

WORTH A KINGS RANSOM WINTER ROACH AT THE ABBEY

by Fred Davis

There has always been a lot of controversy about King Harold's final resting place even a program on country file rejuvenated the search for the real burial site of King Harold, however it seems that his body was removed from Waltham Abbey in the 17th century, his body was so badly brutalised that only his wife was able to recognise him as he laid on the battlefield, records show that the body was returned to Waltham Abbey which Harold had built to rejoice in his recovery from a paralysing ailment after monks had prayed for his recovery at Waltham in the year in the 1060's. The fact that his reign was short lived and his life ended prematurely by William the Conqueror is synonymous with the roach shoals that now annually invade the cornmill stream, however the life blood of fishing is short lived and lasts for just a few winter weeks.

The cornmill stream which is part of the river lea system starts from the river lea flood diversion channel and the stream which runs from Fishers Green through the Abbey and rejoins the lea system a mile or so below the Abbey. The cornmill stream is extremely narrow and shallow and if you find 2 1/2ft of water you may stand a chance of a surprise, the better bags of fish tend to run from November to January sometimes into February but most local anglers tend to believe that it is the extreme cold weather that forces the roach run, the fish supposedly look for warmer conditions within the town, food is readily available at the Abbey as it gets lots of visitors who constantly feed bread to the numerous ducks and swans, maybe in the hardness of winter free food is too irresistible?

What spurred me on to fish this shallow stream? maybe it was childhood memories of catching small fish in barking creek (another small although man made stream) also the inquisitiveness within, even the fact that although I knew of it's potential, you are fishing in full view of the Abbey visitors which can be a bit off putting, ok if you are catching, but you look a bit of a simpleton if your not just because it is so shallow and you don't often see a fish, it was while walking through the Abbey a few days earlier I had looked over one of the concrete sills where the river sometimes runs, water levels permitting, through tunnels under the road and spotted 3 fish all pound plus roach in what must have been inches of water, they saw me and obviously spooked and disappeared under the road before I could engage the camera, however they were gone, I did return

later to try to creep up on the fish and took a photo of the tiny overflow run off to see if I could catch them in the shallow water but it was to no avail.

With my appetite wetted from the sight of such beautiful fish and adopting a not bothered attitude I decided a visit was a must, so it was on the 1st of February that I decided to give the Abbey a crack, hoping that I wasn't too late and the roach shoals would still be in residence, rumour has it that roach to two pound have been caught from the stream although I have never seen one that big, there was one roach weighed in on a club match at 1lb 11oz's two years ago and the occasional 1lb+ roach are caught, when I say a club match, I am really referring to small clubs 10 members or so, weights that win these matches are normally around 16lb+ with weights to 30lb however these weights are achieved when the roach move in to the town stretch big style and it is a bounty for those who catch it right, other times 10lb is a reasonable weight and once the roach start to return to the natural river the town stretch can be devoid and a bite would be considered a bonus!

One of the most interesting things about the cornmill stream is that it looks as if it comes to an end by the abbey church as the river splits into two small arms for a few yards both have concrete sills, the right hand side arm occasionally has a trickle of water running down it but normally this tiny pound is still, water flows from the left hand arm again to a smaller concrete sill however to the right of this is what appears to be a racing sluice over which the water cascades obviously all the main flow is in this tiny arm, by this concrete sill and racing sluice there is a build up of rubbish, bought by the flow, which forms a canopy over the water, held in place by the sill, this peg is normally the flier as better fish take refuge in the shallower covered water, so not wanting to chance fate in other areas on arriving at the cornmill stream for a few hours roach fishing on the punch this was the first peg I set out my stall on. In actual fact I felt quite smug having secured this top peg, easy on a weekday impossible at a weekend!

Having set up the basic standard rig a maver XL wire stemmed slim bodied float with strung shot on .10 Ultima XT7 main line and initially an .08 hook length of Ultima XT7, I was ready to start sacking, imagine my horror when in the first hour all I had to show was four tiny miniscule roach, the smug grin I had on arrival had well and truly gone! I had replaced

the 08 hook length with one of 06 and had dropped hooks from a size 18 to a size 24 in order to buy a bite, obviously it appeared the roach had gone from the Abbey? I was now contemplating a switch to the near by river lea on Dunlop's in order to catch a few fish, as I looked across the stream which at most is 8 metres wide and held just 2 foot of shallow clear water I thought I must be out of my mind fishing here, not another angler in site or any fish, it was then that a larger fish topped and splashed a couple of yards down to my right at the end of the concrete wall, maybe I only had to move a couple of yards to bag?

I gathered my gear and moved it piece by piece around to the far point of the built up brick wall that's runs along part of the bank, refeeding with bread punch (a pinch of Tesco's finest liquidised "value loaf") and baiting the hook with a small piece of punch, with everything to play for I hoped those elusive fish would be there. First put in and the float buried and a plump 6 ounce roach came to the net sport was a bit sporadic with roach drifting in and out of the peg fishing at 4 metres with a Diawa connoisseur whip which had not seen the light of day for years, last time it saw this usage was on the Laleham shallows on the river Thames, memories flooded back of such halcyon days and as usual this whip was a delight to use even if the odd tangle was a result of it's whippy action or my over zealous striking at bites, feeding a pinch of liquidised punch little and often kept the fish interested, and a local angler had arrived with his gear to have a crack at this tiny stream and after seeing some of the quality roach that I was catching he settled in at the next peg in the trees and provided much needed pleasant company, however as a regular he had a wealth of knowledge about the pegs and told me that the locals get tench to over 6lb in the summer, the chap asked me if I had suffered any pike trouble as these can be a bit of a problem, however apart from the odd quite spell there was no visible evidence of any pike on this day. I was also told of an area where large chub shoals hold up and although the fish run to 2 1/2 pound at certain times of year they can be caught one a chuck!

The Cornmill Stream at the Abbey is for the occasional angler rather than clubs parking is limited to two hours outside the Abbey however there are 4 free parking spaces down by the side of the Abbey and plenty of parking on the side roads off of the main roundabout before you enter the high street which leads to the Abbey itself. As the local lad took some snaps of the my final tally of 4 hours fishing I looked at the catch and thought roach bags like this are truly worth a kings Ransom. If you fancy some small stream fishing see what you can find locally you'll never know your luck unless you try, I must

admit every time I drive past or over a small river I often wonder of there hidden secrets.

The fishing in Waltham Abbey on the Cornmill stream is free as is the bank opposite the grounds of the abbey however within the grounds of the Abbey (which is sited on the right hand bank of the river) platforms for the disabled have been erected fishing is for members only within the grounds of the Abbey itself, the opposite bank to the platforms is free.

Although this January has been the mildest on record since 1916 these winter forages even in dire winter conditions can be really rewarding and spur me on to get out and about, hopefully this article may give you the desire to get out and get and plunder a few of our winter waters, if it does it's job done!