

FISH REMAINS, ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD (OXJL16)

by Rebecca Nicholson

A small collection of 152 fragments of fish bone and scales was recovered virtually entirely by the sieving of soil samples from post-medieval features. Of these, fifty three bones were identifiable at least to family (Table 1).

The bones include both marine and freshwater species, as well as bones from the catadromous eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) and either salmon (*Salmo salar*) or sea trout (*Salmo trutta*). Hand retrieved bones include two supracleithra from at least one cod (*Gadus morhua*) of around 60cm found in Phase 6 pit fill (209), a fairly small shark (Scyliorhinidae) probably tope (*Galeorhinus galeus*), vertebra from Phase 5 pit fill (320) and a haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*) post temporal from Phase 3 pit fill (1022). The most commonly identified fish in the sieved samples were eel and herring (*Clupea harengus*), the former likely to have been caught fairly locally and the latter likely to have been imported as salted or pickled fish from the ports of south east England or East Anglia¹. Both herrings and eels would have been fairly cheap², and their bones are ubiquitous in medieval urban rubbish and cesspit deposits where fish remains survive. Plaice, flounder or dab (Pleuronectidae) could also have been salted, as could the gadids (cod and possibly whiting). Both fresh and preserved seafood were sold in Oxford from stalls and 'fishboards' near the guildhall prior to the establishment of the covered market in the later 18th century³. The freshwater fish identified in the assemblage include bream (*Abramis brama*), probably chub (*Leuciscus cephalus*) pike (*Esox lucius*) and perch (*Perca fluviatilis*). None are particularly large and all could have been caught in the Thames or Cherwell rivers. Fishing of the common waters within Oxford was under the control of the City's water bailiffs from the start of the 13th century, enforcing regulations such as the banning of fishing during the 'fence months' in the spring and summer⁴.

¹ In 1360 the fishmongers' stalls in St. Aldates comprised 18 stalls for 'Winchelsea fish', and others for stockfish and herrings. Eleanor Chance, Christina Colvin, Janet Cooper, C J Day, T G Hassall, Mary Jessup and Nesta Selwyn, 'Markets and Fairs', in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 4, the City of Oxford*, ed. Alan Crossley and C R Elrington (London, 1979), pp. 305-312. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol4/pp305-312> [accessed 27 June 2017]

² Dyer, C. 2000 *Everyday Life in medieval England*, Cambridge University Press (2nd editn), p.106

³ Chance *et al.* 'Markets and Fairs' in Crossley and Elrington 1979

⁴ Eleanor Chance, Christina Colvin, Janet Cooper, C J Day, T G Hassall, Mary Jessup and Nesta Selwyn, 'Mills and Fisheries', in *A History of the County of Oxford: Volume 4, the City of Oxford*, ed. Alan Crossley and C R Elrington (London, 1979), pp. 327-331. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol4/pp327-331> [accessed 27 June 2017].

Table 1: Number of Identified Fish Bones

Context	601	1022	382	320	574	535	1028	209	286	
Sample	205	n/a	n/a	n/a	200	201	207	n/a	n/a	TOTAL
Phase	3	3	4	5	5	5	6	6	6	
Shark				1						1
Salmon/Sea trout							2			2
Eel						2	12			14
Herring					9		7			16
Clupeid							2			2
Bream							1			1
cf. Chub							1			1
Cyprinid							2			2
Pike							2			2
Cod								1		1
Cod or Whiting							1			1
Haddock		1								1
Gadid (cod family)							1	1		2
Perch							1			1
Gurnard							1			1
Plaice/flounder/dab						1	4			5
Unidentified	1		1		6	11	77	2	1	99
TOTAL	1	1	1	1	15	14	114	4	1	152