

Salmon fishing on the Tweed

Past . Present . Future

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Sustaining the intangible heritage of net fishing:
Berwick-upon-Tweed and the in-shore Northumberland fishing villages

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Whilst every effort has been made to trace the owners of copyright material, in a few cases this has been impossible and we take this opportunity to offer our apologies to any copyright holders whose rights we may have unwittingly infringed.

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Salmon fishing on the Tweed: a brief history of controversy

Written accounts of net fishing on the Tweed exist from the 1200s, but the skills and knowledge of the river date back to before records began. From the late 18th century this local industry grew with the advent of ice-packing technology and Berwick Salmon was exported in great quantities by rail and sea to London and other cities. It was served in the best hotels and restaurants. Until the 1980s there were more than three dozen salmon-netting fisheries in the tidal section of the river Tweed¹. The industry contracted rapidly with the closure of the Berwick Salmon Fisheries Company in 1981 and following an organised buy-out of in-river net fisheries by the Atlantic Salmon Conservation Trust in 1987. Those fisheries technically lie dormant. Fishing rights cannot be extinguished through lack of use, but those held by the Tweed Foundation are currently restricted to conservation uses only².

The buy-outs were contentious and met with local ill-feeling that lingers to this day. One national newspaper reported the conflict under the headlines: “Net fisheries made Godfather-type offer”³. Local MP Sir Alan Beith (who represented Berwick upon Tweed from 1973-2015) is reported to claim that anything said about salmon is going to be controversial in the absence of “reasoned discussion between the parties involved”. Until recently he represented the industry in annual Westminster debates, claiming that; **“salmon fishing is of great economic significance to the area....a colourful and picturesque activity which is part of Berwick’s tourist trade....an important part in the livelihood of Berwick that should have a part to play in the future”**⁴. Only two net fisheries remain active in the area today; one at Paxton and one at Gardo (beside Berwick Old Bridge). The fishery at Paxton now works in partnership with the Tweed Foundation, fishing only for scientific purposes. Previously, salmon netted at Paxton was smoked in a commercial operation in Spittal and sold with a label proudly illustrating its local source.

Loss of the nets reduces the market for wild salmon because it is illegal to sell any salmon caught by a rod. This highlights clashes (cultural as well as economic) between game, commercial and heritage fishing interests. Net fishing jobs and income lost in Berwick since the 1980s (including boat-building, tourism and port activity) have not been replaced by new opportunities associated with game-fishing (angling) which are concentrated some distance upstream, west of Coldstream. The River Tweed Commission claim that the angling related economy of the upper Tweed has increased to an estimated £24 million, providing 513 full time equivalent jobs (80 of these supported through fishing income, including boatmen and bailiffs)⁵. Angling attracts visitors and investors⁶ from outside the area- but economic impact calculations do not capture the full costs, benefits and displacement effects (intangible and unintended). Notably, Berwick and former netting communities do not benefit from game fishing.



Starting a conversation: listening to local concerns

Working alongside Berwick 900, we have been collecting impressions of the salmon fishing industry through a series of 'pop-up' citizen-led story-telling events. When a story-telling booth was installed in the Town Hall over a long weekend in July 2015, conversations became more animated whenever net fishing was immediately visible at Gardo, licensed for a short summer season to co-incide with the town celebrating 900 years of history.

Archives and family histories provided one measure of local historical significance. Popular memories included the vicar of Norham "blessing the salmon" at the opening of the netting season, midnight on 14th February, a custom that ended in 1987 when the local fishery closed. Modern traditions have been kept alive and 2016 will mark the 70th annual crowning of a new Salmon Queen. As well as recording personal memories we wanted to stimulate a wider-ranging conversation about the potential to revive and sustain net fishing on the Tweed.

This publication offers a record of this process. It allows local citizens, whose voices are rarely heard in major decision-making, to share their knowledge and experience. It sheds light on a deeply-felt public attachment and sense of belonging to net and coble fishing and the Tweed. We heard competing points of view and multiple claims to the 'truth'. We also witnessed frustration among the non-angling public that inherited oral accounts can be dismissed as outmoded or mythical. To help make sense of these different perspectives we drew inspiration from Berwick's established 'slow food' and 'slow living' civic organisations which promote local cultural heritage, notably intangible factors of local distinctiveness and well-being, emphasising community organising that empowers local citizens.



Wild Salmon

Wild salmon on the Tweed are Atlantic salmon. They are an anadromous species, which means that they live in freshwater as juveniles but migrate to sea as adults before returning to spawn. Atlantic salmon return to their native river and even to the same stretch of the river from which they were born. This means that several different Atlantic salmon ‘populations’ may exist within the same river. Atlantic salmon have protected status under the Bern Convention and EC Habitats and Species Directive⁷.

The River Runs Through It

The river Tweed intimately connects a whole system of life: the journey of the salmon upriver is one event that is intertwined along its course with a rich ecosystem of wildlife, landscape, human relationships, cultural heritage and livelihoods.

The Tweed is a Scottish river which runs to the English North East coast at Berwick upon Tweed: 80% of the Tweed District is in Scotland; 20% is in England. The River Tweed Commission was set up in 1807 (originally as the Tweed Commissioners) charged with the general preservation and increase of Salmon, Sea Trout, Trout and other freshwater fish in the River Tweed and its tributaries as a cross-border catchment, as a single entity and as an ecological and administrative necessity⁸. Within this single legal administration, different stretches of the river are differently categorised, such as ‘mixed stock’ coastal fisheries at Berwick, where fish from two or more river systems may swim, complicating the management of individual stocks. The RTC works closely with the Tweed Foundation, which is a charitable company registered in Scotland to introduce “a professional scientific approach to fisheries management. (It) also encourages the use, conservation and the management of fishery resources for recreational activities”⁹.

At the mouth of the Tweed, the Town Council represents the combined interests of Berwick on the northern side and Spittal and Tweedmouth on the southern side. Local government responsibility lies with the unitary authority of Northumberland County Council. A few miles inshore, the Tweed forms the boundary between England and Scotland for a distance. The English side of the river is remarkable for the large number of former fishing shiels and the hidden footsteps of generations of men who worked in the salmon fishing industry on the lower stretch of the river.

Artisan net fishing as “a way of life” and “integral to the place”

To the casual observer, fishing by net from a wooden coble appears physically hard but technically simple. In reality, artisan net fishing requires considerable skill and intimate knowledge of the running patterns of the fish. Net and coble fishing endured for hundreds of years through a mixture of conservation and adaptation: men and boys learned to fish partly from direct experience and partly from accumulated knowledge of generations who quite literally felt their way along the river-bed, navigating by means of a complex network of stories and intimate knowledge of continually fished stretches of river. These instincts offered insights which modern technology could not reproduce. This is the ‘intangible heritage’ of artisan net fishing that citizens of Berwick told us was integral to Berwick as a way of life¹⁰.

Scale of democracy matters in the net-fishing debate. Berwick is represented by increasingly remote governing bodies, including cross-border agencies; it is locally perceived as an ‘outpost’; this concerns the **power to act on local interests**.

Intangible heritage is central to the story because it is what we risk losing forever. Place-specific intrinsic knowledge is ‘**critically endangered**’ much in the same way that wildlife can be.

We heard **different views** about what is valued, such as a **living river**, and how to keep knowledge alive that is embodied and rarely written down. This suggests that the heritage people value goes beyond material objects and records that may be held in a museum.

“There are heroes in this story, especially Scott’s close neighbour and friend, Lord Somerville of Pavilion. Through his drive and enthusiasm, both locally and with legislators in London, he was instrumental in **wresting power from the previously all powerful and largely netting lower river Association to the more angling oriented Western Association of up river proprietors**, who rightly felt that access to Tweed’s salmon was cut off at Kelso or below by some extraordinarily predatory and uncompromising tactics designed to allow as few fish as possible upstream, and to maximise the profits by selling **salmon for food** to the exclusive benefit of the lower proprietors.” (our emphasis, not in the original document.)

“And so the River Tweed Commission was born 200 years ago, and despite many changes in Government and Tweed Acts of Parliament since then.....the Tweed is best governed by those who live by and love it.....despite pollution, poaching, disease, high seas, netting and other woes” (*Andrew Douglas Home, Chairman, River Tweed Commission 2007*)¹¹.

Conflicting knowledge of the river: conflicting representations

Institutional and corporate actors have increasingly become ‘sustainability champions’ to align business viability with conservation targets. This is one way of defining sustainability but there are others, that emphasise local social inclusion or cultural diversity, for example, that seek to qualify quantitative models of sustainable development. All representations can be positively or negatively framed. A **political ecology approach** recognises that social and environmental conditions are deeply and inextricably linked. People’s relationships with nature, and how the natural world is represented (by conservation organisations for instance), are the outcome of political processes as much as they are culturally constructed through direct experience and understanding of nature itself. Interest groups (such as sporting, commercial and heritage fishing) represent the social and the natural ecosystem of the Tweed in different ways, privileging different forms of knowledge¹².

“They want all the nets off. They think the nets catch all the fish. They don’t understand, they’ve never been to see. They think the net basically goes to the top of the river right down to the bed and right the way across, and nothing ever gets through it or under it or past it– that’s their concept. If the anglers are having a bad year it’s because the nets have taken all the fish. It’s nothing to do with what’s happening out to sea. It’s purely the nets” (*A former Tweed Commissioner, interviewed in 2014*).

“You can do catch and release with net and coble just like you can do catch and release with rods, and it’s a highly inefficient way of netting as well, so it’s perfectly compatible with conservation” (*A Tweed Foundation Biologist, interviewed in 2014*).

“(netting stations) can only catch at certain tides; every fishery has its time. Fish will go past 80% of the time, you canna stop them for whatever reason. But as a rule, the nets always caught the lower grade smaller fish because the larger fish will generally run in bigger waters, past in one go.It’s the larger fish that breed best....I would say preserve a smaller quantity of larger fish. I have had this discussion (with the RTC) and they dismissed it. Because it impacted on the rods” (*Sam Dixon*).

Memories

“When I was growing up, because I was born in 1952, we would get a little bit of salmon, poached, left on the doorstep. We didn’t know who had left it there. But in those days the salmon was regarded as a luxury and you only got it if you knew someone in the fishing industry” (*Elaine Crosthwaite*).

“Growing up over Spittal in my primary years (I) spent a lot of time over the summer holidays on the beach watching the men bringing in the nets and casting the nets and watching them row them out and row them in. It was very much part and parcel of what I knew of the town” (*Keith Saunders*).

Horncliffe village in the 1960s: “In the summer we spent a lot of time on the riverside and I remember my brother and I walking from Horncliffe to Yard Ford to take food to our Dad, because the men just didn’t have time to come home to eat.... I don’t like (salmon) so on feast day I was never made to eat it” (*Joyce Benton*).

Between generations

On the Quayside, 1950s: “I can remember going with (my grandfather) as a young lad and I had my own box of nails, and a hammer, and I used to help him assemble the fish boxes. That was his job” (*Douglas Allan*)

Netting at Gardo, 2015 (for Berwick 900): “its given some of the former crew a chance to do what they enjoy and its given some young men of the town an opportunity to try it... keeping the skills and the tradition alive” (*Michael Hindhaugh*).

Young people: “do know about the fishing because when you were a kid, sometimes with my Dad, we’d be going somewhere like football training and if they were fishing (at Gardi) my Dad would want us to watch them. When I was little I’d go, what’s this all about? But now I really understand. We get lots of people come sit and watch us. I just think the fishing should carry on” (*Rory Hindhaugh, 17*)

Loss and change

“People used to come to Berwick because of the salmon fishing. I know things change. Whether we like it or not that’s the way it goes. But I’m sad to see it all go” (*Derek Anderson*).

“So now the Berwick area gets no income off the salmon fishing. I’m a fourth generation netsman and now I’m left with nothing” (*Jason Straughan*).

The Atlantic Salmon Conservation Trust, buying out the fisheries; “their aim was laudable; they realised that stock were in decline and the idea was to preserve wild salmon by getting rid of the nets; closing down the stations on the lower Tweed. They were conserving salmon. But of course in doing that they also increased the value of the salmon beats for the rod fishermen up-river, which is a very profitable thing” (*George Miller*).

Fishing “used to be a working man’s industry but these days (the angling’s) for the elite. It’s not for us when they charge a thousand pounds a day to go fishing. ...All that knowledge that was there that was intrinsic in the working man’s industry will be lost. No matter how many scientists or statisticians you throw at it now they don’t have that same instinct and understanding of fish behaviour, because none of them have been fishermen” (*Matthew Bowes*).

There are striking parallels between the decline of the net fishing industry in the 1980s and closure of the coal fields, both concentrated in the North East of England. Both industries became uneconomic due to cheaper production methods- because competitiveness calculations do not account for social and cultural assets. The loss of jobs was a blow not only to individuals but whole communities and a region faced with low and declining employment. Closure resulted in lifestyle changes and the erosion of a once proud and resilient cultural identity for the close-knit fishing communities involved.

“A relative of mine, Robert Burgon, worked on a batt at Greenhill and as a young lad during the school holidays I would row with him right up as far as Norham and in the morning we’d run back and pick up the salmon that was caught on Holmes’s batt and take it back to the quayside at Berwick. That went on from Monday to Friday. There was no fishing allowed on Saturday or Sunday. The rest of my relatives were on the herring boats, away three months at a time. They’d bring their catch into Berwick quayside where it was taken over by the fishwives and it was packed in massive barrels, salted and sent to Russia. My grandfather bought a fish and chip shop in Bridge Street in the 1930s. All the family worked in the fish business until after the war.”

William John Burgon Affleck



“My great grandfather William Wood was born in 1874. He was a salmon fisherman from Tweedmouth. He married a lady called Isabella Dixon in 1897 and they had ten children, only seven of which survived into adulthood. One of his children was my grandmother and she told me that, in the early 1900s, before the first world war, life was very hard between the salmon fishing seasons, because there was little employment, and her father would mend nets to get some income. And the children would have to go to the soup kitchen which was down at the West End at Tweedmouth. My great grandfather served in the navy in WWI but after the war he returned to work at Crabwater. In the late 1920s he had an accident. He slipped on the wet rocks while they were dragging in the nets and he was very badly hurt. He was taken into Berwick Infirmary and died a couple of days later”

Elaine Crosthwaite

Competing theories

It is widely accepted that in the early 20th century there was an exceptional surge in the numbers of salmon in the Tweed, which declined after the 1960s, and the pattern shifted to autumn fish. Reasons for the decline are not fully understood, but certainly include advances in sea-fishing technologies, and perhaps natural cyclical fluctuations in different salmon stocks. Some netting stations closed as the rise of fish farms suppressed prices, but we heard from people who were angry that fisheries were bought out and closed down because they were blamed for the decline in fish numbers. Many opinions were offered on the subject, and some contested the claim that there was an overall decline in fish numbers at all.

Poor river quality

“When it got to the 1960s there was disease in the river and there was a lack of demand and a lack of salmon and (this meant) many of the fisheries weren’t really making a living wage out of it” (*George Miller*)

Off-shore drifting

“It’s a view of a lot of the locals that it was the off-shore fishing that killed the industry. It wasn’t the net fishing that depleted the stocks” (*Douglas Allan*)

Predators

“Because they shut down the netting stations they’re not controlling the seal population. Much as they’re lovely creatures, if there’s too many of them they kill all the salmon, all the sea trout” (*Matthew Bowes*)

Salmon stocks go up and down

In some years, like 2014, the fishery at Paxton had a terrible year. The year before that an absolute bonanza- so it’s one thing or the other. Generally it’s not profitable, it’s not consistent

The dramatic fall in numbers (catches in 2014) prompted claims that salmon was on the brink of vanishing. But others say that such predictions are overstated. Explanations as to the cause of the drop are “not known and probably will never be known. We know dramatic falls in catches from time to time. Spring salmon suffered a decline in the 1960s. But such falls have been followed sooner or later by recovery.”
(*A Tweed Netsman, 2014*)¹³

Rods and nets

“I’ve seen two sides of it. Working the netting stations when I was younger, then on to the ghillying. They’ve got rid of the netting stations and the salmons declining so it’s not the netting is it? I’ve seen so many fish killed where anglers canna tell the difference between spring fish, black fish and kelts, killed and thrown away. It will empty the Tweed of salmon. It’s all down to money and politics. It’s not about the salmon welfare or the locals (or the river ecosystem or the local community or local economy)” (*Jason Straughan*)

“There is nothing like the feel of a salmon. But it is now so expensive to fish (by rod). Now it is only the elite, those with a lot of money, who can afford to fish for salmon because the beats are on private estates—nothing the ordinary man can afford” (*Michael Ridgway*)

“the effort it takes to get (the salmon) out of the water, the fish is played for a long while on the line. Even if it does survive, how can it not reduce their ability to reproduce? The pressure from the rods; people think that nets used to kill thousands and rods don’t, which is totally wrong. Nowadays all the technology that rod fishermen have, shooting headlines and that; it will empty the Tweed” (*Sam Dixon*)

Unfairly represented as outmoded and uneconomic?

The right to catch and sell wild Tweed salmon is only held by net fisheries. Rod-caught salmon may not be sold commercially. This means that without the nets, there is no legal source of Tweed salmon to the wider, non-angling public. Why did the fishing decline? We heard of many interrelated explanations for the decline of the industry. Some insisted that “net fishing is not economically viable because economics drives everything”. Some believe that net fishing died out because it had become “an old man’s industry”¹⁴. Others emphasised a desire for local businesses and civic organisations to help sustain net fishing, by appreciating the multiplier effects and intrinsic value of fishing activity at the mouth of the Tweed (for tourism, heritage and hospitality). One option might be to look for ways to extract payment for watching or participating in fishing as a cultural event. This resonates with alternative methods of accounting for diverse local assets, such as indicators of ‘gross domestic happiness’. Berwick is actively involved with the international slow food movement, for instance, which stresses the need to respect the rhythms of nature and the quality of typical food products; to defend traditional production processes, foodstuffs and small producers from food standardisation and ‘cultural imperialism’. Profound local and global economic imbalances since the 2008 financial crisis have led to conventional economic models losing their credibility. In this context some of the suggestions raised by local people in this publication are timely and important¹⁵.

The economics of rods and nets

“You are paying for the sport. That’s one of the differences between the rods and the nets—with net fishing you have to catch the salmon to get any value, but with the rod fishing you don’t. So long as there are enough salmon to keep people coming you don’t actually have to catch any” (*A Tweed Foundation Biologist, 2014*).

“(The last coastal net fishery) he’s just sold up now. He was offered a (lot of) money a couple of year ago and he wouldna take it. From the Atlantic Trust. He wouldn’t take it. And he said he had to take less now, same people. And within a fortnight it was all away, all the nets, all the boats, not to be used again. Like Margaret Thatcher with the steel works in Consett (dismantled) within a week” (*Jack Weatherburn*).

“The Tweed salmon rod-fishing industry is the biggest in the UK with a turnover of at least £16 million a year. Does Berwick look to you like a town with a £16 million pound industry on its doorstep? Scientists and conservationists who collude with this should be ashamed. This is what makes netting on the lower Tweed ‘uneconomic’ even while there is a market for the catch. History, skill and knowledge dating back thousands of years will be lost and with it the livelihoods of local people” (*A.K. Roberts, postcard comment*)



Sustaining a seasonal livelihood

The salmon netting season has always been strictly regulated, traditionally opening at midnight on 14th February and closing at midnight on 14th September. Payment was either on a half-share basis, where 50 per cent of the selling price of the fish on the market was divided between the men working at the fishery (usually a crew of 5), or on a fixed wage basis with a bonus paid according to the number of fish caught by the end of the season. Most of the crew had to find additional jobs to see them through the winter months. We were told stories of fishermen picking up casual labour on local farms or in the building trade and occasionally filling in as a boatman on a rod fishery further upriver:

“When the fishing season finished in September we quite often got the casual men to work on the harvest and through the winter. We weren’t the only farm to employ casual fishermen on the land” (George Miller— talking about Horncliffe in the 1950s).

“There were some years that you left the fishing for the harvest because you couldn’t make ends meet” (Bob Mole, interviewed in 1997 by Fred Kennington).

“That’s what happened when the netting season ended; that’s when the back-end of the ghillying started. A lot of the netsmen got jobs ghillying, as boatmen, because of their experience on the cobles, because the angling season runs longer” (Jason Straughan— about recent years).

The hard physical conditions and confined sleeping quarters that characterised the traditional fishing shiel tended to define net-fishing as an exclusively male environment. This is less so for contemporary fishing practices and we spoke to those who were still fishing who suggested that there would be more opportunities for women to work the nets today than in the past. While difficult to make a secure living, an established crew could develop kin-like close ties.

A Tourist Attraction

Visitors have always gathered in large numbers to watch the fishermen at work. They would see the coble rowed out, paying out the net in a semi-circular ‘shot’, outlined by floats, encircling any passing fish in the decreasing draw of the net, the coble rowed back to land and the net winched in. The net must never be held static in the water or the fishing would be considered illegal, as with poaching. The size of the catch, if any, is influenced by many factors including fish stocks, the height, quality and temperature of the water, air turbulence on the river surface, luck and judgement. It takes considerable skill and experience to manoeuvre the coble.

“You know it was a right tourist attraction. Oh Heavens Above! I’m no exaggerating when I say that through the season there would be thousands of people would go to watch the netting of salmon. There was nobody ever got squeamish when you hit them over the head to kill them or anything” (A Tweed Netsman interviewed in 2014).

“Our children, with Dougie being in the army all that time, we used to come home every year; a duty visit to the family and it was always, we have to go and see the fishermen pull in the net– and they still talk about it now.

And the skipper then was old Swinney from Spittal and they used to row back in from the mouth, watching the flukes. I never saw anything but he’d shout and he’d seen something that I hadn’t and they’d get round with the net. A lot of them reckoned they could see the fish, because when it turned over it was silver underneath, but I could never see anything. But that instinct, that’s the skill, that’s from years of watching the river. Magic!”

Douglas and Ilene Allan



“I’ve been a fisherman for 25 years. When I was young I used to fish with a rod in May when the smolts come down the river, there used to be thousands; we laddies used to sit on the quayside to spin and catch ‘em..

There’s no future in (the nets) unless things change. The type of person that would have got a job at a fishery– there’s nothing for them to do now. On a Friday night in Berwick when everyone got paid it was a big night. They called ‘em weekend millionaires because they did get lumps of money at times. It was feast or famine. At the end of the season they were destitute again, but, there was a lot of money spent in the town, in the pubs. The pubs are all dead now.”

Sam Dixon



Border conditions: split and mixed

The Tweed is divided geographically and by different fishing cultures, local conditions and regulations. This border condition is not simply one of being perceived to be on the 'wrong side' for the cross border authority that regulates the Tweed but also being a small town with a cherished autonomy that tends to be edged out by larger and more powerful, remote 'corporate' interests.

"As time went by with the Salmon Fishing Company, bigger businesses from London came in to invest in it and they had different ideas and they really weren't interested in a little place up here. They had publicity people, sporting personalities, all brought in by these business people in London" (Derek Anderson).

Border regions have a particular nature. They are historically complex and they create issues that both divide—through competition and conflict— and unite—through cooperation and collaboration. This ambivalence is evident in the stories that we were told. As one regular visitor explained:

"I don't view it as split between England and Scotland. I view it as another example of the charm, the diversity of accent, that it can draw people to this place and that the border doesn't actually begin to matter" (Michael Clancy).

This mixture is further communicated in a contribution to The Great Performing Rope, pictured here from a public event held in the town on 22nd October 2015.

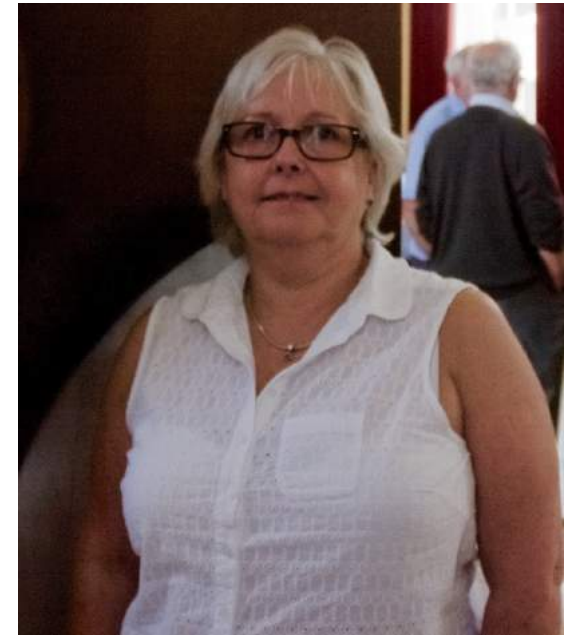
At the same time, Berwick was frequently described as an 'outpost' that fell between the political concerns and representation of Holyrood and Westminster. It was felt to suffer in comparison with places further North, such as Eyemouth (benefitting from an active harbour), or South where it was considered that local people had better access to public services such as hospitals and healthcare.

These responses appear little changed from those recorded in 2001 by journalist Peter Heatherington:

"Living right on the border, we seem to be a forgotten lot—roads are appalling, the health service is not that good, and everything seem to be much better a mile or so north"¹⁶.

“My father was a salmon fisherman at Yard Ford and lots of relatives; my uncles and brothers all went into fishing. They didn’t all stay there but one of them continued up until when salmon fishing ended on the Tweed. I lived in Horncliffe and it was very much a fishing village so everyone you knew was at the fishing.

In the early days there were wooden hand-turned winches, but in the war years there was a local firm called T L Landells and they patented an electric winch. There was a box at one end which kept the electrics dry and there were two different cogs at the top that they pulled the rope around to drag the net back in– because obviously when fishing was good the net could be very heavy” *Joyce Benton*



“My family were netsmen from way back. I’m the fourth generation, if the fishing had carried on. I fished at Norham and a fishing station named Halliwell and Batt Island at Horncliffe. The nets got bought out in 1986 when I was sixteen– so that was my livelihood gone. Because that’s how the fishing worked, it got handed down generation to generation.

When that fishery closed I went to work at Star fishery, West Ord, but I had to leave because I broke my collar bone. I also worked at Gardi, in 1987, and I’ve also worked at Yarrow.

When the netting season ended, that’s when the back end of the ghillying started and a lot of netsmen (like me) got jobs on the ghillying, as boatmen, because of the experience they’ve got on the cobbles, because the angling season runs longer” *Jason Straughan*



Poaching Stories

"A lot of poaching went on I believe. That was the joke going round: how do people eat their salmon in Berwick- poached! but seriously I remember my grandfather Thomas Elliot getting a salmon every year during the Berwick Festival when we would visit on holiday. My grandmother Louisa Elliot, would cook/poach the whole salmon in a large metal fish kettle. This delicious food was an abiding memory of my early years in Berwick (as well as my grandmother always collecting threepenny bits for me!)" (*Peter Elliot*).

"I remember one Saturday morning in the 1980s when a little girl and her Mum came into the shop where I worked. The girl aged about six announced to us all that 'her Daddy had a salmon in the bath'. We told her she should keep quiet about it, but we had a good laugh!" (*postcard comment*).

(In the late 1970s) "when I was working in a government office a man opened his shirt and pulled out a black bag which contained a salmon. I of course had to refuse and he returned it round his waistline" (*postcard comment*).

"There was this family, a well-known poaching family, and they lived on the next street down from my father. They had the net in the main road, repairing it, when the police arrived, just by chance. The police said, oh aye, getting ready for the season? Oh no, no, this is for the strawberries in the garden (laughs) and the copper went away" (*Douglas Allan*).

"Poaching was rife. I had young laddies, 8 and 10, come (to the pub) with salmon covered in sand, knocking on the door, do you want a salmon? And one of my favourite stories was when one of the lads found himself in court in front of the magistrate because he'd been caught on the beach by the bailiffs: he said to the magistrate; well actually I wasn't poaching; I admit I was on the beach but I wasn't poaching 'cos there were that many people there I couldn't get a net in!" (*Keith Wilson*).

One for the pot

"The way I see it right; we're locals to this area and we've got the right to poach. You get poaching and you get greed. Locals who take one for the pot, I see that as, it's always been that way. If you had someone coming to dinner, for your family, you'd fish for the table. What is the harm of that? But poaching has declined in any case because now it's cheaper to buy your farmed salmon at the supermarket, for what the price of a poached salmon is" (*local resident*).

Cooking salmon

"My old granny was one of the best cookers of salmon I have ever known. How she judged it no one knows. Her method was to put the fish in a pot of salted water on the stove and let it boil. When asked 'is it ready yet?' she would go to the cupboard, take out her special wine glass, spoon some of the water from the pot into the glass and hold it up to the light. The answer then was either 'not long now' or 'it's ready'. Granny magic or old wives tale, we will never know" (*Douglas Allan*).



Whose Heritage?

People of all ages expressed a similar plea for salmon fishing to be renewed: “not as a museum but in some way to keep the knowledge alive” (Joyce Benton); that salmon fishing is “part of our heritage to be carried on for future generations”; and “traditions are important to keep our town interesting” (postcard comments).

Michael Hickman sums up popular support for preserving a ‘living river’:

“It’s terrible, the loss. We go on about the history of the salmon but we’re actually losing it before our eyes. We could pick it up. The town could say, right, we’ll pick up a netting station, buy the fishing rights or whatever and start it off again, with 50% of the food, the salmon, going into local shops where it should be. People go on and on about how lovely it was, and we watch it disappear before our eyes. We need to take it back into our control. It’s the same with the harbour. There should be a harbour, like Seahouses or Eyemouth. Bring this unused harbour back to life”.

These comments suggest that we should not take for granted what constitutes heritage and who it is intended for. This was expressed by one resident as his hope “that ordinary working people of Berwick will organise together to ask for a greater share of its resources, in return for centuries of work to create its beauty”. Others wanted to guard against “feudal renewal” and “theme park” preservation (postcard comments).

Tweed Tourism: Trading on a Living River

From the stories we gathered for this publication, it is clear that local attachments to salmon fishing knowledge and traditions run deep. When ‘critically endangered’ intangible cultures are recognised- as tourist attractions, or as a function of renewed pride- it is possible to imagine local planning strategies that trade on this heritage in order to ‘bring life back to the river’¹⁷. Novel policy ideas can be identified elsewhere that address the concern of small towns in particular to attract and retain residents, jobs and tourist income. In France, for example, the government can subsidise cafes that provide music and entertainment, justifying this by the combined stimulus to jobs and spending in public spaces- that in turn foster a convivial public life¹⁸. Is it far-fetched in this context to regard net fishing as a form of entertainment?

Net repairs

Peter Elliot remembers his grandfather doing a lot of net-knitting out of season in the kitchen: “knitting a whole new net, and repairing the old nets. If you can imagine having a massive tear in a net, being able to repair that by knitting all the new parts, what a skill that is! I just wonder how many other people were doing the same, because every shiel had its own supply of nets, and whether that particular skill has disappeared.....There’s that sort of sensitivity that I don’t think people are aware of when they imagine what’s involved”.

The memories fade

At the Mouth of the Tweed Festival (16th July 2015) one woman wistfully observed that “you get used to not seeing (the fishing). I like to see the cobbles out here (on Bailiffs Batt). When you do see it, it’s nice to watch and you can see them doing the semi-circle. But, like I say, it’s easy for the absence to become familiar, when the tradition and the memories fade”.

“Last summer (2014), on a visit to Paxton House, I sat and watched what was possibly the last commercial catch” (postcard comment).

Berwick salmon: a premium product?

Despite the undisputed potential for a premium brand of wild salmon, none is locally available. In the past, locally caught wild salmon satisfied the luxury market, taken by train to London hotels and restaurants. Paxton House was fishing commercially until the end of the 2014 season and Rick Stein would ask specifically for Paxton Salmon because of its quality and provenance:

“everybody wants Paxton fish...the big restaurants in London ask for it. All the celebrity chefs ask for it if they can get it” (Curator, Paxton House, interviewed in 2014).

“I used to say, would this not be a better selling point? Would people not pay more, perhaps, to buy English smoked salmon? Where else do you get English smoked salmon?” (A Tweed Foundation Biologist, interviewed in 2014).

Some people doubted whether there was a market for wild salmon at a premium price. A retired chef observed that “Berwick’s not a big seafood eating town. It’s possibly a big fish and chips eating town”. But he agreed that wild salmon “is a beautiful firm, solid fish” and by its scarcity it would surely be a premium product” (Keith Wilson).

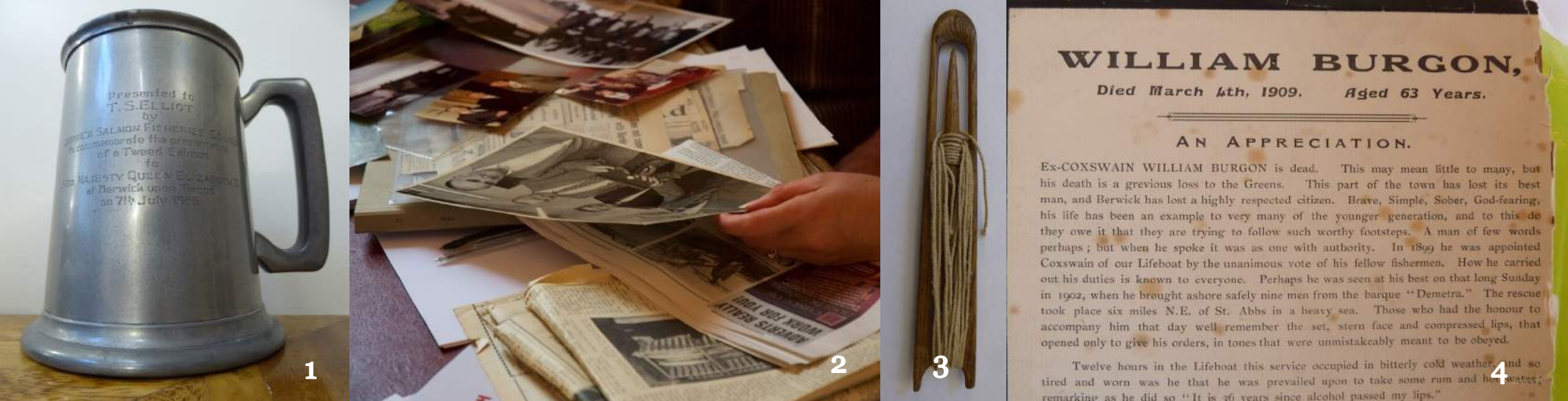


Future quality of life

There is clearly ambition in Berwick to preserve an active, fully functioning fishery, rather than to celebrate this fishing heritage only as a chapter of Berwick’s past. This ambition echoes a growing trend for the English regions and small towns in particular that seek to retain artisan products and keep craft skills alive. This is evident in The Bristol Weaving Mill which is the first working cloth mill to open for business in over a century. This women-only enterprise is intended to produce artisan fabric for a niche market as well as to demonstrate and innovate with the craft skills and processes involved¹⁹.

Similar ambitions are evident in **Slow Food** and **Cittaslow** quality of life initiatives that help to define Berwick through popular food, drink, civic arts and heritage festivals. These promote locally produced, sustainable food and cultural heritage. If commercial fishing was to be made possible, Berwick Salmon would be an eligible product submission to the **Slow Food in the UK Ark of Taste** project. The Ark of Taste project aims to protect ‘forgotten foods’ (such as netted salmon) that have been neglected or undermined as a local (autochthonous) food- both in terms of food culture (edible biodiversity; culinary diversity – ‘eat it or lose it’) and in terms of long-term food security and local resilience.





Citizen-led archives

Many people who came along to the story-telling events brought with them family photographs, news cuttings, artefacts and documents to show their personal connections to the netting industry. We are very grateful for these insights. They describe everyday routines as well as celebrated moments. Featured pictures show: 1) Tankard presented to Thomas Elliot following his presentation of a salmon to the Queen on her visit to Berwick in 1956; 2) Kenneth Anderson's personal archive as managing director of the Berwick Salmon Fisheries Company into the 1980s (deposited by his surviving brother, Derek); 3) A needle and twine for knitting/repairing nets; 4) 1909 obituary to William Burgon, former Lifeboat Coxswain, whose death was a "grievous loss to the Greens (fishing community)"; 5) Fish Trades Gazette, August 8, 1970; 6) Net fishing crew, under Watham Shiel, 1920s; 7) Thomas Elliot at Low Bells shiel in 1960 with his 3 year old grandson Peter; Richard Dimbleby interviewing Thomas Elliot in 1952 for the documentary 'Come with me to Berwick on Tweed'.



Endnotes:

1. Sharman (2011) A Vision for Berwick's Future. Mouth of the Tweed Food Heritage Eco-Museum Proposal (p.8). <http://www.mouthofthetweed.co.uk/MOTT%20Feb%202011%20Eco-Museum%20proposal%20-%20ex%20costs.pdf>
2. Brown and May Marine (2012) Salmon and sea trout fisheries technical report (p. 14). <http://mainstream-downloads.opendebate.co.uk/downloads/Appendix-16.2---Salmon-and-Sea-Trout-Fisheries-Baseline-Technical-Report.pdf>
3. The Independent, Thursday September 15 1988; additional newspaper cuttings from July to September 1988 displayed as part of an exhibition of photography by Jim Walker, A Wake for the Salmon, July 11 to September 18 1988 at Berwick Museum.
4. Sir Alan Beith quoted in The Daily Telegraph, July 1988 and also from Hansard records of House of Commons debate, 12th December 2014 (column 387-388). In the same debate, Mr Alan Campbell (MP for Tynemouth) is quoted saying of net-fishing: "this is a heritage industry. It is a local and organised so that catches are limited. Yet somehow vested interests appear to have won out. At a moment when we are looking for plurality and diversity it would be sad if we took a step that would ruin and end a centuries-old practice that people have carried on sustainably in many communities" (column 388).
5. SQW (2015) Economic impact from Angling on the Tweed river system. London: SQW Consultants (appointed by the River Tweed Commission, updating a previous overview conducted in 2006).
6. The Horncliffe Salmon Fishings beat was advertised for sale with a notional purchase price of £1.35m. The estate agents marketing the property anticipated global interest, quoted in The Chronicle, 19 August 2015, article by Tom Keighley.
7. Scottish Natural Heritage (2015) Atlantic Salmon: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/about-scotlands-nature/species/fish/freshwater-fish/salmon/>
8. Quoted from the River Tweed Commission website. <http://www.rtc.org.uk/> (10.12.15)
9. Quoted from the Tweed Foundation website. <http://www.tweedfoundation.org.uk/html/about.html> (23.01.16)
10. Osler, A.G. and Porteous, K. (2010) 'Bednelyfysch and Iseland fish': continuity in the pre-industrial sea fishery of North Northumberland, 1300-1950. The Mariners Mirror, 96:1, pp.11-25.
11. Balfour, C. (2007) The Early Days of the River Tweed Commissioners. River Tweed Commission. (Chairman's foreword.) We have been asked to point out that as the salmon spawning grounds are in the upland areas of the catchment, the Commissioners considered it unfair to allow the large netting industry at Berwick, which was perceived to prevent fresh fish reaching the upriver fisheries during the netting season. Until the 1850s, there were net fisheries at points all the way up the river to Peebles as well as rod fisheries.

12. Rocheleau, D., Thomas-Slayter, B. and Wangari, E. (1996) *Feminist Political Ecology*. London: Routledge.
13. These individual opinions represent observations made in the context of net fishing and ghillying for anglers. These opinions contrast with tests of Catch and Release that show that fish have a good recovery rate (River Tweed Foundation). Brown (2015) 'River Tweed Anglers Told to Throw Back Salmon', *Scotsman*, 7th February 2015.
14. Interestingly, the previously cited SQW (2015) update (appointed by the River Tweed Commission) identifies "an ageing fishing population" and "a lack of younger fishermen and women" and "affordability" among 'threats' to the contribution which game fishing makes to the local economy of the upper Tweed (pp.26-28).
15. DI-Clemente, E. et al. (2015). Slow tourism: an alternative model for local and tourist development. *Sustainable Tourism: A Collection of Tools and Best Practices*, 23 .
16. Heatherington, P. (2001) English learn the Scottish way, *The Guardian*, 24 April, p.3.
17. Stefano, M.L., Davis, P. and Corsane, G. (eds) (2014) *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*. The International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University.
18. Banerjee, T. (2001) The future of public space: beyond invented streets and reinvented places. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, volume 67.1, pp. 9-24.
19. Looming on the horizon...city's first working cloth mill in a century (Metro. Wednesday, November 4, 2015: 11)
<http://www.bristolweavingmill.co.uk/>

Useful links:

Scottish Government (2015) *Wild Fisheries Reform: a Response to the Report of the Wild Fisheries Review*. May 2015: [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General 20Documents/20150515_Minister_on_Wild_Fisheries_Review_Final_Report.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General%20Documents/20150515_Minister_on_Wild_Fisheries_Review_Final_Report.pdf)

The Slow Food in the UK Ark of Taste and Chef Alliance Programmes: <https://www.slowfood.org.uk/ff-info/forgotten-foods/>

The Great Performing Rope: <http://www.thegreatperformingrope.com/>

Northumbrian poet Katrina Porteous takes fishing tales to America: <http://www.thejournal.co.uk/culture/culture-news/katrina-porteous-shares-northumberland-fishing-7064635>

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