



PHOTOGRAPHY

Above: Beneath the Bridge of Sighs at Cambridge, waters for pike in due season. Right: Fisher and quarry in surroundings more likely to yield a palatable result.

The pike, the peer, and the archbishop

Good sport and a good dinner, to be had by those in the know. They include a distinguished man of letters, Dr John Constable, who tells intriguing tales of primeval fish as the years roll away

AT some point during her confinement in 1562, Alice Abbot, wife of Maurice, a poor cloth-worker in the Guildford area, was taken with longing for the flesh of a pike. She let it be known that a dream had revealed that if she ate this fish, the child she was carrying would become a great man. John Aubrey, antiquary and writer, completes the story in his *Miscellanies*:

‘She arose early the next morning and went with her pail to the river-side (which runneth by the house, now an ale-house, the sign of the three mariners) to take up some water, and in the water in the pail she found a good jack, which she dressed, and eat it all, or very near. Several of the best inhabitants of Guilford were invited (or invited themselves) to the christening of the child; it was bred up a scholar in the town, and by de-

grees, came to be ArchBishop of Canterbury.’

Aubrey’s reputation for reliability does not stand high, so the whole account must be regarded as suspect—except that the infant Abbot, George, did indeed become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1611, having previously served as vice-chancellor of Oxford University. He seems to have taken his own natal auspices seriously, which might explain why he preached a sermon on the

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Book of Jonah every Thursday from 1594 to 1599, surely a record of some kind. Among other distinctions, he played a prominent role in the preparation of the authorised version of the Bible and officiated at the coronation of Charles I. He was also responsible for a terrible accident in 1621 when he killed a servant with a crossbow while hunting deer at Bramshill in Hampshire. Not even a royal pardon could quite expunge this stain.

It is clearly fanciful to suggest that the eating of the pike had any important influence on Archbishop Abbot's mixed fortunes in life, but at the same time the possibility may serve as a fable supporting the view that this noble fish deserves both respect and circumspection, whether dead or alive, raw or cooked.

That the pike is an excellent eating fish will need special justification, particularly for those who may have made the attempt to prepare it and regretted it. All that is needed is care and attention. As that great book, *Barker's Delight*, put it in 1651, 'When the Pike is at home minde the cookery.' Author Thomas Barker goes on to give sound advice on the initial and essential steps:

'The first thing you must doe when the Pike comes in the Kitchin, if it be alive, is to knock the Pike in the head, that the Pike may bleed, then take an handfull of salt and water, so rub him and scoure him to take the slime off, or else there will be dirty meat.'

In my own experience, the critical steps are rapid evisceration and the salt. For those who would wish the form of the pike to remain in reasonable shape for presentation, it is enough to clean it, remove the slime and soak it for as long as possible—12 hours is not too long—in salted water before cooking. Oven baking in foil with lemon sections laid in the cavity, bay leaves here and there, a little sherry splashed around the body and perhaps some bacon laid over the top, works well. Stuffing the fish with its own liver shredded with thyme combined with anchovies and pickled oysters and so forth, as urged by Izaak Walton, seems needless.

The flesh of the pike is firm—as you might expect of a fish that can accelerate to a top speed of 13mph within a body length or so—and cream-white in colour, with a patterning of dark meat on the surface. A simple salad or potatoes is satisfactory accompaniment. Many complain about the fine bones that sit over the rib cage, attached only by cartilage and so free-floating after cooking. These Y-shaped hazards are mostly

sizeable and easily removed. Those who dislike such things are advised to take George Formby's advice and stick to bananas.

Arguably, pike does best eaten as a curious light fish course, rather than as the main substance of a dinner. As it happens, those of about 4lb to 5lb in weight seem to cook best, smaller fish being tasteless. Anything larger should be returned to help

with white bellies and dark red-brown fins barred with a darker shadow. Beautiful in appearance though they were, the scent told me that they needed every hour that I could spare them in salt water. The other fish was taken in November from a wind-swept lough, where the water was so peat-stained our lures disappeared from view when more than 6in beneath the surface.

First catch your pike, then look inside: the vital first steps before inviting one's guests, as a Cambridge Fellow was soon to learn.



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keep down the population of smaller pike.

The quality of the meat is affected in a marked way by the character of the water from which it was taken. I have cooked pike twice in recent months, on the first occasion a little unseasonably in late-summer from a shallow, weedy lake surrounded by trees. The fish were green and primrose speckled,

The fish were almost black where they were not golden orange, but the taste was clean and pure, and an excellent prelude to the rare Northumbrian beef which followed.

On the whole, it is better to eat pike that one has caught oneself, or at least seen caught. For a short time, a few years back, I had the honour to be a minor variety of

Fellow at Magdalene College, Cambridge. One morning, I decided to exercise what I imagined were the privileges of the position and fish the Cam from the college's banks. Tact seemed necessary, students being delicate creatures who wear their bleeding hearts prominently upon their sleeves, so I rose early to avoid them, and with the mist rising from the water and sharp stars mak-

lowship would have little use for such conversation, so I went into the porter's lodge and in passing mentioned my captures to the duty staff, knowing that they themselves were probably fishermen, or would at least be interested. One, Arthur, was sorting the post and looked up from his work with a wan face. 'Did you keep the fish, sir?' he asked. I explained that I had returned them

as a sort of man-about-the-great-house for Lord Fairhaven at Anglesey Abbey, doing any kind of odd job. Now, one time he came in and told us he wasn't feeling too well. It turned out that the previous evening he'd been asked to clean a pike of some considerable size that had been caught by Lord Fairhaven in the mill pool. His lordship wanted to present it for dinner to entertain a large party of distinguished guests.

'We gave Mr Monday a chair, for he did look peaky, and he explained it all to us. "I never did like fish much," said Mr Monday, "but I'll certainly never eat a pike as long as I live. Do you know what I found in its guts?" Mr Monday looked round at us, savouring our attention (I think it was a lonely job at the Abbey), before carrying

Pike, not quite what Lord Fairhaven had intended, but served for supper all the same

on: "A rat, a whole rat, a big one, all pink and slimy and half-digested, with a tail this long. Oh, and the smell! I threw up, I did, and it makes me feel sick to the pit of my stomach now, just talking about it."

"All very well," we chimed, "but what did Lord Fairhaven do about his dinner at such short notice? It must have been embarrassing for him, with visitors in the house and nothing on the table."

'Mr Monday looked into space, picked up his bag and started to move towards the shop door: "Oh, I just rinsed the fish a bit and popped it through to the kitchen. What the eye doesn't see, the heart can't grieve over." And that's very true, sir, and very good advice. You'll be dining in hall tonight, won't you, sir? Shall I book you in?' I glanced at the calendar and noticed that it was Friday.

I offer this useful tale as a reminder to anybody intending to eat pike that this extraordinary, primevally powerful and terrifying fish is truly omnivorous, and while it may well be a rich imparter of sympathetic magic to those who digest it, these charms may not be entirely the pike's own, a consideration which may explain much or nothing about the life of Archbishop Abbot. □

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ing their farewells over the looming bulk of St John's Chapel tower, caught several fish in the short stretch above the appropriately named Pickerel Inn, by Magdalene Bridge, looking up towards the Bridge of Sighs.

It was a striking experience and I needed to talk about it, but there was every reason for thinking that my colleagues in the Fel-

lowship would have little use for such conversation, so I went into the porter's lodge and in passing mentioned my captures to the duty staff, knowing that they themselves were probably fishermen, or would at least be interested. One, Arthur, was sorting the post and looked up from his work with a wan face. 'Did you keep the fish, sir?' he asked. I explained that I had returned them

alive. 'Just as well, just as well. I'll tell you a story, if you've got a minute.' I had. 'Well, I used to work for Boots, quite a while ago now. One customer was extremely regular in his habits, and we got to know him rather well. We called him Mr Monday, for reasons you can guess, and would often chat with him. It emerged that he worked