused by the late arrival of the trains carrying fish. It was resolved to remove the market to a piece of land at the corner of Bell Street and Spiceal Street, which was levelled and part was flagged for the deposit of fish. For this, Caithness stone was used, at a cost of £175.

Two fishermen, Samuel Lake and James Anderson of Torbay, applied to open a wholesale fish establishment in the market to furnish large supplies from the Torbay area. This was permitted on condition the supply was plentiful and constant and that the price of fish to the general public would therefore be reduced. Various plans for the new market building were submitted and the suggestion was made that there should be an ice vault beneath each letting space, 20 feet below street level and lined with cement. (Thermal socks included for the traders, I hope!). The plans chosen for the market were by Edward Holmes and the Spiceal Street elevation was to be of Hollington stone. ¹⁷ Over the years there were extensions and enlargements, and now we have *another* new fish market!

Fishing could be a leisure activity as well as a means to earn a living. The City's Water Committee dealt with this side of things. After Shustoke Reservoir was completed in 1883, fishing tickets were introduced, as a means of raising revenue to offset the £3,000 which the City had paid for the fishing rights to the reservoir. Yearly tickets cost from one guinea to five guineas, depending on the type of fishing and number of rods. The first year's income from yearly tickets was £366, but it declined thereafter. Maybe fishing just wasn't an attraction for Birmingham residents. ¹⁸

This is belied by a delightful account of a fishing expedition to a reservoir by Howard Shakespeare Pearson. He recorded the Moseley Quartet's trip to Bicton, in August 1872. The account is beautifully illustrated, with a large watercoloured fish, and a pen and ink sketch of four men, with fishing rods, in a boat, titled 'Twixt Wind & Water.'

A wonderful day in our Annals in many respects. We formed a double Quartette, the Typographer being replaced by Mr Parry, who had kindly guaranteed us fishing if not fish; and all of us being accompanied by our wives.....and a large hamper.

From Barnt Green we were piloted by Captain Parry to the Reservoir at Bicton where in the Keeper's House we unpacked our traps, and prepared a Diet of Worms for theinhabitants of the Lake. After dining, we watched from the window without much pleasure the approach of thunderstorm no. 1, which having passed over, we made a first attempt to catch the fish. The fish, however, were evidently afraid of catching colds in such wet weather, and not even the bliss of being unhooked by such fair fingers as were waiting, could tempt them outside their doors. Getting impatient, the male sex, always fickle, embarked in

a ponderous skiff — flat-bottomed, leaky, and clumsy but unsuitable by anything short of an aerolite. Storm no. 2 waited until we were far from any chance of landing and then oh ! didn't it come down ! No fish in all that reservoir was wetter than we, who came to catch and were sweetly caught.

After tea matters improved a little, the sun came out and so did we, and so after much perseverance, did some fish. All caught at least one, the general average was two apiece. The excitement when Madame the Secretary's hooked a "wapper" was immense, and so fearful were the struggles of the giant of the deep that he actually overthrew his fair conqueror.....¹⁹

Being a fish hook manufacturer is an unusual occupation. There were, however, *two* companies at Redditch which produced fish hooks and fishing tackle. One firm was called William Bartleet & Sons, and was described as 'one of the leading firms of Needle & Fish Hook Manufacturers'. Another firm was 'Richard Harrison & Co., at the Metropolitan Needle & Fishhook Works, who produced for Bartleet, "a peculiar kind of fish hook which has a large sale in Scotland & Ireland ". In 1873, Richard Bartleet, a son of William, but with ' no probability of being admitted into partnership in his father's firm', attempted to go into business with Richard Harrison, to trade with Scotland, Ireland and the USA only, using hooks supplied by Harrison & Co..²⁰

From fishers of fish, to fishers of men. George Dawson (1821 - 1876), preacher, lecturer and politician, was pastor at the Church of the Saviour, which was set up on broad and non - denominational lines, from 1847 to 1876. A man of wide interests, he spread both a religious and a civic gospel, campaigning for improvements to the physical, moral and intellectual state of the town. After his death, a discourse was preached by George St. Clair, on 17 December 1876. St. Clair started with:

" I go a fishing" : John xxi. 3. How Peter tries to return to fishing but is brought back as a fisher of men to continue the work of Christ.

He concluded:

" As members of this church we are called upon to do what none others can do — to perpetuate his [Dawson's] work. Will any man go back to his fishing nets ?"²¹

And back to fishers of fish; or at least, apprentices to the fishers. Aston Union Board of Guardians preserved a register of young people put out to service from 1882 to 1894. During these years the Board sent twenty - two young men, aged thirteen to fifteen years, to Grimsby, to serve on fishing boats there. Of this number, six were apprenticed; six returned to Aston, one being described as "no sailor"; 1 absconded; four went on to deep sea fishing and of five, there is no report. Another boy who returned, but not from Grimsby, was one Albert Hands,

aged thirteen, who was sent on 7 July 1893, to try being a fish salesman in Selly Oak.²²

Fish even get a mention in a report to the Lord Mayor's European Famine Fund Committee, which was formed in December 1919, to collect funds, clothing, food for invalids and hospital necessaries. Food was particularly required for women and children left starving as a result of the Great War. In a report of 3 February 1921, Alice James, reporting on a visit to the Tyrol, where a Home and Hospital was being set up at Kitzbuhol, wrote the following :

In Innsbruck we are the only agency possessing cod liver oil. The childrens' bodies are crying out for fats, and many are the quaint manoeuvres of our Home children to procure a second teaspoonful. Cod liver oil time is eagerly anticipated .²³

I used to hate the stuff !

Well, 'fish & chips' just have to appear somewhere, and they do, in the City Council's Catering Committee minutes for 26 October 1948:

Resolved that the Secretary be authorised to make application to the Ministry of Food for the granting of licences for the sale of fish and chipped potatoes for consumption off the premises from the restaurants set out in the supplementary report of the Catering Sub Committee.²⁴

An interleaved report in this volume mentions fishy dealings at Rann Street Restaurant. On 25 February 1949, the supervisor and two assistant cooks were apprehended by the police when leaving the premises and each was found to be in possession of one pound of filleted cod. The three women were charged, fined and dismissed from the Department. Another report gives a list of meals served at functions, one of which records 102 dozen fishcakes supplied for 102 dozen persons — no seconds there then !²⁵

By the 1950s, the herring fishing industry was declining on the east coast of Britain. Charles Parker, BBC radio producer in Birmingham, and Ewan MacColl, folk singer, went over to Norfolk, Yarmouth and Peterhead to record fishermen and their relatives about their way of life and the history of the industry and songs associated with the fishing. Out of this Parker produced the radio ballad, *Singing the Fishing*. It was broadcast on the Home Service on 16 August, 1960 and won the Italia Prize for Radio that year. MacColl wrote the song "Shoals of Herring" for it, which fitted the traditional style so well that it has been thought by many to be a song from earlier times.

The field recordings made can be heard in the City Archives. Many centre on the life of fisherman Sam Lerner of Winterton, who went to sea at the age of six in the 1890s. This is a summary of one of the interviews:

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Sam Lerner remembers the jellyfish problem when hauling the nets. His hard upbringing. First visit to [South] 'Shields' and a visit to the theatre. His third voyage in the *Gemini* with his Uncle Jimmy who beat him for fouling a rope in the capstan. Shipping in the *Boybob* as a cook in a trawling smack. Fishing off Cornwall in the *Thalia*. Shipping in the *Snowflake* as a deckhand and having to teach a thirteen- year- old boy to cook. Treating his sore hands with water and laudanum whilst on the *Breadwinner*. Tells of a tragedy that happened to a family in a shipwreck in 1897.²⁶

There is a tape of the radio ballad,²⁷ the programme scripts, notes, music and songs, correspondence and publicity,²⁸ but *listening* to this dramatic tale is essential for proper appreciation of the tapestry of words and music. You can even buy the CD!²⁹

To complete this article, we have a photograph of "Roy in his shop", on the Soho Road, taken by Vanley Burke. This may be the Regal Fish Shop, 325 Soho Road. Vanley has been taking photographs in the city, and especially in Handsworth, since 1965. His first exhibition was at Grove Lane School in 1970 and was called *Handsworth from Inside*, and he has since exhibited widely, in Britain & South Africa.³⁰

Hope you enjoyed the catch!



Roy in his shop

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MS 2192

All references are to records held in Birmingham City Archives.

1. Digby 'A' 213
2. Z 75
3. 486810 [IIR 13]
4. Typescript calendar of deeds & documents relating to Birmingham before 1800, in Birmingham Reference Library, compiled by Leonard Chubb, 1925. What an appropriately named author!
5. Sutton Coldfield Borough Records 104.
6. Sutton Coldfield Borough Records 110
7. Sutton Coldfield Borough Records 158
8. Elford Hall 1393
9. B&W/M II/ 11/ 17
10. MBP 340 / 34
11. B&W/ M IV/ Bundle F
12. B&W/ Box 10/ 3
13. B&W/ Box 11/ 10
14. B&W/ MI/ 7/ 11.
15. B&W/ Box 18/ 7 and Box 18/12.
16. B&W 550.
17. BCC. Markets & Fairs Committee Minutes. Vol. 1. 1865 - 1868. Minutes 4760; 5332; 5479; 5517.
18. J.T.Bunce *History of the Corporation*, Vol. 2. (1885).
19. 395229 [ZZ 33] Vol. 1.
20. Lee Crowder. 1066 C.
21. George Dawson Collection. Vol. 10. end of ZZ.
22. GP/ AS/ 11/ 4/ 1.
23. 414255 [IIR 18] p. 53.
24. BCC: Catering & Entertainments Committee Minutes. Vol. 1. 1947 - 1949. Minute 377.
25. Ditto.
26. CPA / LC 79.
27. CPA / LC 82.
28. CPA 2/78.
29. £13.99 from the City Archives: please ask the staff.
30. MS 2192. Box 20.