

The Helford River oysters

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Oysters in the Helford river -

The Romans loved them, lovers relish them and Lewis Carroll had them walking with the Walrus. Oysters have captured the hearts and stomachs of generations of seafood eaters, but were once a food for the poor. The Helford River boasts one of the classic oyster fisheries of the British Isles.

History

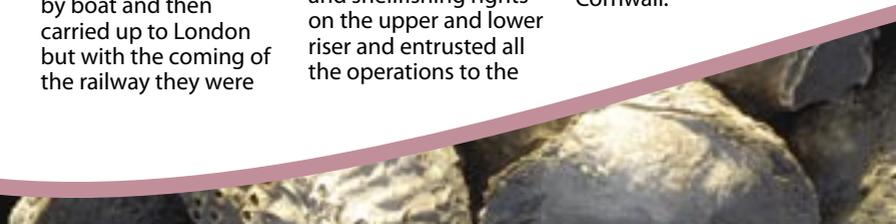
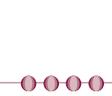
The Helford has long been noted as a 'natural habitat' for oysters. They once occurred in seemingly limitless number on the River's fertile beds, but collection and consumption increased until they almost became extinct in the 19th Century. Farming of oysters began in the early part of the 20th century and numbers have since recovered as a result of careful husbandry. The oyster fishery is one of the survivors of the once vast marine economy on the River. In the late 1860s the Helford supplied the high class fish markets frequented by the gentry of Plymouth and London. At first they were taken to Plymouth by boat and then carried up to London but with the coming of the railway they were

sent direct by train. The Helford oysters were not produced in such numbers as those on the nearby Fal estuary and were regarded as superior. This can be attributed to the fertility of the waters and the careful and skilful management of the beds.

The Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm operations have been dispersed along the length of the River but are now concentrated at Port Navas. The Vyvyan family of Trelowarren leased the fishery for years to a Mr Tyacke, with a forebear of Mr Hodges acting as bailiff on the upper rights. In 1915 the Duchy of Cornwall acquired the fishing and shellfishing rights on the upper and lower riser and entrusted all the operations to the

Hodges family based at Port Navas. Between 1919 and 1983 the shell fishing lease was held by MacFisheries with the Hodges family still acting as managers. The Helford Oysterage became known as The Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm.

In 2005 Ben Wright and Wright Brothers Oyster Merchants took over the right to all the oysters and other shellfish in the River. Ben and his team are working to restore the oyster and shellfish beds to their former glory. The excellence of the oysters and the close links with the Duchy have led to Royal visits by Edward VII and more recently by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall.



Techniques

Historically the Helford was famous for its renowned native oyster, although since the 1950s, other species such as Pacific oysters, clams and mussels were also brought in to be fattened in cages in the River or on the river bed

Now native oyster brood or halfware is brought in from the Fal and Solent under strict conditions to restrict the spread of

disease. It is then left to mature on the beds in the River. Fishing is carried out using iron-frame dredges that can collect up to 100 oysters each pull. The work has changed little over the years; it's hard and much is still done by hand.

The collection of Helford oysters starts in August ready for the start of the season which runs from 1 September to mid-May. Any oysters collected below marketable size are returned to the River to grow on. The remainder, above 50/55 gms in weight,

are sorted, graded and rested on the foreshore at Port Navas. Next they are cleansed for at least 42 hours in tanks of cool water which is circulated under ultra violet rays. They are then packed in their shells between layers of seaweed for the local markets, London and most large UK cities with some going across the Channel.

Important factors in the farming of oysters are the quality of the stock, tidal range, water quality and climatic influences. The feeding grounds must be carefully tended and cleaned all the year round, especially in the close season.



Problems

All has not been plain sailing for the oyster fishery over the years. It has suffered from over-fishing and near extinction, as well as catastrophic invasions by parasites. In the 1980s a parasite, *Bonamia ostreae*, thought to originate from the United States, appeared in European oysters. It proved fatal to many French oysters and the disease spread quickly through Holland and Norway to Britain. It brought production of the native oyster to a standstill, affecting 80% of the stock. Many farms switched to cultivating Pacific oysters and the parasite largely disappeared. Now native oysters are farmed again and close control of their movement has restricted the spread of this crippling parasite. The oyster beds which are located some way upriver from its mouth are marked by perches or whities to warn boats to keep clear and avoid damaging the succulent and fragile shellfish.

Anchorage on the shellfish beds and accidental groundings in these unexpectedly shallow waters destroy the shellfish, damage the bed itself – which is carefully tended – and can prevent fragile Native oyster spawn from settling.



○ ○ The future

At the Duchy of Cornwall Oyster Farm, Ben Wright and Wright Brothers Oyster Merchants are working hard towards the long term regeneration of the Helford oysterage and shell fishery which is already showing signs of revival and which itself contributes to the ecology and biodiversity of the river.

Measures are being taken all the time to combat the

risks of water-borne pollution. The ultimate complete ban on the toxic TBT anti-fouling on all vessels is imminent (expected 2008), farmers have become more aware of issues such as run-off, boat-users are more careful and considerate about where they lay anchor and what they discharge into the water and water treatment works have been modernised and

upgraded – these are all steps that have enabled Helford shellfish to flourish once again in these pristine waters.

The economic health of the industry is dependent upon the continued high quality of the water, the environmental well-being of the Helford River and our increasing awareness of our impact on this precious habitat.

○ ○ Sponsors

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