

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



The Dowdeswell Pike

On 11th May 1896, the decomposing body of an enormous female pike was found floating on the surface of the Dowdeswell Reservoir, five miles to the east of Cheltenham. The pike, which is one of the largest ever recorded, was 4 foot 6 inches long, with a maximum girth of 23 inches. Although it was apparently in too poor a condition to be weighed, its weight was estimated to have been as much as 60lbs, although as much as a third of that amount might have been due to an intake of water after death.

The corpse was taken to the premises of a leading Cheltenham taxidermist, J.C. White of St Luke's Place, where the skin was preserved by being filled with plaster of paris and mounted in a glass case, at a cost of £5 10s 0d, paid for by Cheltenham Corporation.



The Dowdeswell Pike, stuffed and mounted in it's original glass case

The age of the fish was initially estimated at up to 30 years, but in 1968 a scientific examination of one of its gill-cover bones by staff at the Freshwater Biological Association concluded that its likely age was nearer 13. They also noted that its rate of growth during the first three years of its life was normal, but that it grew exceptionally fast thereafter. This would seem to support a theory that the young pike was inadvertently introduced to the newly constructed Reservoir, which occupied the site of a small fish pond, at the time of its construction in 1883-6. The pike was then supplied with an unlimited source of food, as the Reservoir was stocked with trout so that it could be used for fishing by members of the Corporation. Indeed, in the years before its discovery, there had been 'fishermen's tales' of an enormous pike seen chasing - and eating - the Corporation's fish! The pike may have gone blind, which would have prevented it from catching its prey, resulting in its death by starvation.

By late 1896 the stuffed fish was on display in the Public Library and in 1899 it became part of the town's embryonic museum collection (Accession number: 1899.7), being transferred in 1908 to the newly-opened Museum, where it has been on display ever since.

As well as the uncertainty over the pike's weight, a lingering doubt remains as to how it got into the Reservoir; after the results of the 1968 examination were published, a local resident wrote to the investigator claiming that the Pike had originally come from Liddington Lake at Leckhampton and that it had been secretly introduced to the new reservoir by an angler who was angry that the fishing there would be the exclusive preserve of the Town Councillors!



A photograph of the Mayor George Parsonage turning the first sod of the New Corporation Water Works at Dowdeswell

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
Collections Team, The Wilson, Clarence Street, Cheltenham GL50 3JT

Tel: 01242 387488 **Email:** collections@cheltenhamtrust.org.uk

Visit our website: <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/>

The Cheltenham Trust VAT Registration number 194 2512 07.
Cheltenham Leisure & Culture Ltd VAT Registration number 194 2476 82.

The Cheltenham Trust is a Registered Charity in England & Wales, number 1158606.
Registered address: Cheltenham Town Hall, Imperial Square, Cheltenham GL50 1QA.

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