



Mike Evans at Newnham



Lydney lave netsmen

are licensed in the Estuary, mostly concentrated around Lydney with smaller concentrations at Blackrock, and Newnham-on-Severn. When fish were more plentiful and salmon were an important local food resource, lave net numbers reached a peak of over 400. The current length of the fishing season is controlled by byelaw and is restricted to 1st June to the end of August.

Where can you see lave netting in operation?

Throughout the season, the lave net fishermen at Blackrock (in Monmouthshire, Wales, just upstream of the second Severn crossing) demonstrate the ancient skills of fishing on all suitable tides when conditions are favourable. Lave netsmen can also be seen on suitable tides from Newnham-on-Severn carpark and from the end of Lydney docks.

Has lave netting got a future?

The Environment Agency is very concerned about the declining numbers of salmon entering the rivers of England and Wales and in 2003 the Agency produced the Severn Estuary Salmon Action Plan.

This outlined a number of actions to help protect salmon stocks. The Agency also agreed to investigate the heritage value of the lave net fishery and this is progressing. Presently there are no restrictions on the number of lave net licences that can be issued. The Salmon Action Plan outlined proposals to cap licences at the current level of 28, to help protect salmon but also to preserve the skills of all those fishermen currently involved in the fishery. A Net Limitation Order to achieve this, is being consulted on.



If you would like to know more about lave net fishing and would like to contact a local group, please contact the Fisheries team in the Agency's Lower Severn office at Tewkesbury (details on the back of this leaflet) and we will help put you in touch.

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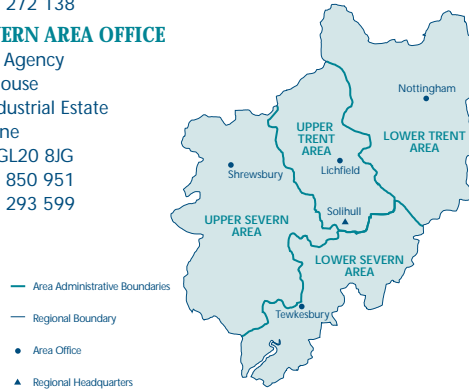
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A dip into history

Lave nets in the Severn Estuary

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The severe tidal conditions of the Severn Estuary has led over centuries, to the evolution of unique fishing methods to exploit salmon and other fish that frequent the muddy waters.

The lave net is one of these methods and has been used for at least 350 years and perhaps for more than a millennium. A deceptively simple design, and in the hands of a skilled fisherman, it is a very effective means of intercepting the elusive salmon as it makes its way from salt to fresh water to spawn. The lave net's advantage over the other legal salmon nets operating in the Severn Estuary (putcher ranks and draft nets) is that it is portable, allowing the fish to be actively pursued rather than chancing that the fish will swim into a fixed trap.



Mr Harris of Alvington taken in 1965 near Lydney

Do people still lave net?

The lave nets have historically been fished from the area known as 'English Lake' which stretches from just downstream of the second Severn crossing up to Longney Sands just a few miles below Gloucester. The skills of lave net fishing have been handed down through generations, in the tight knit communities on both banks of the estuary in England and Wales. The netsmen are centred at Blackrock, Lydney, Awre, Newnham and Westbury on the west bank and at Severn Beach, Oldbury, Purton, Arlingham and Framilode on the east. Lave net fishermen in Blackrock in Monmouthshire have their own names for areas within their traditional fishing areas, such as 'Monkey Tump', 'the Hole', and 'the Gut'.



Fishing locations



Blackrock netsmen in the estuary

What do lave nets look like?

Lave nets are not unique to the Severn Estuary but the fishing methods are. Wherever lave nets are used, they conform to one design. Two arms or 'rimes' and a handle or 'rock staff' form a 'Y' shape. The rimes are traditionally made from black willow (a type of willow) and spread apart by a headboard fastened to the ash rock staff, to which they are hinged with a bolt. When spread, the arms form a span of some eight feet and are joined by a headline from which hangs the nylon netting forming a bag. The mesh must be no less than 4" stretched (i.e. 2" knot to knot) to be legal for salmon fishing. The rimes are hinged on the rock staff so that the net can be collapsed, rolled up and carried on the shoulder when not in use.

How is a lave net fished?

Lave nets may be of a pattern but the way they are used differs depending on the location in the estuary and prevailing conditions.

'**Cowering**' involves standing still in waist high water with the rime ends resting on the bottom. A finger is crooked round a mesh or two of the net, so that the fisherman can feel if a fish swims blindly into the net in the muddy waters of the estuary. On detecting the fish, the net is levered smartly up and the struggling fish dispatched with a quick strike to the head with a 'knobbing-pin or priest' (hard wood or bone implement).

To allow fishing to continue without returning to the bank, the dead fish is secured to the netsman by a cord or slip, which has a loop at either end. This is passed through the fish's gills and round the netsman's wrist, from where the fish is allowed to trail in the current so that it doesn't dry out. The chances of cowering being successful are increased if two or more netsman co-operate and stand shoulder to shoulder across a gutter or minor channel in the sandbanks on a falling tide, to intercept salmon dropping back.

'**Stalking**' or actively hunting the salmon takes place on the extensive sandbanks that rise above the water on a falling tide. This type of fishing is particularly practised on the sandbanks known as Lydney Grounds. Salmon dropping back with the receding tide find themselves in rapidly shallowing water. The fish



Stalking at Lydney



Martin and Richard Morgan from Blackrock keep traditional lave net making skills alive



panic and swim for deeper water, in doing so their dorsal fin normally breaks water, known as a 'mark or loom'. This can be spotted by an alert netsman, who, with a peculiar skipping motion (his trailing foot will clear the surface with each step) will attempt to intercept the fish head on and place the headline under it and raise the fish out of the water.

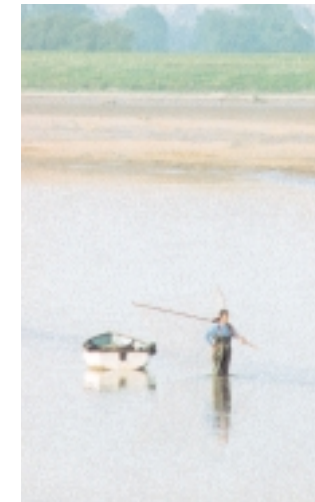
salmon heading up as it comes over a sand bar on the receding tide. This can be a very effective method of fishing, as long as the prevailing weather is of light or no wind with low light levels. The position in the estuary means that if conditions are perfect, the lave net can be deployed for many hours before the next incoming tide.

What happens to the salmon?

Historically, the salmon were an important source of food for the fishermen and their families. Any surplus was sold or traded within the local community. With the coming of the railway in the early 19th Century, fresh salmon could be sent to the cities, primarily London to the fish markets. This switch from local consumption to cities greatly increased the fishing effort. The tide has now turned again, due to the ready supply of farmed salmon coupled with declining wild stocks. The majority of salmon now caught are smoked or consumed locally. For the Blackrock fishermen, there is a tradition among the netsmen that all fish are shared among them and none are sold.

How many people lave net?

The Environment Agency, under the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Act 1975, licenses lave netting. There are currently 28 lave netsmen that



Low water stalking upstream of Newnham

'**low water stalking**' generally takes place on the sand bars in the upper Estuary, mostly during neap (small) tides. It differs from stalking as the netsman is trying to intercept salmon swimming upstream or 'heading'. The practised eye can see the mark or loom of a