

Fish Weirs in the Severn

It is now over nine years since an essay in this history discussed the River Severn around Bickton and thereby mentioned 'fish weirs'. Perhaps it is now time to say more about them for the sake of newcomers as well as for those who have lost original copies.

Anciently, fishing especially for migrating eels, was not by rod and line, but by baskets or nets held over openings in fences built across the width of the river channel. On the Severn, such 'weirs' would thereby block navigation, but conflict was avoided by digging 'barge gutters' around them. This produced the characteristic islands or 'bylets' at each site, many of which can still be seen on O.S. Maps. The 1880's editions of the 6 inch and 25 inch maps actually show the 'funnel' shapes of some weir fences still surviving at Little Shrawardine, Montford, Fitz and Preston Boats, while contemporary watercolours and photographs confirm the details of their construction.

Earlier estate maps confirm these shapes and also identify the associated cottages and smallholdings of the weir keepers, whose other occupation would probably be basket weaving using the riverside willows. Field names and other records are also clues to the former existence of weirs. Meanwhile there were also many references to 'fisheries' on the tributary streams, but these were normally associated with mills, which often paid their rent in eels.

Most of the known sites were included in the 28 listed by the 'Commissioners of Sewers' in 1575, seeking to regulate obstructions to navigation in the County. By the nineteenth century, most of these had gone out of use for various reasons, including flood damage, such as the great flood of 1628, which is said to have *'brought down all the wares on the Severn'* (may have damaged Montford Bridge too).

Medieval deeds and charters suggest that the peak of weir building was in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, expanding upon eight fisheries already recorded in Domesday Book 1086. The charters of Shrewsbury Abbey, for instance, included exchanges of land with neighbouring estates which would have allowed the digging of the necessary barge gutters still to be seen at Wroxeter and Underdale, Shrewsbury. In this way, the midriver property and parish boundaries could be diverted through them.

Taking all these various records and field observations together, it is possible to identify at least forty sites in Shropshire, including those around Bickton at Bromley's Forge, Mytton, the Isle and Fitz. They all occupy suitable gravel banks, which thereby illustrate the general stability of the channel, relevant also to the story of fords and bridges.

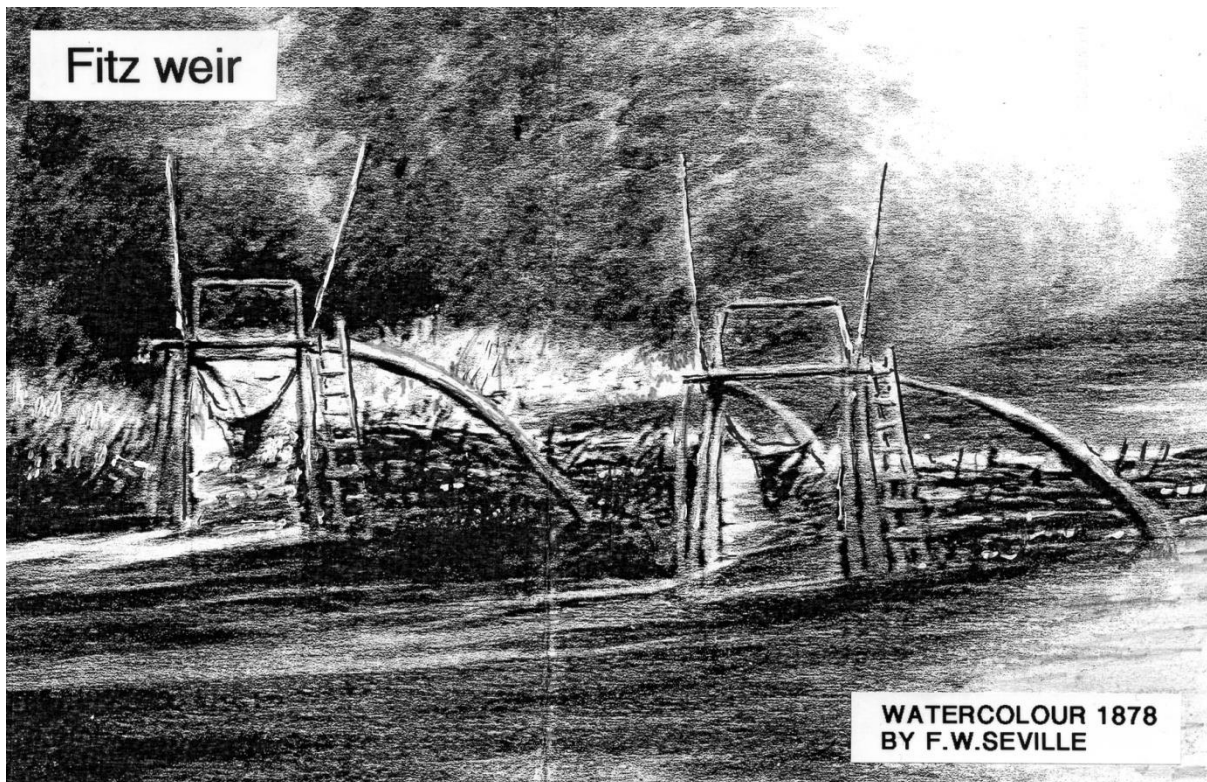
While some bylets remain, others have been reunited with the adjacent floodplain, across which the outline of a silted-up barge gutter can still be recognised. In these cases, the parish and property boundaries might still follow this line, so that, for example, a small patch by Bickley Coppice actually still belongs to Mytton across the site of the weir. This same odd situation at the Fitz weir has only recently been resolved by a deal between the landowners concerned.

A few of these sites, with obvious features, but poor documentation, had obviously gone out of use before 1575, perhaps during one of those 14th century purges against obstruction to navigation. Why these were closed down while others survived is not recorded, but their relationship to a customary towpath could provide one explanation. If this had been along one bank only along

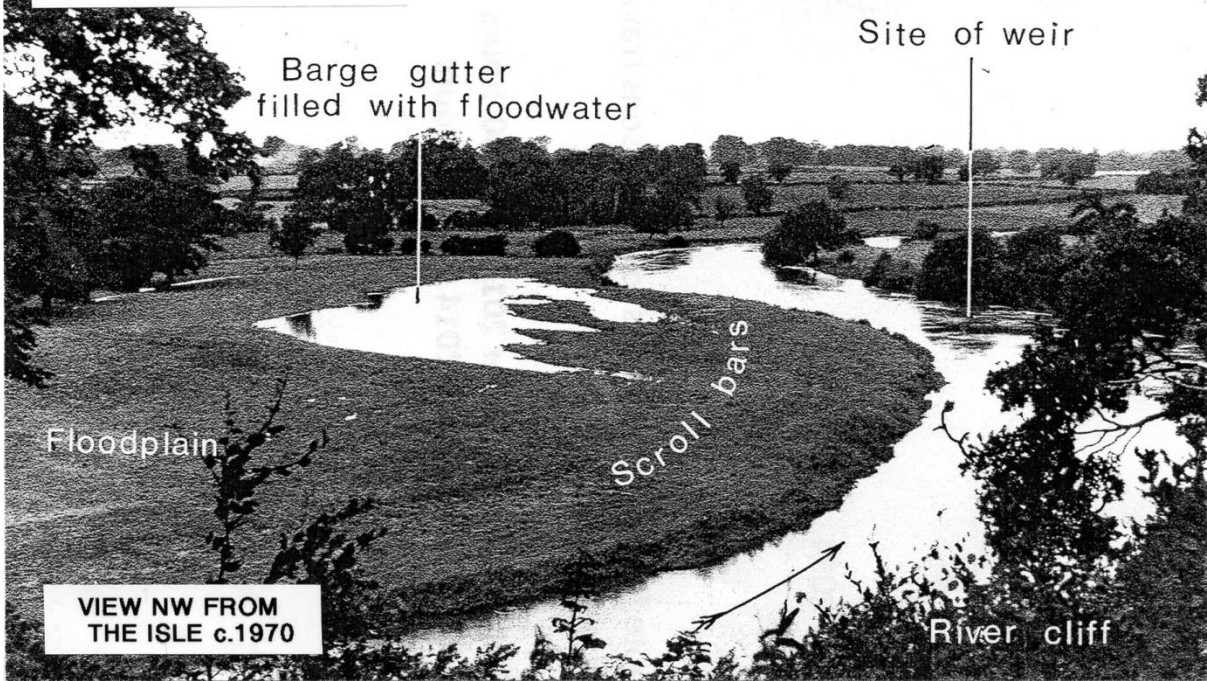
whole lengths of the river, any barge gutter on that side would allow the weir to continue, but, the other way round, the weir would be condemned as an obstruction.

This would explain how a weir belonging to the Isle closed down while others nearby remained in use, even into the nineteenth century. The only clues to its former existence are the adjacent field names and traces of an old barge gutter running across the opposite floodplain. The original parish and property boundaries had obviously returned to the river at a date before post-reformation bureaucracy might have fixed them. Its history is therefore guesswork, but nevertheless it reveals much about the nature of the floodplain. Most of its surface is historically very old with recent deposition confined to the bank area, where low banks of silt, 'scroll bars', have blocked the ends of the gutter, which still holds water in time of flood.

The main 'catch' for such weirs was normally eels during seasonal downstream migration, rather than fish in general. In the 1920s many more regulations were brought in to manage inland fisheries for both commercial and sport fishing, so that such traditional 'weir' fishing was banned. In any case, eel numbers were declining because of 'elver' fishing downstream and loss of habitat upstream. Once our landscape was rich in pools, wet ditches and meadows, but agricultural improvement has drained so much. Unlike normal fish, eels could wriggle through such ditches to reach pools, such as those around Bicton, where Oxon Pool was noted for them in the sixteenth century, while later, John Mytton created another off Calcott Lane, which has since been drained.



Site of Isle weir



Barge gutter
filled with floodwater

Site of weir

Floodplain

Scroll bars

VIEW NW FROM
THE ISLE c.1970

River cliff