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Tunnicliff, S.P. (1980) A catalogue of the lower palaeozoic fossils in the collection of Major General J.E. Portlock. Ulster Museum, Belfast. 111pp.

Mystery of the trout that was a salmon

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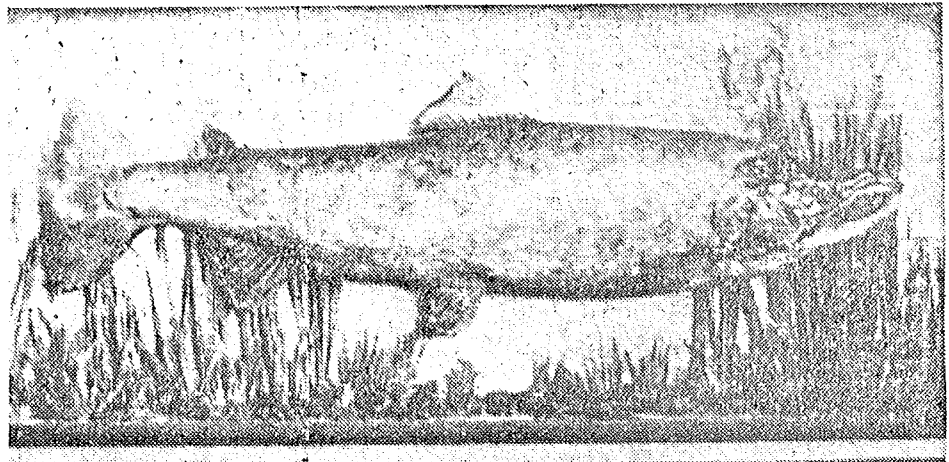
THE historic Weybridge Salmon is a large stuffed fish, mounted in a glass case which now hangs at the top of stairs at Weybridge Library.

This fish has an interesting history, both as a fish and as a museum specimen, and can rightly be classed as a local "curiosity." Its history starts on March 9, 1861, when a local professional fisherman, Mr. George Keene (who made his living by hiring boats and giving advice to gentlemen who wished to fish in the Thames), found it, floating on the surface of the water.

There was a mystery about the fish from the beginning, and it was described as a "long lean fish, very much out of condition, only faintly spotted and both upper and lower jaws beaked, indicating old age."

George Keene thought it was a trout, but as it was different from the trout which he normally caught, thought also that it came from somewhere else and had been put in the Thames after its death. Even so, he had it stuffed and mounted in a bow-fronted glass case with a label saying: "Taken in the Thames." Two other trout, stuffed and mounted by the same taxidermist, were labelled "Killed in the Thames."

While at the taxidermist it was seen by two fish experts, Frank Buckland, who was to become Inspector of Salmon Fisheries in 1867, and Sir William Jardine, who was a Commissioner for Salmon Fisheries in England and Wales. Buckland thought it was not a



Thames trout, but did not like to say that it was a salmon, while Sir William Jardine said it was definitely a salmon.

A controversy raged over this fish in Victorian sporting magazines for many years for the simple reason that in 1861 the Thames was so polluted that the experts could not believe that a salmon could survive in it to reach as far above London as Weybridge.

George Keene kept the fish for the rest of his life, but his widow sold it in 1889.

In 1914, it was sold again to J. E. Harting, a well-known naturalist, who presented it, with several other specimens from his own collection, to Weybridge Museum. Mr. Harting first took the fish to the British Museum (Natural History) and showed it to a Mr. G. A. Boulanger, who pronounced it a salmon.

For many years it had pride of place in the museum, but during the 1930s, after J. E. Harting's death, the museum's natural history collection was largely dispersed and the fish relegated to a storeroom. After the Second World War, some museum specimens (largely natural history) were transferred to the loft over old stables which were being used as a general storage space for all manner of unwanted objects and furniture. The museum had been allocated a small por-

tion of the stables in which were kept agricultural specimens.

In 1974 the stables were pulled down. Shortly before this museum staff were told that everything in the stables was to be destroyed and that they could remove anything they wanted including anything from the loft. Accordingly, the present museum staff explored the loft — a dangerous task as part of the floor was rotten — and unearthed a great many treasures, some of which had been lost over the years.

Most of the natural history specimens were moth-eaten and rotten and had to be thrown away, but miraculously the fish had survived. Although the glass of its case had been smashed, the back on which the fish was mounted, and the base, complete with its artificial reeds and stones representing the river-bed, remained intact.

It was a filthy dirty, but a young art student, Mr. John Pulford, then employed as a Saturday receptionist-museum assistant, cleaned and revarnished the fish. Elmbridge Council's carpenters made a new case, and the fish, and its reeds, were transferred. It was exhibited under the title, *A Fishy Mystery*, and the magazine cuttings relating to it were shown with it.

In 1979, Mr. Alwyne Wheeler, of the British Museum (Natural History), published a book, *The Tidal Thames*, referring to all the well-known fish that had been caught in the Thames. At the time, however, he did not know of the Weybridge Salmon. Having learnt of it he came to visit the museum, and has now duly pronounced it to be a salmon, that, in spite of the Thames pollution, could well have migrated upstream to Weybridge.

His findings on the fish were published in *The London Naturalist* in 1980. The museum now proudly exhibits the fish, and also sells re-prints of Mr. Wheeler's article for 20p. Anyone wishing to know more details of this remarkable fish is recommended to read it.

Weybridge Museum will be open during August from 2 p.m.-5 p.m. each weekday and 10 a.m.-1 p.m. and 2 p.m.-5 p.m. on Saturdays. The main gallery of the museum will be closed, however, during September, October and November for a complete refurbishing and the construction of a new natural history gallery.

During this period, old photographs of the district and photographs of museum specimens on the recently-reddecorated stairs, together with the archaeology gallery in the museum vestibule, will be open.

The salmon will also be on display.

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