

# Swimming along the River Cam to Ely

PURPORTEDLY NAMED FOR ITS ABUNDANCE OF EELS, ELY STILL CELEBRATES THIS FASCINATING FISH EACH MAY, AS DR SUE BAILEY DISCOVERS

If anyone had mentioned jellied eels to me, I would have squirmed. But I was converted when I tasted the tangy-sweet-smoky flavour of a smoked eel at last year's Ely Eel Festival. Now an established date in the local food lover's calendar, this annual event hosts all kinds of eel-based fun, from the World Eel Throwing competition (fortunately not with live eels) to a food and drink festival, and runs over the spring bank holiday weekend from 3 to 6 May. The 16th Eel Day Parade heads off from the High Street to the river, while the Eel Food Safari runs throughout, with local cafes and restaurants providing creative twists on the eel theme.

At the Ely Eel Festival, this amazing fish is celebrated with music, dancing, a living history encampment, a beer and cider tent, more than 75 artisan food and drink traders, and street food. I, myself, will be acting as eccentric cook Fanny Cradock in the Cookery Theatre, too, making an eel-shaped cake and talking about eels' past popularity, so do come and say hello!

Once, eels were a staple food in the Fens, and jellied eels from Ely lured Londoners to visit. The Old Fire Engine House restaurant in Ely has eel hooks in the kitchen and tales are told of a cut-off eel's head shooting along the preparation counter. This was in the late 80s and, according to one of the ladies working there, put her off eels completely. When eels were much more available, they used to serve the delicious traditional eel pie topped with a puff pastry crust. An early 15th-century recipe adds to the



eels some garlic, mace, saffron, crushed apples and verjuice (which is vinegar-like, sharp juice from crab apples).

Originally the marshes surrounding Ely were full of eels, and it's thought this island in the Fens owes its name to this curious fish. Eels spawn in the Sargasso Sea in the western Atlantic and their offspring float like curled leaves on the warm Gulf Stream back to Europe, drifting along for up to three years. They then grow into transparent glass eels, or elvers, like a mass of wriggling spaghetti, and begin to swim up freshwater streams to mature into adults. The fully grown silver eel (aged between ten and 35 years) then makes its return journey to spawn.

The Environment Agency's Dr Ros Wright, who specialises in eels, says: "Long black ribbons of glass eels used to come up along the rivers," but eel numbers have declined globally by 95% caused by "a perfect storm of man-made impacts". For 15 years, EU regulations have now controlled fishing to restore numbers. As Dr Ros says: "Eels are a very important part of the ecosystem for biodiversity, not just to be put on to people's plates." So we must value, respect and conserve eels.

Eel history is fascinating, according to Craig Cessford, senior project officer at Cambridge Archaeological Unit. "Eel is often the most common species of fish bone we find in Ely from the eighth century onwards. But we actually have better evidence for eels from Cambridge. There was a bowl found beside a seventh-century burial with eel bones in it. We also have a grig (funnel-shaped willow trap) found in a 14th-century pit."

The last full-time eel catcher, Peter Carter from Norfolk, retired recently and used

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traditionally made woven traps to catch eels, taking over from lifelong eel catcher, Sid Merry, who died seven years ago. But David and Richard Bunning of the Mid Norfolk Smokehouse still have fresh, hot, smoked and jellied eels. According to David, there is still "a good steady eel population in the Norfolk Broads".

To find out more about the fascination with eels, listen to The Hungry Roundhead – aka local guide and food historian Nora Gardner – at the Cookery Theatre. Nora says: "The 17th-century flavours and dishes come to life as I talk about the origins of traditional recipes."

So, why not visit the festival to learn more about and sample this unique and locally famous fish? ●