

# Ely's Links With Eels

MARTHA HOW EXPLORES SOME HISTORIC FISHING TRENDS...

**M**any people believe the name Ely acknowledges it was once significant for eel fishing and trading.

This is disputed by some scholars who point out that eels were called 'aguilla' until the 13th century and the City of Ely was founded much earlier in 673 when Queen Etheldreda founded the abbey.

Whatever the heritage of the name, one thing is for sure, Ely and its outlying fens have a long history with eels. In fact, records about local eel fishing date to the 10th century Domesday Book.

"Eels have had a significant impact on livelihoods, food, religion, trade, culture and legends of East Anglia," says Alban Murphy, a Sixth Form student, who is passionate about medieval history in our region.

Alban and his family, who live in Haddenham, take an active part in historical societies. He delivered a fascinating historical talk dressed as a 10th century eel fisherman at a recent Haddenham History Society meeting.

## LIFE CYCLE

Eels are unusual, they return



**Above:** Spears and willow traps were used for fishing from coracles on Fen waters.

to a single location, the calm, seaweed-rich Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic to breed. Pre-maturity, leading up to a stage called 'glass eels' they travel up to 5,000 kilometres through saltwater to European estuaries and marshes.

They change colour to brown and are called "elvers", small versions of adults, when they turn yellow they are at their best for eating.

After between five and 20 years in European waters, eels become sexually mature, their eyes get larger, they turn silver and white and return to the Sargasso Sea to spawn.

Full grown they can be up to two metres long and can live 50 years but there are records of longer lifespans.

Alban explains: "Due to overfishing, pollution and habitat loss the number of eels returning

to Europe has declined by 90% since the 1970s, they are listed as 'critically endangered' species.

Various marine and scientific institutes are working hard to breed eels and partially mature

**Left:** Eels were caught in willow woven traps.

**Right:** Alban Murphy, a 6th form student, from Haddenham, is passionate about local medieval history.







**Above:** Jellied and smoked eels were a vital protein source during the world wars.



**Above:** Troubling statistics show European eels are critically endangered

eels are farmed in various parts of Europe. The challenge for breeding is their unusual spawning and migratory life cycle.

Eels are scavengers, marshland is ideal for them, exactly the habitat around Ely before the drainage of the Fens. Saxons caught eels using spears, with hooks on fishing lines and in willow traps using coracles to navigate the marshlands.

The traps were by far the most effective as 5-6 eels could be caught per trap. Eel fishing may have been started by early settlers whose prime objective was food but the practice grew to such an extent that records say that 540,000 eels were caught in 1086 in Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and the Thames. 24,000 caught in Ely, 17,000 in Littleport and 3,300 in Haddenham.

### ON THE MENU

Eels also had a role in religious life. During Lent the faithful were not allowed to eat meat but eels were not considered to be meat. Eels became a tradeable good from 400AD, as they can live out of water for up to five days, they could be transported to London markets fresh on arrival. Due to the 'non-meat' designation there was significant demand

**Right:** Coracles were used to navigate marshes around Ely in Saxon times.



from monasteries across the country.

There are local and national stories about eels, from the eel catcher's daughter involving King Cnut, to a story that Henry I died overeating eels.

Across Europe, the Netherlands landscape was also perfect for eels and from the 1400's eels began to be imported into East London. The availability of this cheap fresh source of protein was ideal for the growing working population in London. This reduced the East Anglian trade, eel fishing continued locally on a small

scale for food but increasingly for leisure during Victorian times. Jellied and smoked eels were a vital protein source during the world wars. The last Fenland eel fisherman stopped working in the 1950's.

The role of eels in our local culture is remembered on Ely Eel Day in May each year and eels are occasionally seen in our waterways.

So, from being a major part of local diet and livelihoods, eels are now just a part of Fenland history but whose significance should not be ignored. **F5**



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