

# The Early History of the Carp and its Economic Significance in England

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## Abstract

The carp, by the admission of most authoritative fish farmers and pisciculturists, is one of the most important food fish in the world. However, their origins are shrouded in mythology. Even where serious attempts have been made to trace the origins of this fish in the British Isles, the difficulty in distinguishing myth from reality has clouded the issue. This essay attempts to put the introduction of the carp to the British Isles in its correct historic perspective. Changes in the management of estates over the period c1250–1400 prompted the growth of commercial fish keeping and this created a situation into which the introduction of the carp was appropriate. The early history of the species in England is traced, and attempts to explain their rise to dominance nationally are expounded.

C F HICKLING, writing in 1971, was of the opinion that the species, carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) was introduced to England between c1450 and 1500, and was still only maintained on a small scale by fish-keepers by 1531.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore he was of the opinion that this fish, in his own words 'the mainstay of fish farming', was not a native of Europe but had been transported from the East by way of Cyprus. More recent research by the present author and Balon has shown both opinions to be inaccurate.<sup>2</sup>

Balon was the first scholar to question the opinion that the carp was introduced to Europe from China.<sup>3</sup> He showed that the River Danube contained an indigenous wild carp population since the retreat of the last glaciation c10–12,000 BC.<sup>4</sup> Cassiodorus (AD 490–585) confirmed this when he told of

the glory of King Theodorus' (AD 490–526) court in Italy:

... and from the Danube come carp and from the Rhine herring. To provide a variety of flavours, it is necessary to have many fish from many countries. A king's reign should be such as to indicate that he possesses everything.<sup>5</sup>

Written sources are insufficient without other evidence, since it was not unusual for classical writers to confuse fish species. For instance, Ovid named 'swift pike and perch' (*Rapidique lupi percaequae*) amongst the common sea fishes<sup>6</sup> when both are freshwater fish. It is, therefore, archaeology that provides the most convincing proof of the presence of carp in the Danube in prehistoric times. At the mesolithic site at Vlasac, on the Lower Danube, Prinz records carp bones found in massive quantities amongst the excavated food remains.<sup>7</sup>

Having shown that the carp was a native of the Danube from the earliest times, it needs to be explained how they came to be

<sup>1</sup> C F Hickling, 'Prior More's fishponds' in *Medieval Archaeology*, XV, 1971, pp 118–23; pp 120–1.

<sup>2</sup> C K Currie, 'Medieval Fishponds: aspects of their origin, function, management and development', unpublished MPhil thesis, University College, London, 1988, pp 183–88; E K Balon, *The domestication of carp*, Royal Ontario Museum Life Sciences Miscellaneous Publications, Toronto, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp 5–7, 17–19.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted, *ibid*, p 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ovid, *The art of love, and other poems*, (Original text with parallel translation, Loeb Library), ed, J Mozley, 1923, p 318.

<sup>7</sup> B Prinz, *Mesolithic adaptations on the lower Danube. Vlasac and the Iron Gates Gorge*, British Archaeological Reports, International series 330, Oxford, 1987, pp 58, 61.

established in the rest of Europe. Balon has discussed this but laid undue weight on the monastic contribution to the spread of fish-keeping.<sup>8</sup> More recent research has shown that fishponds came to be established by secular authorities as indications of their status as landowners from at least the 1st and 2nd centuries BC.<sup>9</sup> In England, the first large-scale building of artificial fishponds was undertaken by the members of the Norman secular aristocracy to enhance their status. The earliest monastic fishponds were frequently granted as already existing entities by wealthy secular patrons. The monastic contribution was generally later in date, and on a smaller scale than that of the laity.<sup>10</sup> Freshwater pond fish, as luxury items, were rarely consumed during Lent by ordinary monks. As Lent was a time of penance it was mainly salted sea fish that was eaten for much of the time, with freshwater fish reserved for special feasts, and the entertainment of important guests. A number of early grants of ready-made ponds to newly founded religious houses make it a specific condition of the grant that the fish should be reserved for special occasions.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Balon 1974, pp 19–21.

<sup>9</sup> Currie, *op cit*, pp 26–41.

<sup>10</sup> C K Currie, 'The function of fishponds in the monastic economy' in R Gilchrist, and H Mytum, eds, *The archaeology of rural monasteries*, British Archaeological Reports, British series 203, Oxford, 1989, pp 147–72; M A Aston, ed, *Medieval fish, fisheries and fishponds in England*, British Archaeological Reports, British series 182, Oxford, 1988, p 4.

<sup>11</sup> Currie, 'Function of fishponds', pp 159–60; Examples include the de Warennes who were particularly precise about their reasons for granting rights to freshwater fishing. At Lewes, East Sussex, their grant of 1091–8 to fish their waters in the district held the condition 'for the great feasts and for great guests and especially the (memorial) service of my mother and father . . .' (cf. L F Salzman, ed, *The Cartulary of the Priory of St Pancras of Lewes, part i*, Sussex Record Society, vol 38, 1932, p 19). At St Mary's, York, the same family made grants of freshwater fish from local meres c1138–47 'at the feast of the Assumption' and c1174–5 three times yearly at the Annunciation, the Assumption and the Nativity of St Mary, cf. C T Clay, ed, *Early Yorkshire Charters VIII*, Yorkshire Archaeological Society extra series, 1949, pp 82, 114. The Earls of St Clare granted fishing rights in their ponds to the alien priory of Stoke-by-Clare for the celebration of the feast of St John the Baptist (1138–43) and the anniversary of the death of their ancestor, Gilbert FitzRichard (c1152–73), cf. C Harper-Bill and R Mortimer, eds, *Stoke-by-Clare Cartulary*, Suffolk Record Society, Suffolk Charters IV, 1982, pp 17, 25.

Examination of detailed accounts of aristocratic fishponds before 1350 seems to indicate that little attempt was made to realize their full potential in terms of yields. In many cases they were seen as a conspicuous luxury. A good example of this is the 400 acres of ponds maintained by the bishops of Winchester, where barely a tenth of their potential was exploited.<sup>12</sup>

Despite extensive searches, this author has been unable to find reference to carp being kept in ponds in England before c1350. Research has shown that the most popular freshwater fish before this date were bream and pike, particularly on the royal table, where it is thought contemporary trends would be mirrored.<sup>13</sup>

## I

Although sea fisheries, and possibly estuarine fisheries seeking migratory fish, were involved in the commercial sale of fish, it seems unlikely that aristocratic and monastic landlords kept fishponds for the purpose of entering the commercial market before the early fourteenth century. Even after this date there is little evidence that the upper classes of medieval society kept freshwater fish for profit. Before c1250 the kings of England seem to have been able to supply the greater part of their requirements from their demesne lands throughout the kingdom. During the reign of Henry III (1216–72) royal accounts recorded the increasing necessity of purchasing freshwater fish for both stocking new ponds, and for providing for the larger feasts held at Westminster. By the early fourteenth

<sup>12</sup> E Roberts, 'The Bishop of Winchester's fishponds, 1150–1400: their development, function and management' in *Proc Hants Field Club Archaeol Soc*, 42, 1986, pp 125–38; p 130; Currie, 'Medieval Fishponds', p 44 and following. A good example is quoted by Roberts (p 127); in 1393 the Bishop of Winchester procured quantities of smoked and salt sea fish and salmon for his household from outside sources but it was only when Richard II visited Winchester in September that the episcopal ponds were fished.

<sup>13</sup> Currie, 'Medieval Fishponds', pp 50–89.

century, the kings seem to have become largely dependent on commercial sources.<sup>14</sup>

From this it can be concluded that a class existed that supplied freshwater fish for the market. Research seems to indicate that these fishermen were concentrated in areas of large natural fisheries. In the twelfth century it is recorded that, although The Fens were fished day and night throughout the year, they continued to supply large quantities of freshwater fish.<sup>15</sup> The estates of Ramsey Abbey in the fifteenth century record the considerable income derived from their fisheries there; in many cases it was almost as great as that received from livestock, and often in excess of manorial rents.<sup>16</sup> Such income, however, generally derived from rents and leases; it was not general practice for such establishments to be involved in the direct sale of the produce. Thus when Henry III required extra freshwater fish he sent to the sheriff of Cambridge and Huntingdonshire to procure them for him, almost certainly from the abundant natural fisheries in those areas.<sup>17</sup>

Generally, the greater aristocracy seemed uninterested in making profits from their own fishponds beyond the relatively meagre rents they asked for them when they were put out to farm. This is shown at St Swithun's Priory in Winchester where, as late as 1491, they were asking 23s 4d per annum for their two ponds at Fleet which covered a minimum of 130 acres. This was little more than the value they put on the one hundred fish from those ponds that the lessee was required to send to the priory each year.<sup>18</sup>

The comparatively low rent per acre of the Fleet ponds seems to be fairly typical of the medieval period. This is confirmed by Dyer, who recognized that riverine fisheries appear to have been more valuable than

ponds. He assumes that this is because river fisheries are 'generally more productive'<sup>19</sup> The disparity in rents may alternatively derive from the way in which the different types of fishery functioned. Medieval ponds have been shown to have been mainly managed by draining down and sorting the entire population after a set period (often every five years).<sup>20</sup> Ponds were hence treated as underwater pasture and once the stock had been removed, they were rated as any other pasture, i.e. devoid of its stock. The yield of a pond was not generally reflected in the rent charged, as a lessee would generally be expected to provide his own breeding stock, but in the effectiveness of the management. Rivers may have been seen differently as the stock was entirely self-generating – a major proportion of the catches of all river fisheries were of migratory fish which were not easily regulated. Therefore the rent was higher as the fish were in a wild state and were not domesticated animals provided by the lessee, as in the ponds.

It must have been these lessees who caught many of the fish that found their way on to the open market. Before 1300 the leasing of ponds was relatively rare; the upper classes kept them for their own use. But with the decline of demesne farming over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries many ponds were farmed out. This was not always the case: many landlords jealously retained their ponds, but as the fourteenth century progressed, so more ponds fell into the hands of lesser gentry and rich peasants who could afford the leases. This facilitated access to regular supplies of freshwater fish easier for these groups. In this way the rigid élitism associated with pond ownership was diluted, although the association of freshwater fish with high social status did not die away entirely until much later. It

<sup>14</sup> Currie, 'Function of fishponds', pp 156–57.

<sup>15</sup> H C Darby, *The medieval Fenland*, 1940, repr Newton Abbot, 1974, p 28.

<sup>16</sup> J A Raftis, *Estates of Ramsey Abbey*, Toronto, 1957, p 300.

<sup>17</sup> *Calendar of liberate rolls*, 1267–72, p 165.

<sup>18</sup> J Greatrex, *The register of the common seal*, Hants Record Series II, 1978, p 183; F G Baigent, *The Crondall record*, 1891, pp 474–75.

<sup>19</sup> C Dyer, 'The consumption of fresh-water fish in medieval England' in Aston, ed, *Medieval Fish*, pp 27–38; p 32.

<sup>20</sup> Roberts, 'Bishop of Winchester's Fishponds', p 132; Currie, 'Medieval Fishponds', pp 54–63.

managed to survive until the fashion of fly fishing for trout in clear chalk streams was taken up by the upper classes in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Then a new aspect of freshwater fishing became associated with prestige and status. The influx of super-market trout in recent years is now eroding this manifestation of class élitism, but it is still a sign of status to 'own a bit of fishing' in late twentieth-century England.

Commercial fishermen may have been bringing some freshwater fish to market throughout the medieval period but this increased dramatically after c1300–1350. B K Roberts has shown how wealthy peasants owned fishponds in the Forest of Arden in Warwickshire in the early fourteenth century and the wording of agreements between these people and other persons of middling status seems to imply that at least part of the produce of the ponds may have been intended for commercial sale.<sup>22</sup> There is little evidence here for members of the aristocracy being involved in this activity.

The best evidence for the development of commercial production dates from the later fourteenth century. Along the southern bank of the River Thames at Southwark was a series of waterfront plots known as 'The Stews'. This was formerly held to represent an area inhabited by prostitutes,<sup>23</sup> but it would seem that the real origin of the name derives from the fishponds there in the 1360s, and possibly much earlier.

In 1363 it is recorded that John Tryg, a fishmonger, had a messuage and yard there containing a pond for 'feeding and keeping fish' worth 13s 4d a year. He is ordered to repair three perches of wharf opposite this messuage. In the same year it is recorded that William Stode had a fishpond and yard worth 13s 4d a year plus eight perches of ditch round the said yard opposite

Maydelane. The ditches were not kept clean causing the river to flood the adjacent land. Two other persons are ordered to appear before the King for the same complaint; William Strokelady had a yard and fishpond worth £1 a year and four perches of ditch by Maydelane and William Neuport of London had there 'divers' messuages with yards and fishponds worth £1 6s 8d with 30 perches of uncleaned ditches.<sup>24</sup> Hugh Ware of London had messuages with yards and fishponds worth £4 a year and 12 perches of uncleaned ditches.<sup>25</sup> It is further recorded that these messuages backed on to an area aptly called Pyke Garden.<sup>26</sup>

These documents seem to record a thriving system of holding ponds operated by professional fishmongers to supply the open market. The description implies that not only was the system very extensive but that the fish were deliberately fattened with supplementary food. It is even possible that the ditches referred to imply a complicated system of supply leats, and possible diversion ditches to empty the ponds when the fish were needed. Archaeologists in the area have often come across rectangular tanks and ditches but, until this document was noticed, they had not been able to identify the purpose of these features.<sup>27</sup> This evidence seems to record that a commercial fish-keeping industry existed in England by the 1360s.

Supplementary feeding is, in many ways, the best indication that fish-keepers were trying to increase their yields, probably for commercial gain.<sup>28</sup> By the fourteenth century changes in the national economy were beginning to foster the emergence of

<sup>21</sup> Industrial pollution may have contributed to this.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, 'Bishop of Winchester's Fishponds', pp 123–5.

<sup>23</sup> H Douglas-Irvine, 'Southwark borough' in *The Victoria History of the County of Surrey*, IV, 1912, pp 125–62; p 148.

<sup>24</sup> C T Flowers, *Public works in medieval law*, II, Seldon Society, XL, 1923, p 188.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p 189.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p 198.

<sup>27</sup> Southwark excavation personnel, personal communication.

<sup>28</sup> Although the gardener at Abingdon Abbey was giving fish artificial food, and then selling them in the fourteenth/early fifteenth century (see R E G Kirk, *Accounts of the obedientiars of Abingdon Abbey*, Camden, new series, LI, 1892, pp 3, 52, 74), research has shown that this was an uncommon practice for a high-status institution (see Currie, 'Function of Fishponds', pp 154–6.)

a more money-based system in which the middling orders of society were able to avail themselves of opportunities to better themselves. There is perhaps more to Chaucer's Franklin having a fishpond than social climbing.<sup>29</sup> It may demonstrate that the rising middle classes were already commonly keeping fishponds.

Hickling argued that medieval fish-keeping practices were far behind those recommended by Taverner in 1600. One of his principal arguments was that medieval fish-keepers did not give their fish supplementary food.<sup>30</sup> This may have been true of the late eleventh- to thirteenth-century upper classes, but it was not beneath lower orders to try to increase their revenues, as is shown by the Southwark fishmongers. Hickling further argued that it was only with the introduction of the faster growing carp, 'still the mainstay of fish farming', that English fish-keeping was able to advance to Taverner's standards of 1600.<sup>31</sup> Ideas thought by Hickling to be Tudor innovations were known to the Romans – such as supplementary feeding – and had not been forgotten in the medieval centuries. The introduction of the carp would have opened up new areas of exploitation. Their faster growth would have encouraged commercialism as yields could be such as to make investment more worthwhile.

## II

The introduction of the carp to England seems to coincide with changes in both the economic climate and attitudes towards fishponds. It now seems probable that it began to be introduced to this country in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. This was a period described by Dyer in which:

The aristocracy always recruited new blood from below its ranks, but in the late fourteenth and fifteenth

century there was a new threat posed to the privileged classes by parvenus like Chaucer's Franklin. The leasing out of demesnes, and with them many ponds, provided just one of the changes threatening the aristocratic way of life.<sup>32</sup>

Writing in 1984, without the benefit of much subsequent research the present author suggested the following reasons for the introduction of carp to late medieval England. Although many of the conclusions drawn then have needed revision the basic premises hold true:

The reasons for its (the carp's) introduction as a popular species must now start to become plain. The . . . secularized fishing industry of England, in an age of increasing materialism, could not have failed to notice the opportunities awaiting it . . . They would have been quick to notice the hardiness of the carp, the ease with which it could be transported, and, more importantly, its rapid growth rate compared with other freshwater species. As fish culturists know only too well, the quicker a fish will grow, the more money there is to be made.<sup>33</sup>

Previous views concerning the introduction of carp to England had been based on comments in 'The treatyse of fysshynge with an angle',<sup>34</sup> attributed to Juliana Berners, and published as part of *The boke of St Alban's* in 1496. Here the author says she knows little about the carp as 'there be but few in England'.<sup>35</sup> As a consequence it was considered that the fish was largely a Tudor introduction. There is now some evidence to suggest that they had already begun to make their appearance in the late fourteenth century, at a time when changes were taking place in the fish-producing industry (this includes evidence to suggest major changes in the sea fishing industries

<sup>29</sup> Dyer, 'Consumption of freshwater fish', p 35.

<sup>30</sup> Hickling, 'Prior More's fishponds', p 123.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p 120.

<sup>32</sup> Dyer, 'Consumption of freshwater fish', p 35.

<sup>33</sup> C K Currie, 'Carp beginnings' in *Carp Fisher*, 7, 1984, pp 64-7, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Hickling, 'Prior More's Fishponds', p 120.

<sup>35</sup> J Berners, 'Treatyse of fysshynge with an angle' in *The boke of St Alban's*, 1496.

at this time.<sup>36</sup>) An early manuscript of Berner's 'Treatyse' has recently been found that seems to date from c1406 to c1450.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore it has been discovered that royal kitchen accounts of the fourteenth century record the carp.<sup>38</sup> It would seem from this that carp had begun to find their way on to London tables towards the end of the fourteenth century. The most obvious point of dispatch was the Low Countries. The first detailed writings on the keeping of carp originated from The Netherlands in the mid-sixteenth century. Janus Dubravivus' work *A new book of good husbandry* was an extremely influential work on fish-keeping.<sup>39</sup> Its writer was a Dutch cleric, and when the first English work to extol the virtues of keeping carp, John Taverner's *Certaine experiments with fishe and fruite*, was published, it went to some lengths to recommend Dubravivus as an authority on the subject. Even much later, in the early eighteenth century, the Dutch and Flemish peoples were still seen as masters of all forms of husbandry, particularly the keeping of fish.<sup>40</sup>

It may, therefore, be more than a coincidence that a Fleming, 'Frows of Flanders', was leasing 'The Stews' at Southwark at the time of the peasants' revolt of 1381 when his property there was attacked and 'wrecked'.<sup>41</sup> Dyer has suggested that peasant discontent often expressed itself by assaults on fishponds, which were seen as bastions of privilege.<sup>42</sup>

East Anglia has a long tradition of connections with the Low Countries. It is therefore not surprising that the earliest

record of carp stocked in ponds in England dated from this region in 1462, when the Duke of Norfolk stored his ponds with them. The accounts of this man record that between 1462 and 1468 he stocked six of his own named ponds with carp and made gifts for stocking in other ponds to five of his wealthy neighbours, including Lady Waldgrave and Thomas Moleyns.<sup>43</sup> The extent of the Duke's interest and the generous gifts he made suggests that East Anglia, at least, would have been reasonably stocked with the species by the 1470s at the latest.

A particularly interesting account of the keeping of carp in this region dates from 1538 when it is recorded that the Gyffard family of Suffolk had been about to supply the King with carp for his pond at Comebury when misfortune overtook them:

About Christmas 2 years ago the King wrote to Thos Gyffard to provide carp and other fish for his manor of Comebury. He drew his pools and put the chosen fish into Theves pond, which was robbed in the night, before they could be taken to Comebury, by persons from Claydon. Raffe Gyffard stole 5 carps worth 5 crowns out of the same pond, and on the 6th of this August, the Warell's pond was robbed, and a cart was traced to Steple Claydon, where Raffe Gyffard lives and nets and other things were found there. Raffe told those sent by Thos Gyffard that he would fish his ponds before his face. About 5 years ago Nicholas Gyffard (and others) . . . were taken in Thomas' park at night with stalking horse, crossbows, longbows and last St Thomas' Day a buck was killed . . . the keeper's hound drew straight towards Claydon but Thomas ordered him to stop, as he did not wish his kinsman's conduct to be talked of in the country.<sup>44</sup>

By the time of this document, carp are frequently recorded. The large number of places from which it was possible locally to obtain them must show that Hickling's comment that they had only been introduced to England on a small scale in the 1530s seems to be incorrect.

<sup>36</sup> M A Saul, 'The herring industry at Great Yarmouth c1280-c1400' in *Norfolk Archaeology*, 38, 1981, pp 33-43; P Heath, 'North Sea fishing in the fifteenth century: the Scarborough fleet' in *Northern History*, III, 1968, pp 53-69.

<sup>37</sup> R C Hoffman, 'Fishing for sport in medieval Europe: new evidence' in *Speculum* 60/4, 1985, pp 877-902; p 879.

<sup>38</sup> J McDonnell, *Inland fisheries in medieval Yorkshire 1066-1300*, Borthwick Papers, 60, York, 1981; p 1.

<sup>39</sup> J Dubravivus, *A new book of good husbandry*, 1599 translation.

<sup>40</sup> R North, *The gentleman farmer*, 1726.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas-Irvine, 'Southwark borough', p 148.

<sup>42</sup> Dyer, 'Consumption of freshwater fish', p 35; lecture given at Bristol University, Feb 1984.

<sup>43</sup> T Hudson, ed, *Manners and household expenses of England in the 13th and 15th centuries*, Roxborough Club, 1841, pp 560-3.

<sup>44</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 1538, II, p 246.

Amongst those recorded as keeping carp in ponds was Prior More of Worcester.<sup>45</sup> In 1530 the Prior of Llanthony Secunda, near Gloucester, sent a gift of carp to the King.<sup>46</sup> In Hampshire, early in 1537, Thomas Wriothesley is recorded as being about to stock the former monastic ponds at Titchfield with them. The document tells us how they were to be transported to the site, as well as indicating that commercial dealings in fish was now acceptable amongst the rising classes of society:

The bailey of Gernsey and Mr Wells of Hampton were here at the same time. Viewed the ponds – four of them a mile in length. The bailey will give Wriothesley 500 carp to stock the ponds, Mr Huttuft providing the freight, Mr Mylls tubs, and Mr Wells conveyance of the carps, so that in 3 or 4 years time he may sell £20 to £30 worth of them every year . . .<sup>47</sup>

In 1538 it is recorded that the monks of the London Charterhouse had kept carp in their ponds. At the closure of this monastery, the despoilers were keen to have their share of these fish, and a quantity were sent to the royal pond at Foyerwell.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile a number of the royal circle are recorded as eating carp. In a letter of John Husee to Lord Lisle, dated 1538, it is mentioned that two 'pasties' of carp have been delivered to the Lord Privy Seal.<sup>49</sup> Sir William Penison wrote to Cromwell that same year to inform him how the mayor (of London?) had presented 'my Lady' with:

10 great pikes, 10 carps, 10 fresh great eels, fresh salmon and sturgeon, tench, bream and all other good fishes as can be gotten.<sup>50</sup>

In 1539 Sir Brian Tuke wrote to Lord Lisle concerning a gift he had received: 'I thank my lady for her baken partridges, baken carps. . .'<sup>51</sup> Finally, whilst Thomas

Cromwell was in Farnham, Surrey, also in 1539, a Mrs Covert brought him carp worth two shillings.<sup>52</sup>

At Mangotsfield (Gloucestershire), an incident is recorded in 1537 that reflects the above mentioned Gyffard family feud, and demonstrates that fishing was not always a peaceful pursuit. Here, as the result of a local dispute, sixty people broke down a mill dam and let all the fish out, stealing tench, bream, and carp worth more than £20.<sup>53</sup>

From these accounts it would seem that carp were not hard to come by in the 1530s. They were obtained from such widely diverse places as Norfolk, Suffolk, Hampshire, London, Surrey, Worcester, and Gloucestershire. From this distribution, it would appear that they were reasonably well established in this country.

There is a scarcity of recording in matters of fish-keeping between c1350 and the 1530s for reasons that are not altogether clear. From the popularity of fish in the 1530s, when they are clearly still prestigious gifts, it might be suggested that disruptions in the recording systems brought on by the plagues and wars of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were more likely reasons than lack of interest for this absence of notice. The records suggest that carp were present in England from the late fourteenth century, and that by the 1530s they seem well established and much sought after.

### III

By the end of the sixteenth century, if not before, the carp had become the most popular freshwater fish in England. Treatises such as those written by Taverner (1600) and North (1713) give them pride of place above all other fish.

A large number of early post-medieval pond owners are recorded keeping carp.

<sup>45</sup> E S Fegan, *Journal of Prior William More*, Worcester Historical Society, 1914, p 345.

<sup>46</sup> J N Langston, 'Priors of Llanthony by Gloucester' in *Trans Bristol and Gloucester Arch Soc*, 63, 1942, pp 1–145, 136.

<sup>47</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 1538, I, p 19.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 1538, II, p 903.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 1538, I, p 716.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 1538, II, p 177.

<sup>51</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, 1539, I, p 965.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 1539, II, p 782.

<sup>53</sup> E Dennison and R Iles, 'Medieval fishponds in Avon' in Aston, ed, *Medieval Fish*, pp 205–28, 205.

The Earl of Rutland, in the early seventeenth century, bought his supply from a Lincolnshire fisherman, Paul Robinson, who charged 12d for 10-inch fish and 2s 0d for 18-inch fish.<sup>54</sup> In 1590 a John Pyke was accused of having stolen 'many and great carpes' from the Bishop of Winchester's fishpond at Frensham, near Farnham, in Surrey.<sup>55</sup> At Cornbury Park, in Oxfordshire, a mid-sixteenth century survey records three fishponds next to a mill which were stocked with bream, carp, and eels.<sup>56</sup> Carp are recorded in ponds, formerly belonging to the Archbishop of Canterbury, at Harrow, in Middlesex, in 1554.<sup>57</sup>

The popularity of carp with pond-keepers is demonstrated in innumerable post-medieval treatises. Taverner and North, noted above, devoted their comments almost entirely to the species, paying little attention to any other kinds of fish in their praises. Amongst others recording the carp is Gervase Markham, who records angling methods for them in his *Country contentments or the husbandman's recreations*.<sup>58</sup> Here he refers to them as river fish as well as pond dwellers, thereby suggesting that sufficient numbers had escaped into English river systems by the early seventeenth century for them to be so considered. Other treatises recording methods of keeping carp or fishing for them are Walton,<sup>59</sup> Worlidge,<sup>60</sup> Balgrave,<sup>61</sup> Smith,<sup>62</sup> Mortimer,<sup>63</sup> Bradley,<sup>64</sup> and Hale<sup>65</sup> to mention but a few. Many of these works are little known but would repay further study for the information on

early fish-keeping and fishing that they contain.

That fishponds were still popular in the post-medieval period with a great many landowners can be demonstrated from numerous sources. Roger North indicates that freshwater fish are still considered luxury items at the beginning of the eighteenth century:

But you may contrive to keep your Stock (of fish) within Compass; for you may enlarge the Expence of your House, and gratify your family and friends that visit you, with a Dish as acceptable as any you can purchase for Money; or you may oblige your friends and Neighbours, by making Presents of them, which, from Country-man to the King, is well taken; . . . it is a positive Disgrace to appear covetous of them, rather more than of Venison, or any other thing; so that Presents are not only expedient, but necessary to be made by him that professeth a Mastery of fish.<sup>66</sup>

Further witness to this statement is the account of Lord Wharton of Upper Winchendon in Buckinghamshire for the year 1686. Many hundreds of 'great carp' are taken from a number of ponds on his estates, some for sale and some for restocking other ponds.<sup>67</sup> In Sussex, the diaries of Thomas Marchant show that a large number of ponds in that county were stocked with carp. Here Marchant spent much of his time as a fish dealer, travelling from pond to pond to catch the fish therein.<sup>68</sup> At various places in Oxfordshire, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ponds are identified as being systematically managed to produce good sized carp for eating and stocking.<sup>69</sup> In Hampshire, a number of ponds are identified within the Titchfield area in the 1740s that contain carp.<sup>70</sup> At least a dozen can still be identified today, four of these

<sup>54</sup> D Davis, *A History of Shopping*, 1966, p 128.

<sup>55</sup> H J Baker and H C Minchin, *Frensham then and now*, Farnham, 1948, p 16.

<sup>56</sup> C J Bond and R A Chambers, 'Oxfordshire fishponds' in Aston, ed, *Medieval Fish*, pp 353-70, 366.

<sup>57</sup> C K Currie, 'Earthworks in The Grove, Harrow-on-the-Hill' in *London Archaeologist*, vol 5, no 7, 1986, pp 180-85, 180.

<sup>58</sup> G Markham, *Country contentments*, 5th edition, 1633, pp 59-102.

<sup>59</sup> I Walton, *The compleat angler*, 1653.

<sup>60</sup> J Worlidge, *Systema agricultura*, 1669.

<sup>61</sup> J Balgrave, *The epitome of the art of husbandry*, 1669.

<sup>62</sup> J Smith, *England's improvement revived*, 1673.

<sup>63</sup> J Mortimer, *The whole art of husbandry*, 1707.

<sup>64</sup> J Bradley, *A general treatise on husbandry and gardening*, 1721.

<sup>65</sup> T Hale, *The complete book of husbandry*, 1756.

<sup>66</sup> R North, *A discourse of fish and fishponds*, 1713, p 67.

<sup>67</sup> R A Croft and A R Pike, 'Buckinghamshire fishponds and river fisheries' in Aston, ed, *Medieval Fish*, pp 229-66, 264-5.

<sup>68</sup> E Turner, 'The Marchant diary' in *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, XXV, 1873, pp 163-99.

<sup>69</sup> Bond and Chambers, 'Oxfordshire Fishponds', p 366.

<sup>70</sup> Hants R O, 5M53/1110-4, letters relating to the management of former Wriothesley estates in the mid-eighteenth century.



ponds being those stocked in 1538 by Thomas Wriothesley (see above).

Although North records a flourishing market for carp, there are hints of some decline in the keeping of fishponds in the post-medieval period. In the more remote parts of the country, he comments that the current fashion is to let estates to tenants, who tend to neglect fishponds.<sup>71</sup> Taverner claims also one of his reasons for promoting the qualities of the carp so strongly is that fish-keeping is no longer as popular as it once was.<sup>72</sup>

#### IV

A study of medieval fish-keeping shows that the bream was by far the most popular freshwater fish on the royal table in the thirteenth century. Other species that enjoyed popularity amongst the non-migratory species were the pike and tench.<sup>73</sup> By the time of the first major treatises on fish-keeping in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these fish had been supplanted in popularity by the carp.

It has been suggested above that the carp's faster growth and its hardiness were the principal reason behind its ascendancy. Medieval fish-keeping seemed to work on a five-year maturity cycle.<sup>74</sup> Dubravius, writing in 1563 about fish husbandry based mainly on carp, seems to rely on a three-year cycle.<sup>75</sup>

By the post-medieval period, this latter cycle seems to have been accepted by most commentators. It is also generally agreed that the bream is a slow growing fish, although the rate of its growth seems to have been exaggerated by Hale who claims they are not 'profitable' as they take fifteen to twenty years to grow to edible size.<sup>76</sup>

Taverner is more realistic when he records that they need five to six years to reach edible size, but this is only if they are kept in a large pond and kept from overbreeding.<sup>77</sup> North repeats this advice, saying that they are 'slow growers' on waters of less than ten to twelve acres.<sup>78</sup>

In comparison, the carp grows much quicker. North claims various rates of growth, all of which are much quicker than bream or other indigenous cyprinids such as tench or roach. With correct keeping, he claims they can grow from ten to eighteen inches in one or two years. This is a weight gain of approximately two pounds, a weight the bream cannot usually obtain in five years. Bradley claims that twelve rods of water will produce forty-two carp and eighty-four tench in three years to edible size.<sup>79</sup>

Hale gives other reasons why the carp should be preferred to other fish. He claims they command the best price in the market; they also '... require so little trouble, or is liable to so few accidents'. They are praised for their ability to endure the hardship of cold winters, and are much harder than other fish 'to take by the common methods of stealing'.<sup>80</sup> North records that London is the best market for carp, where they are in much demand. Here a fish between thirteen and sixteen inches can be expected to realize 12d.<sup>81</sup>

North gives advice on bulk selling. He urges the seller to contact the person being sold to before the event so that a price can be agreed beforehand. The common procedure seemed to be with him for the seller to transport the fish to the buyer. North considers it a disadvantage to have to haggle after the fish have been transported. If the sale is of fish for eating, the price will be by the measure of so much per inch. If

<sup>71</sup> North, *Discourse of Fish*, p 69.

<sup>72</sup> J Taverner, *Certaine experiments with fishe and fruite*, 1600, p 22.

<sup>73</sup> Currie, 'Medieval Fishponds', p 255.

<sup>74</sup> Roberts, 'Bishop of Winchester's Fishponds', p 132, Currie, 'Function of Fishponds', pp 154-5.

<sup>75</sup> Dubravius, *New book of good husbandry*, p 19.

<sup>76</sup> Hale, *Complete book of husbandry*, p 252.

<sup>77</sup> Taverner, *Certaine experiments*, p 8.

<sup>78</sup> North, *Discourse of Fish*, pp 53-4.

<sup>79</sup> Bradley, *General treatise*, p 346.

<sup>80</sup> Hale, *Complete book of husbandry*, p 255.

<sup>81</sup> North, *Discourse of Fish*, pp 63-4, 90.

they are for stocking then the price is so much per hundred or dozen with the fish to be between certain lengths. He gives examples of between seven and ten inches and between nine and twelve inches.<sup>82</sup>

On the return from ponds, North gives the most detailed information. He compares his returns with that of the normal return per annum on meadowland, which is where most ponds are built. This is £2 per acre at the most in 1713. He argues that four acres of ponds will return 1000 carp per year fed to fourteen or fifteen inches (about two to two-and-a-half pounds in weight). We have seen above that a carp of this size can command a price of 12*d* each but North chooses to halve this to 6*d* to prove his point. From this, with carriage deducted, the seller can expect to make £6 5*s* 0*d* per acre.<sup>83</sup>

It might be wondered what sizes these fish attained in comparison with the modern varieties, which can exceed 40 pounds weight in favourable conditions. Roger North notes that his carp can reach eighteen inches (about four pounds weight) in five years. It was not usual to keep fish much larger than this for the commercial market. Nevertheless Taverner claims to have seen carp in 1600 that were thirty-three inches from between the eye to the fork of the tail. Such a carp, even allowing for poor condition factors, could be expected to exceed twenty pounds weight.<sup>84</sup>

William Peard gives some idea of the maximum weights for carp in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He recalls how a water known as Stonehead Lake was fished in 1793 to produce 2000 carp of 'large dimensions' including a fish of thirty inches length, twenty-two inches breadth and weighing eighteen pounds. In Weston Hall, Staffordshire, he notes that

there is a painting of a carp of nineteen-and-a-half pounds weight. In Sussex, a Mr Ladbroke presented Lord Egremont with a brace of fish from his park at Gratton that weighed thirty-five pounds between them. It is recorded that Ladbroke made this gesture to demonstrate to the men of Surrey the sort of carp Sussex was capable of producing.<sup>85</sup>

## V

The growth of a commercial market in freshwater fish seems to coincide with the gradual decline of direct demesne farming. As more lords were prepared to lease out property for money rents, so the opportunity for large-scale acquisitions of former demesne fishponds arose. This created a situation where profitable breeding of a high status, and hence, highly-priced, food item, became increasingly viable.

Whereas, there can be little doubt that some lesser fish-keepers were able to produce freshwater fish for the market before the fourteenth century, opportunities increased dramatically thereafter. Not only were commercial fish-keepers able to acquire more ponds in which to produce stock, but the decrease in the number farmed by the aristocracy led to an increased demand for freshwater fish on the open market. It has been shown that the kings of England, formerly maintaining hundreds of acres of ponds, came to be largely dependent on the commercial market by the fourteenth century.

However, not all the upper aristocracy leased out their ponds. Many of the country aristocracy maintained fishponds to supply fish well into the post-medieval period. The idea of freshwater fish as a status item of food may have declined somewhat as fishponds became accessible to the lower orders of society, but high prices continued to ensure that only the wealthy could afford

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p 69.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p 86.

<sup>84</sup> Personal observation: condition factor is a fish-farming term referring to the ratio of length to weight in fish. Low condition factors generally mean the fish are underfed.

<sup>85</sup> W Peard, *Practical water farming*, Edinburgh, 1868, p 153.

to eat them. The evidence suggests that the earliest commercial freshwater fish breeders were directing their sales at a growing London market. The arrival of the carp in England seems to be related to these increasing opportunities of making large profits from the sale of freshwater fish.

The overall evidence shows that the carp is likely to have come to Britain at some time in the fourteenth century although it was only over the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that the species established itself in any numbers. By the 1530s it was well established and appears to have been much prized by the aristocracy and fish stealers alike. The methods used for the keeping and breeding of the fish achieved a very reasonable standard which was maintained until at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. At some time between c1800 and the 1950s tastes changed,

and the fish declined in popularity as a table fish. The exact reasons for this decline must await further study.

It is this that led to the neglect of the many ponds throughout the country that held carp. This loss of interest probably led to the silting up and possible infilling of many of these ponds. The loss of habitat resulted in a reduction in the distribution of the species to such an extent that by the 1950s popular angling writers thought carp relatively scarce compared with its cousin the tench, which maintained a wide distribution. Nevertheless, the evidence shows clearly that the carp was, for nearly four centuries, the most popular freshwater fish in England and was widely cultivated.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>86</sup>Throughout this article, the term freshwater fish refers to fish species that live entirely in freshwater. Migratory fish, like the salmon, who come into freshwater to breed, are not considered true freshwater species.

## Notes and Comments

### WINTER CONFERENCE 1991

Will be held on Saturday 7 December at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. The theme of the conference is 'Rural Society and the Poor'. Papers will be by Dr Paul Glennie on 'Early Modern English Labourers', Dr Dennis Mills on 'The Peasantry and the Poor in Open and Closed Villages', Dr Christine Hallas on 'Nineteenth-century Poor in the Yorkshire Dales', and Dr Alan Howkins on 'The Intermediate Workforce: Peasants, Labourers and Farm Servants'. The Conference begins at 10.30 am and lasts to 4.30 pm. Registration forms can be obtained from Dr Peter Dewey, History Department, Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX.

### SPRING CONFERENCE APRIL 1992

The Society's annual residential Spring Conference will be at Nottingham from Monday 13 to Wednesday 15 April. Accommodation has been arranged at Florence Boot Hall on the spectacular campus of the University of Nottingham. A full conference programme of papers by leading figures in agricultural history will be arranged and the traditional field trip

on the Tuesday afternoon will be to the nearby famous open field village of Laxton. Further details can be obtained from the local conference organizer, Professor John Beckett, Department of History, University Park, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD.

### SPRING CONFERENCE APRIL 1993

This will be at Gregynog Hall near Welshpool, Powys. Further details will appear in the next copy of the *Review*.

### NORTHAMPTONSHIRE RECORD SOCIETY

Members may wish to know that the Northamptonshire Record Society has moved, together with the County Record Office, to Wootton Hall Park, Northampton, NN4 9BQ. This has compelled the Society to reduce the stocks of its publications, and many volumes from the record series, and copies of *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, are available at reduced prices from the Secretary, Northamptonshire Record Society, Wootton Hall Park, Northampton, NN4 9BQ.