

Inland Waterways News

The Lough Neagh eel fishery

Rev Oliver P Kennedy

Lough Neagh is Europe's major commercial wild eel fishery, producing 700 tons of wild eels each year: 550 tons of Brown Eels caught by local fishermen and 150 tons of mature Silver Eels caught at the eel weirs on the River Bann at Toomebridge and Kilrea.

The commercial fishery has a long and troubled history. The present title to the eel-fishing rights on Lough Neagh and the River Bann derives from the mid-1600s when Charles I granted the bed and soil and the eel fishery to the Earl of Donegal, from whom it devolved to the Chichester family and currently to the Shaftesbury Estate.

There has always been a company operating the eel weirs. The more Brown Eels the fishermen caught on the lough during the summer, the lower the catch of mature Silver Eels at the weirs in the autumn and early winter. So the company, by patrolling the lough and seizing gear and equipment, sought to restrict the fishermen's catch. This basic conflict of interest caused animosity over the last 200 years between the fishermen and the companies. Families living around the lough shore insisted that they had a right to earn a living by fishing, as they had done for generations.

To establish its exclusive right to the eel fishery, the company took often inconclusive legal proceedings at different times. But in the late 1950s a Dutch firm combined with the four main eel wholesalers in London's Billingsgate Market to acquire the company and form Toome Eel Fishery (NI) Ltd; in 1963 that company won a judgement giving it the exclusive right to the eel fishery on the Bann and the lough.

This meant that local fishermen could fish only with permission, under company regulations, and had to sell their catch to the company at a price that it determined. A private company had an absolute monopoly over one of Europe's most productive wild eel fisheries, and could administer it to the detriment of traditional fishing families.

In response, the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Association registered as a trade union to represent the fishermen. Then in 1965 one of the five shareholders in Toome Eel Fishery (NI) Ltd proposed to sell its 20% holding. A second shareholder already had an option on a third shareholding, and the remaining two directors feared that he could acquire a majority — so they suggested that the Fishermen's Association should acquire the available share.

A Co-operative Society was formed to purchase the shareholding for £83,000. Fishermen and local people subscribed about £43,000; the balance was lent by Ulster Bank, repaid from the Co-operative's profits in later years. This gave the Co-operative the right to appoint a director and a one-fifth share in the catch of Silver Eels at the weirs.

The Co-operative hoped to buy out the other shareholders; it retained some of its profits to help finance that project. However, the company decided in 1967 to cease purchasing Brown Eels from fishermen: since the other shareholders had a stranglehold on the major market outlets, this was intended to create chaos.

In response, the Co-operative decided to market the catch on behalf of the fishermen. It developed lucrative new markets on the continent and retained part of the proceeds. In December 1971, the retained profits enabled the Co-operative to buy out the remaining 80%

shareholding, bringing to reality the dreams of previous generations of fishermen.

Giving the fishermen an interest in the viability and profitability of the company ended the conflict of interest between the Brown Eel and Silver Eel fisheries. The number of licences — currently about 185 each year — was increased but the intensity of fishing is controlled to preserve stocks. The maximum daily quota is usually eight stone, but that is flexible. And in years when the natural elver recruitment has been low, the Society buys in elvers to sustain the stock of eels.

Fishermen are allowed to fish by either long-line (1500 hooks) or draft-net. Eels are collected from the fishing quays each morning and transported by lorry to Toomebridge. Each fisherman's eels are in a separate tank on the lorry.

At Toome, undersized or inferior eels are returned to the river; the boat is credited for the weight accepted. Eels are graded to the sizes appropriate for different markets and packed in 30lb cartons ready for shipment by air; 60% of the catch now goes to Holland, 30% to North Germany and 10% to London. Eels caught on Lough Neagh this morning will be packed and shipped today; the smoked eels may be on sale in the holiday resorts around the Isselmeer tomorrow morning.

The full profits of the fishery are now shared locally by fishermen and the share-holding members of the Co-operative. The total paid to fishermen each year is in the region of STG£2.5 million, while total turnover is about STG£5.5 million. The Society has for many years past paid its members Share Interest and Dividend at a combined rate of 27%.

The returns from the Dutch and German markets have declined in recent years because of over-supply of both wild and farmed eels and because of the strength of sterling. Fortunately, Lough Neagh wild eels are accepted by quality smokers on the continent as having the perfect fat content for smoking. Every effort is made to ensure that they reach the market in prime condition: the Society has invested £3.5 million in new buildings, with provision for future development and diversification.

The Co-operative has been one of the major successful community enterprises in the recent troubled years: an indication of what can be achieved by a previously disadvantaged community through a local initiative founded on the principle of self-help. Dr Chris Moriarty referred to the eel fishery on Lough Neagh as one of the most productive and sustainable eel fisheries in Europe and attributed its continued success to efficient management and controlled exploitation.