

## How big was Wales' largest salmon?

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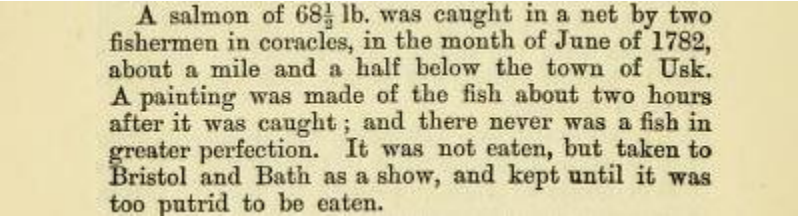
The largest salmon caught by any method in Wales was taken by coracle net in 1782 from the River Usk. Several sources give its weight as 68 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>lbs but it may have been even larger.

In February 1992, a painting of the salmon was auctioned. The inscription reads: '*Portrait of a salmon caught at Llantrissant near Uske, AD 1782, weight 68<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>lbs*'. I was the Fishery Officer for the Usk at the time and Jean Williams of Sweets Tackle Shop in Usk gave me a cutting from the Mail on Sunday dated 9 February showing the picture:



The cutting quoted the auctioneer, Andrew Gibbs, as saying: '*The artist would simply have laid the fish on the canvas and drawn round it*'. As I recall, the painting was bought for £5,000 by Andrew Baylis, a fishery owner on the Usk who represented the river on the Welsh Regional Fisheries Advisory Board. Andrew subsequently moved to Devon taking the painting with him.

The capture of the salmon is noted by J.H. Clark in his book: 'Usk, Past & Present' publ. Usk, County Observer Office (1891) on page 166:



A salmon of  $68\frac{1}{2}$  lb. was caught in a net by two fishermen in coracles, in the month of June of 1782, about a mile and a half below the town of Usk. A painting was made of the fish about two hours after it was caught; and there never was a fish in greater perfection. It was not eaten, but taken to Bristol and Bath as a show, and kept until it was too putrid to be eaten.

William Coxe, mentions the painting in his 'Historical Tour of Monmouthshire', published 1801 (<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/q3fzw54w>). He says that in the house of 'Mr. Rhees' the Usk postmaster 'is the figure of a salmon, caught in 1782, which weighed 68 pounds and a half'. Mr. Rhees rented the Crown fishery where it was caught. At that time, the Crown fishery probably stretched from upstream of Trostrey weir to the Redland Pool in the tidal reaches (See Footnote 1).

Llantrisant is about two and a half miles, as the crow flies, below the town of Usk which suggests, if there is any precision in the distance to the site of capture, that the salmon was taken on what is now either the Upper or Lower Llangybi fishery.

Fred Buller records the fish in his 2007 work 'The Domesday Book of Mammoth Salmon' but gives it a lower weight of  $62\frac{3}{4}$  lb (see excerpt in Annex 1). Though he doesn't state his reasons, Buller says that it was customary at the time, and indeed before 1825, for weights to be given in pounds Dutch rather than our current avoir dupois pound. I have found a little evidence to support this. A tale recounted by William Scrope in '*Days and Nights of Salmon Fishing*', 1843 mentions 'a salmon caught by William Grant some thirty years earlier that weighed 'fifty-four pounds, Dutch'. The story is included in '*The Big Fish*' (1992) edited by Arthur Oglesby and Lucy Money-Coutts. I can't find any other references that confirm Buller's assertion, rather the contrary (see Footnote 2).

However, suppose that Fred Buller is correct and that the weight of the salmon was originally recorded in Dutch pounds. If that's the case, then the salmon would have weighed more than  $68\frac{1}{2}$  lbs not less. Fred Buller got his maths wrong. A Dutch pound is 494g compared to a pound avoir dupois of 454g. So a fish weighed in Dutch pounds would be 1.093 times that weight when converted to avoir dupois. In other words, the salmon would have weighed  $74\frac{1}{2}$  lbs avoir dupois if the painting gives its weight in Dutch pounds. Fred Buller divided when he should have multiplied.

So where does that leave us? Well, unless someone can confirm that the avoir dupois pound, equal to 454g, was not in general use in Monmouthshire in 1782, a conservative view would be to accept the weight on the painting. This would make it the largest recorded in Wales. But if Fred Buller is right that the Dutch pound was in use, then this Usk salmon was not only the largest recorded in Wales but, at  $74\frac{1}{2}$  lbs, was larger than any in England as well. Fred Buller mentions a couple of larger fish in Scotland.

After writing a letter to Trout & Salmon magazine about the Usk fish in 2017, I was told about another painting of it in Abergavenny Museum. The style of this painting is different and suggests it might have been painted later than the original. The inscription reads: 'Caught in the year 1782 (Wt.  $68\frac{1}{2}$  lbs) near the Town of Usk'. Jean Williams of Sweets Fishing Tackle thinks that this second painting used to hang in the District Council Office in Usk. Presumably, it was given to Abergavenny

Museum, now run by Monmouthshire County Council, after local authorities were revised in 1974. The Museum's staff kindly allowed me to measure the fish on the painting. Its length was  $57\frac{3}{4}$  inches and depth,  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inches.

The staff at Abergavenny Museum have recently tracked down the original painting and borrowed it for an exhibition at the museum showing both paintings. They kindly took the dimensions of the salmon on the original painting: its length was 145 cm and depth 34 cm, equivalent to 57.1 inches and 13.4 inches respectively.

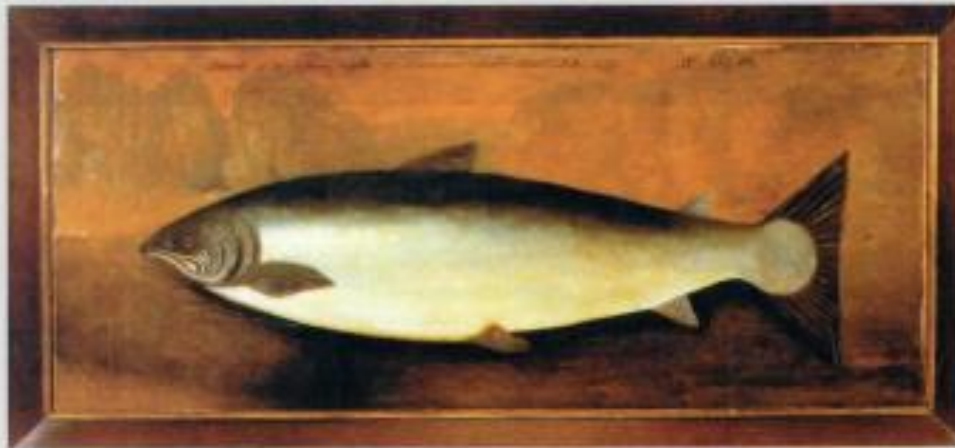
Of course, there is no guarantee that these were the actual dimensions of the fish but they are consistent with a salmon of at least  $68\frac{1}{2}$ lbs or even  $74\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. A salmon of 71lbs is recorded by P.D. Malloch (see Footnote 3.) as having a length of only 53 inches though its girth of 31 or 32 inches may be slightly larger than the Usk salmon. From the depth of the Usk salmon, I estimate the girth to have been 30 or 31 inches. From length/weight relationships, based on smaller salmon (e.g. <https://www.letsflyfish.com/weight.htm>), the weight of the Usk salmon could have been as much as 74 lbs, or even more.

Footnotes:

1. The limits of the Crown fishery in 1860 are described given by William Foster Batt in evidence given to Inquiry into Salmon Fisheries (England and Wales), Minute No. 1842, page 51 in Report of Commissioners appointed to inquire into Salmon Fisheries (England and Wales) together with Minutes of Evidence, published 1861, HMSO, London.

2. Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avoirdupois> and other websites indicate that although a new standard for the pound avoirdupois was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in platinum instead of bronze, the latter had been the standard since 1588, in Elizabeth I's reign: [https://sizes.com/units/pound\\_avoirdupois.htm](https://sizes.com/units/pound_avoirdupois.htm). It isn't clear that the platinum pound was significantly different from the bronze. Indeed, the 1824 changes may not have done more than change the name for weights and measures to 'Imperial', (<http://www.dozenalsociety.org.uk/history/poundhist.html>).

3. P.D. Malloch in his 1910 book 'Life history and habits of the salmon, sea-trout and other freshwater fish' records on p89 a Scottish salmon of 71lbs netted in the Tay at Newburgh in 1872 with a length of 52 ins and girth of 31ins (page 89) or 32 ins (page 94). Malloch notes that a cast of this fish, weight given as 70lbs, was in the Buckland Collection in South Kensington. Its head seems to have returned to Scotland, to the Scottish Fish Museum, and an image is on the museum's web site: <http://www.scotfishmuseum.org/album.php?s=buckland-collection>.



The painting was found in Derby and bears the inscription: 'Portrait of a Salmon caught at Llantrifsent near Uske AD 1782. Wt 68 $\frac{1}{2}$  lbs.' The weight is in pounds Dutch

## REECE AND LEWIS'S 62 $\frac{3}{4}$ lb USK SALMON

— No. 363 —



A painting of a large salmon, caught at 'Llantrifsent, near Uske', is featured in Arthur Oglesby and Lucy Money-Coutts' book *The Big Fish*. The caption below the painting indicates that the fish weighed 68 $\frac{1}{2}$ lb but at the time, or indeed at any time before about 1825, it was customary in Britain to use pounds Dutch. Since one pound (*avoir du poids*) equals 1.0892 pounds Dutch, the salmon actually weighed approximately 62lb 12oz.

Llantrifsent or Llantrissent or Llantrisant, as modern maps would have it, is about three miles south of Usk. (It was once much more important in the nation's history. Men from Llantrisant fought in the Black Army at Crécy – so called after a bold black diagonal stripe in the arms of Hugh Despenser, the Lord of Glamorgan, who raised three hundred archers and spearman locally.)

In the correspondence column of the *Fishing Gazette* of 5 March 1932, there is a short letter from Edward Coulman of Chesterholme, Newport, Monmouthshire which reads, 'I had occasion recently to refer to the *Usk Gleamer* of September 1875, in which I noticed a rather curious record, viz "A salmon weighing 69 $\frac{1}{2}$ lb was caught in the River Usk near the town in 1783".' This puts the fish at a slightly heavier weight which is not borne out by the last but most important data on the taking of the Usk monster salmon which appeared in a letter published in *The Times* of 26 November 1996:

Note: Fred Buller was also wrong in saying that men from Llantrisant near Usk fought in the Black Army at Crecy. That Llantrisant is in Glamorgan, hence the arms.

RECORD CATCH

*From Sir Richard Hanbury Tenison*

Sir, Your report (November 21) of Mr. Bond's record catfish mentions the 'next biggest freshwater fish ever caught in Britain, a 64lb salmon taken by Georgina Ballantine in 1922'. That was certainly the largest salmon taken in British waters by rod and line but in June 1782 a 68½lb salmon was taken by net trawled by a coracle on the River Usk. The Usk fish was considered so remarkable that it was toured round the local towns by its captors until it fell to pieces.

Yours faithfully

R. Hanbury Tenison  
Clytha Park,  
Nr. Abergavenny, Gwent

Further enquiry revealed that the salmon was taken in a net trawled between two coracles on the Crown Fishery water, which stretched twelve miles from Clytha Park to Caerleon, and that the successful netsmen were named as the leaseholder Richard Reece of Usk and his fisherman, James Lewis. It is likely that Lewis was manning one of the coracles. The salmon would not have been hauled into the coracles which were solely used to sweep the pool with the net.