



# SALMON CROSS THE MERSEY

You can catch salmon in the most surprising places and at a fraction of the cost of fashionable beats, reveals **ADRIAN DANGAR**

**Dr Keith Hendry does his best to be the first fisherman to catch a salmon in the Mersey for some 150 years, downstream of Stockport town centre**

**I** WAS first introduced to the charms of the North Tyne by fishing guru Anthony Luke 10 years ago, and, having caught two fine fish that sunny October afternoon, remember comparing her favourably with some of Scotland's grander rivers that not only cost a small fortune to rent—if you're lucky enough to find a good week available—but also entail days away in order to make the long journey worthwhile. By contrast, the picturesque North Tyne was less than two hours drive from home, and her dark, mysterious waters and hazardous, rocky riverbed reminded me of a larger version of the little Yorkshire Esk where I first learnt to fish as a child.

A decade ago, the story of the North Tyne's extraordinary revitalisation as a salmon river was already unfolding—a meteoritic rise from rock bottom in 1959, when not a single migratory fish was landed on rod and line, to a catch of more than 4,000 salmon in 2004, and

the accolade of being named England's most prolific salmon river. By then, one of fishing's best secrets was out, but sport on some of the beautiful beats upstream of the river's junction with the South Tyne near Hexham can still be had for a song. You'll stand as good a chance of catching a salmon here as anywhere in Britain—and that could include one of the big boys that each year put the sparkle into a prolific autumn run.

Those connected with the fish hatchery built to replace spawning redds destroyed by the creation of Kielder Water in the early 1980s are naturally keen to put their case forward as the principal reason for the North Tyne's renaissance, but the ongoing debate on this subject continues to polarise the fishing community. The reality must surely be a combination of factors, including the buying out of North Sea drift nets and a dramatic improvement of water quality in the estuary. However, the benefits of a hatchery contributing up to 600,000

fry a year cannot be disregarded, nor can the effect on fishing of regularly releasing large quantities of water from Europe's largest reservoir.

Many are convinced that the Environment Agency's campaign to tackle pollution in the Tyne's tidal reaches through Newcastle has played the most significant role in restoring her fortunes as a salmon river. Archie Ruggles-Brise, project manager of the Tyne Rivers Trust, considers its work to be crucially important, and is adamant that 'nothing would have happened on this scale without the improvement of the water quality'.

James Carr, the chairman of the Salmon and Trout Association, agrees. 'The Kielder hatchery has become a red herring—although it may have been helpful when the river was being reseeded, the real drivers for the Tyne's spectacular recovery are the partial buy-out of the drift nets combined with the steady increase in water quality. How else do we explain the dramatic improvement in the same

ADRIAN DANGAR; SKYSCAN PHOTOLIBRARY/ALAMY

*'Sport on some of the beautiful beats upstream of Hexham can still be had for a song, and you could catch one of the big boys'*

river's run of sea trout when there has been no stocking of that species?'

On the opposite side of the country, another great river flowing through an equally famous city is promising a similar resurrection, albeit some 30 years later. It is a staggering 147 years since the last rod-caught salmon was recorded in the Mersey, when the Industrial Revolution turned the river into a stinking open sewer—but that is about to change, thanks in no small part to the efforts of fish biologist Dr Keith Hendry. 'Salmon have been sighted regularly since 2004 trying to negotiate weirs on the Bollin [a tributary of the Mersey],' he told me, 'and, to everyone's amazement, parr were recently discovered in the Mersey at Stockport, where there are spawning redds close to the town centre. To reach them, the parent fish must have swum 4½ miles up the Manchester Ship Canal.' There cannot be a more poignant image representing the triumph of nature over the excesses of mankind than that of these magnificent wild fish spawning within yards of a British city centre.

Dr Hendry explains that, under the EU Water Framework Directive, fish passage must be unrestricted on all waterways by 2025—a ruling that when combined with the widespread cleaning up of rivers could see migratory fish return to waters they have not spawned in for a century or more. 'At last, the legislative tide is turning in favour of fish,' Mr Hendry says, 'but we must find funds to comply with the directives, even if that requires an environmental tax. This is a debate we need to start now.' True to his word, Dr Hendry addressed a fringe meeting on the subject at the recent Conservative Party conference as the owner of APEM (Aquatic Pollution and Environmental Management), a widely respected aquatic consultancy firm. The meeting was attended by a wide cross section of interested parties and Dr Hendry hopes that he has now kick started the discussion on establishing the best way forward for the development of funding streams to pay for this crucial work.

Dr Hendry is confident that the Mersey will be repopulated naturally by the descendants of fish currently running



the Ribble and Dee estuaries to the north and south of Liverpool, together with those descended from fish that have recently spawned in the river. 'Received wisdom has it that 20% of fish stray from their native river—that has not yet been substantiated by scientific evidence, although I once tagged a salmon from the Tamar that was subsequently caught in the Camel, so I'm pretty sure salmon nose in and out of different rivers.' The story goes that a salmon was actually caught in the Mersey last year, but not declared by the successful fisherman, who had neglected to purchase the necessary licence.

Knowing that Dr Hendry is hoping—properly licensed, of course—to be the first person to catch a Mersey salmon on rod and line for nearly 150 years, I thought it best not to mention this rumour. By the time this article appears in print, he may have achieved that ambition. One thing is certain. It is only a matter of time before a salmon is caught in the Mersey. 🐟

For more information about fishing on the Tyne, contact The Tyne Rivers Trust on 01434 611817 or visit [www.tyneriverstrust.org](http://www.tyneriverstrust.org)

**Good riddance to pollution: the tranquil waters of the North Tyne in Northumberland are now a clean haven for the noble salmon**



**Really, it was this big! Dr Hendry poses with a substitute—a wooden sculpture in Stockport**