



# THE Tweed FOUNDATION

A Tweed Foundation Paper

## SECTION 4.2: THE HISTORY OF THE SALMON AND SEA-TROUT ROD FISHERIES OF THE TWEED AND THE EYE

*Along the silver streams of Tweed,  
'Tis blithe the mimic fly to lead,  
When to the hook the Salmon springs,  
And the line whistles through the rings;  
The boiling eddy see him try,  
Then dashing from the current high,  
Till watchful eye and cautious hand  
Have led his wasted strength to land.*

*"On Ettrick Forest's Mountains Dun"*  
Sir Walter Scott, 1822

*"We may consent to admit – for is nothing to the purpose – that salmon-angling is actually one of the most costly, and is apparently – that is, to the eye of all but the person suffering – one of the dreariest and most desperate of recreations. The expense and the labour are great; the material recompense inappreciable and often quite invisible ..... It is strange to think of the exceeding desperateness of the chances of success which suffice to tempt men away from their business and their families to some of our salmon-streams; yet those who have most often felt and seen the hopelessness of the undertaking, are just those most eager to try it again. Look at that otherwise sensible and respectable person, standing midway in the gelid Tweed (it is early spring or latest autumn, the only seasons when there is now much chance), his shoulders aching, his teeth chattering, his coat-tails afloat, his basket empty. A few hours ago probably he left a comfortable home, pressing business, waiting clients and a dinner engagement. On arriving at his "water" the keeper, as the tone of keepers now is, despondingly informed him that there is "nae head o'fish" although at the utmost "there may be a happenin' beast" ..... But in his eagerness and ignorance he knows better than the keeper; and there he is at it still, in his seventh hour. The wind is in his eye, the water is in his boots, but Hope, the charmer, lingers in his heart".*

Russell, 1864, "The Salmon".

*According to Sir Robert Bruce-Lockhart, what Neville Chamberlain did after making the Munich Agreement was to go fishing on The Junction, where he sounded-out the then boatman, Vivers, about local opinion on the agreement. The Prime Minister was told, reportedly, that "not a man from Berwick to the Solway did not approve". The same source, however, was not able to commend Mr. Chamberlain's fishing skills - he lost six fish in two days.*

**(A) The origins and early days of rod fishing :** Salmon fishing rights are rights to take Salmon by any legal method – not just by rod and line and most of the time since this area was settled by humans after the Ice Age, fishing with a line was a minor method. Owners of fishing rights used traps (as at "The Yair" on the upper Tweed – a "yair" is a fish trap) or nets to get

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their fish. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the system was, generally, that a fishing proprietor would grant a "tack" (lease) of his fishings to a fisherman who would net the river but who would also rent days out to anglers. Any fish caught by an angler and taken away were then paid for at the commercial rate, as described by Dr. Knox in 1854:

*"When the angler reaches Kelso, he will find a different mode of fishing for salmon practised. The river is all taken, but the fisherman will hire a boat to you, and assist you with rod, line &c. ; the charge is moderate. What salmon or sea trout you take, you may have at a reasonable charge.....At Kelso, the angler, if a gourmand, may have salmon cooked the minute it comes from the river. I do not advise it, it has a peculiar odour and flavour. Life is not altogether extinct when placed in the kettle, and it tells on the fish when cooked. I should not think it quite wholesome.*

Some further details of how the fishermen of this type worked their fisheries and the mix of methods used comes from a printed account of a legal case between the River Tweed Commissioners and Rober Kerse, a well-known fisherman of his day, who had a tack of the Mackerstoun fishings:

*"The memorialist is tacksman of the fishings in the Tweed opposite to Mackerstone, which belong to Sir Henry Hay Macdougall. Sir Henry has an undoubted right of salmon-fishing; but the nature of the channel is extremely unfavourable to the exercise of the right; particularly at the place which gives rise to the present question, called the Trow Rocks, it is covered with precipitous rocks, among which the water has worn deep holes and gullies. Fishing by net and coble is here impossible: an expert fisher may use the rod, but even to him the rocks are very unfavourable, as the rocks frequently break the line and enable the fish to escape.*

*In these hard circumstances, necessity has suggested a mode of catching the fish particular to the situation, and which has been exercised for time immemorial as a matter of avowed and acknowledged right. When the river is high, and the rocks are covered with water, it is impossible for a fisher to approach them, and the fish pass up the river undisturbed. But when the river gets very low, a few of the fish remain in the pools among the rocks, in which they are in a manner confined; and if not purposely disturbed, they are then in no disposition whatever to run up the river. In this state of matters, nets are placed above and below, immediately to the rocks where the pools are, but by no means across the whole river; and particularly on the north side, these nets never approach the land nearer than a hole "in the red stone", from ten to fifteen yards from the land, and between which stone and the bank an open stream is left. The nets being thus placed, the "lying or resting fish" as they are called, are disturbed by the fishermen, and being driven from their holes by leisters, small nets, or other means, are chiefly caught in the nets on the outside, but which are not properly what are called "bar" nets, but "check or inset" nets, their object being to catch the fish. They are never placed there, except in the very act of fishing, and never remain longer than from late of the evening till early in the ensuing morning. It is only in very dry seasons, when there are no fish running that this mode is practicable, and in fact, a whole season frequently passes, without the river being ever low enough to make way for it."*

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It is later stated :

*"The tacksman of the fishing immediately above, to whose instigation, it is believed, the present prosecution is in part owing, has had a net stretched from shore to shore, stented across the river for days together, which may be considered in some degree as a permanent obstruction to the passage of fish ....."* (stent, stend = to stretch)

In 1824, in parliamentary evidence, a John Wilson, (quoted in Scrope, 1843) described the fishings on the river Tweed :

*"The fishings as regards their relative values, may be divided into the following classe :- The first comprehends the short distance from the mouth of the river to Berwick Bridge, where alone there are probably a greater number of salmon captured than in all the remainder of the river. From Berwick Bridge to Norham, to which place the tide reaches, may be considered the second class: as far as this place the net and coble only are in use. From Norham to Coldstream Bridge the fishings are of still less value; and here, besides the net and coble, the various modes of fishing practised in the upper parts of the river are also in use – rod fishing, setting, leistering; cairn, hanging and straik nets. From Coldstream to the Bridge of Kelso the net and coble are used only partially in floods; and on Mondays, when by the cessation of the lower fishings on Sunday, the salmon get further up. I have seen from 100 to 500 salmon and gilses caught at Kelso in the morning by the net and coble. From Kelso to the higher districts of the river the principal modes of fishing are by the rod, leister, cairn and straik net"*

The fact that nets were only in general use above Coldstream on Mondays, after the Sunday "slap" (close-time) had let some fish get that far up the river gives a rather alarming picture of the level of netting exploitation there must have been in those days – and of a rather callous attitude to the few survivors that did get past the nets on their off day. The mix of methods and the different aims of food and sport fishing inevitably caused conflict and complaints, illustrated by what Sir Humphrey Davy had to say in 1832:

*" I have often heard the Tay and the Tweed vaunted as Salmon rivers :  
- They were good salmon rivers, and are still very good, as far as the profit of the proprietor is concerned; but, for angling, they are very much deteriorated. The net fishing, which is constantly going on, except on Sundays and in close time, suffers very few fish to escape; and a Sunday's flood offers the sole chance of a good day's sport, and this is only in particular parts of these rivers. I remember the Tweed and the Tay in a far better state. The Tweed, in the late Lord Somerville's time, always contained taking-fish after every flood in summer.*

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*I fear I shall tire you by attempting any details on this subject, for they are so many, that I ought to take a map in my hands; but I will say a few words on those in which I have had good sport. First, the Tweed – of this, as you will understand from what I mentioned before, I fear I must now say "fruit" [It was]. Yet, still, for spring salmon fishing it must be a good river. The last great sport I had in that river was in 1817, in the beginning of April. I caught in two or three hours, at Merton, four or five large salmon, and as many in the evening in Kelso – and one of them weighed 25lbs. But this kind of fishing cannot be compared to the summer fishing; the fish play with much less energy, and in general are in bad season; and the fly used for fishing is almost like a bird – four or five times larger than the summer fly, and the coarsest tackle may be employed. I have heard that Lord Home has sometimes taken thirty fish in a day, in spring fishing. About and above Melrose, I have taken, in a morning in July, two or three grilse; and in September, the same number. I have known eighteen taken earlier, by an excellent salmon fisher, at Merton; and the late Lord Somerville often took six or seven fish in a day's angling." (The April / Spring fishing referred to here was for kelts as can be seen from the quotation from William Henderson, below – hence the description of fish caught in April as being in "bad season" )*

As sport fishing increased in significance and value over the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these other methods of fishing salmon for food disappeared and the earliest existing rod fishing records yet found, those of The Hirsell, begin in 1856. However, complaints about the salmon angling are just as old. Even in Scrope's famous "*Days and Nights of Salmon fishing on the Tweed*" (1843), the first book on Tweed salmon angling, things were not as good as they used to be :

*" The Salmon in the Tweed are no longer large. Far from it. During my experience of twenty years I never caught one there of above thirty pounds, and very few above twenty.*

The title of this book is a good example of the mixed methods in use in up to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century – the "nights" of salmon fishing referred to are when the water was "burned" – large torches used to illuminate the water for spearing fish with leisters (fish spears, with three or more barbed prongs). There was a

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mixed sporting culture too, in Salmon fishing in those days – just about any method was usable in order to get fish as shown in Scrope's book :-

*"The river was very low and clear at the time; so much so, that it was in good order for sunning, and therefore in no state for fish to travel in. I chanced, however, to hook a salmon with a fly, which, after being played a little, got off the hook: there was a cairn just above the spot where this occurred, and I told my fisherman to set the net belonging to it that night; he did so with a very bad grace, assuring me that that it was perfectly useless ..... Nevertheless the fish, having started from his stream, was caught in it that night".*

*"We were sunning a strong stream called the Carrywheel, and I had placed Charles Purdie at its gorge, to leister such fish as might attempt to pass it from the fright given by the disturbance below"*

*"To these various methods of taking fish, I must add the destruction by means of rake-hooks. The tackle is very simple.: it consists of two strong hooks, about two or three inches long, tied back to back, and fastened to a twisted gut, on which are put five or six large shot, at equal distances from each other. The fisherman, with a strong rod, throws the line, with these bare hooks attached to it, about a foot beyond any salmon he may discover lying, and then with a sudden jerk, draws the hook into him ..... Clean fish are sometimes taken in this manner, and most fishermen are provided with the tackle". ("Sunning" – spearing fish in shallow water when the sun was strong. The "cairn" refers to a Cairn Net, a bankside fixed net that was then legal. The cairn was built out into the river and a gill net strung downstream from it. Fish coming up the bank were turned towards mid stream by the cairn and then caught in the net. A "leister" or "waster" is a five pronged fish spear on a long pole)*

Scrope's justification for all these methods is of great interest :

*" All this to a Southern ear sounds like poaching of the most flagitious description; but a salmon is a fish of passage and if you do not get him today, he will be gone tomorrow. The Tweed used to be let for above £12,000 a year; judge then, in what a wholesale manner these fish are*

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*caught by long nets and other sweeping modes; yet in what profusion they continue to be found! You may just as well think of preserving herrings or mackerel as these delicious creatures; ..... Keep close time strictly; kill no spawning fish; tamper not with foul ones of any sort; preserve the fry ..... but catch as many salmon as you can, recte si possis (meaning with a rod), si non, quocunque modo\*, that is with a net or leister and so forth." (\* Rightly, if possible, if not, then by any means.)*

In effect, he is saying that Salmon are in such abundance, despite the numbers taken in the nets, that any method in the legal season is usable by a sportsman who should aim to get as many fish as possible. This was obviously written before the great collapse in netting catches seen in the 1850's (see Section 4.1 on the Net Fishery) and for which the sort of ruthless exploitation advocated by Scrope must bear some responsibility.

The mixed nature of salmon fishing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is further illustrated by William Henderson's account of his first visit to the Tweed, to St. Boswells, in the Autumn of 1839 :

*"At once I sought out Adam Johnston, who was then tacksman of the Dryburgh as well as of part of the Bemerside fishings.....In making my arrangements with Adam, it surprised me to find his terms so exceedingly moderate. A day's fishing, including boatman and use of boat, was then only 5s. At the present time (1874) a rent of £200 a year and all attendant expenses are paid for the water which I was then free to roam over at will. This will show how great a change has been produced in the value of Tweed-fishings by the competition of gentlemen eager for this noble sport.*

*1840 – In the first week of March I entered upon my new career as an angler for Salmon .....The fish taken were generally from 8 to 15lbs in weight; all were kelts, and doubtless had been much heavier when they came from the sea the autumn before. The destruction of kelts in the early spring, previous to the Act of 1857 which made it penal, was most lamentable; thousands of large fish where slaughtered every week, and sold to the dealers in the Midland counties at 1¼d per pound (0.5p). Every form of ingenuity was put in practice to capture these unwholesome fish and yet, had they been spared, and permitted to revisit the sea, they would not only have increased several pounds each in weight, but would probably have realised 2s per pound (10p). So*

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*much for the greed and blindness of man, and for the stupendous ignorance of our Legislature."*

Strange as the idea of eating kelts may be nowadays, Maxwell (1904) records having eaten a very well cooked and tasty Kelt at Amiens. Later in his book, Henderson writes :

*"The Act of Parliament only came into operation in the spring of 1858, at which time the capture of a 20 lb salmon was a rare event. By the autumn of 1860 few anglers fished the Tweed without taking one or more of still heavier weight."* (The belief then was that Salmon could live for many years running upriver to spawn from the sea annually. It was not till scale-reading started around 1900 that it became apparent that, as a rule, they only spawned once in their lives and that large salmon were not old fish that had spawned many times. However, before the arrival of the bacterial disease, *Furunculosis* with Rainbow Trout imported from Denmark in the 1920's and which then caused widespread fish kills before becoming acclimatised, it is possible that the survival rate of kelts was much higher. *Furunculosis* is a disease that can be carried by fish without adverse effects, until some stress (such as spawning) sets it off. Every kelt tested now has the bacterium but before it became endemic, it may be that the stress of spawning was not so fatal as it is now, with the presence of this organism. If in pre-*Furunculosis* days more kelts made it back to the sea at least, before dying there unnoticed, it could explain why the sight of masses of dead kelts upriver, as we see today, did not suggest to people then that Salmon might actually be short-lived.)

It is also of interest that the largest fish Henderson caught at this time, a 21½ lbs Salmon at Dryburgh, was regarded as being of unusual size and that he comments that fish had become much larger since, due to "*improved legislation*" – obviously thinking that better protection of kelts had allowed more fish to live longer and become larger. He also records that a 30½ lb kelt he caught on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 1846 was regarded as being the largest fish caught on the river for the last 11 years – and was the largest that the boatman / ex-tacksman had ever had part in capturing. The idea that the increase in weights of Salmon on the Tweed in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century was due to the protection of kelts was also suggested by Maxwell (1904) who thought that the promise of larger fish on the Tweed from the protection of kelts had been "*amply fulfilled*".

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In 1846 another member of Henderson's club decided, unusually, to go fishing in July, the worst time of year, after passing through Berwick and learning that a recent spate had let Salmon get through to the upper river, and caught five fresh run, sea-liced, fish weighing 118 lbs as a result. Clean fish upriver before Autumn were obviously a novelty – Henderson records catching 14 fish on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1849, three of which were clean, on which he remarks that *"It is very unusual to take so many clean fish so early in the year.* In 1842, Henderson joined a syndicate to rent what where called the *"Edenfoot Fishings"*, which then included Sprouston Dub, which he regarded as the best pool. The transition from the old, "food" fishing to the new, sporting, way is well illustrated by the fact that this syndicate employed a Bob Kerss, who had been tacksman of these fishings for many years, as their boatman and Henderson remarks that *"long nights spent in watching his cairn nets in times of flood had brought on acute Rheumatism"*.

Until 1857, the Tweed Salmon rod fishing season ended on November 7<sup>th</sup>, and William Henderson records that on the last day in 1856 he killed, with the *"green, sickly-looking dew worm"* at Carham, *"more fish than had succumbed to any rod for many weeks"* – One Salmon and six grilse, weighing 63lbs, all fresh run. He also records that *"no angler on the Tweed had for several weeks past made such a basket, and that on this day the highest number recorded as falling by any other rod was three fish"*. He also gives as good an account of the nature of Salmon fishing as anyone in writing :

*"Salmon fishing is, of all sports, the most uncertain. It is so seldom that the right size and colour of the water are accompanied by a brisk wind, and a sky cloudy yet disdaining the adornment of "powthered wigs". And when all these circumstances conspire to meet the angler's wish, disappointment often awaits him unless there has been a recent run of fish or the salmon chance to be in what the fishermen call "a taking mood". When they are in the mood, there are sometimes unexpected successes, just to the keep the salmon-fisher from being down-hearted"*

The transition from netting for food to fishing for sport on the river was long drawn out – as late as 1886, the fishing report in *"The Scotsman"* on the opening of the Tweed netting season, included an account of the opening day

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of netting on the Town's water in Peebles, though stating that in the upper Tweed it was only there, where the fishing belonged to the Burgh, that netting took place. It also reports that netting in the Cornhill, Lees and Wark areas had been delayed till May by agreement with the local fishery proprietors in order to improve the rod fishing. However, as a convenient marker, the year 1860 can be taken as the beginning of the modern era of Tweed rod fishing for Salmon, the cultural changes that had taken hold by then matching the fact that the legislation of 1859 was not substantially altered as regards fisheries till the first modern Tweed Act of 1968.

**(B) The origin and numbers of rod fishing beats :** The history of rod fishing for Salmon is of ever-increasing value and of the proliferation of fishing beats, an increase that can be quantified from the records of the RTC as every beat was required to register annually with them. The relationship between number of registered beats and number of beats fished may not be exact as they are sometimes recorded as not being let – but whether that means they were not fished at all or were simply not let commercially and were being fished by the owner is not clear. Names of beats can change, making for confusion and beats can amalgamate into single fisheries as well as split into smaller units. While number of beats being fished in any one year may not therefore be exact, the general trend will be correct.

The starting point is the first registration & valuation list of the RTC, drawn up for 1831. The Upper District list is clearly that of what were primarily rod fisheries (average rental value £11), the main list being that of the net fisheries (average rental value £99). There are only 23 named fisheries in the former, though Dryburgh is divided into two units to make 24, covering the river from what are now the Carham / Birgham fisheries up to Holylee, with three on the Teviot being the only fisheries listed on any tributary :

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Table 4.2.1 The first list of rod fisheries of the Tweed

<b>Upper District 1831</b>	<b>Modern Name (if different)</b>
Redden Boat	Birgham / Carham
Sprouston	
Maxwellheugh	The Junction
Trows	Makerstoun
Rutherford	
Craigover	Mertouns / Maxton
Dryburgh (Sir D. Erskine)	
Dryburgh ( C. Riddell)	
Bemersyde	
Gladswood	
Drygrange	
Westhouse	The Pavilions
Netherbarns	Boleside & Netherbarns
Fairnilee	
Sunderland Hall	
The Yair	
Caddonlee & Peel	
Ashiestiel	
Thornilee	
Elibank	
Holylee	
<b>Teviot</b>	
Mount Teviot	Monteviot
Ormiston	
Sunlaws	

However, the division between rods and nets must have been less precise than suggested by these two lists. The evidence given to Parliament in 1824 by John Wilson quoted above shows that the boundary between methods was one of degree – between Norham and Coldstream, (further down than the lowest “rod” fishery listed for the Upper District roll), there was rod fishing though the fisheries were primarily net, while from Coldstream up to Kelso, covering the Upper District fisheries from Redden Boat up to Maxwellheugh, there was occasional net fishing when conditions were suitable. It is also

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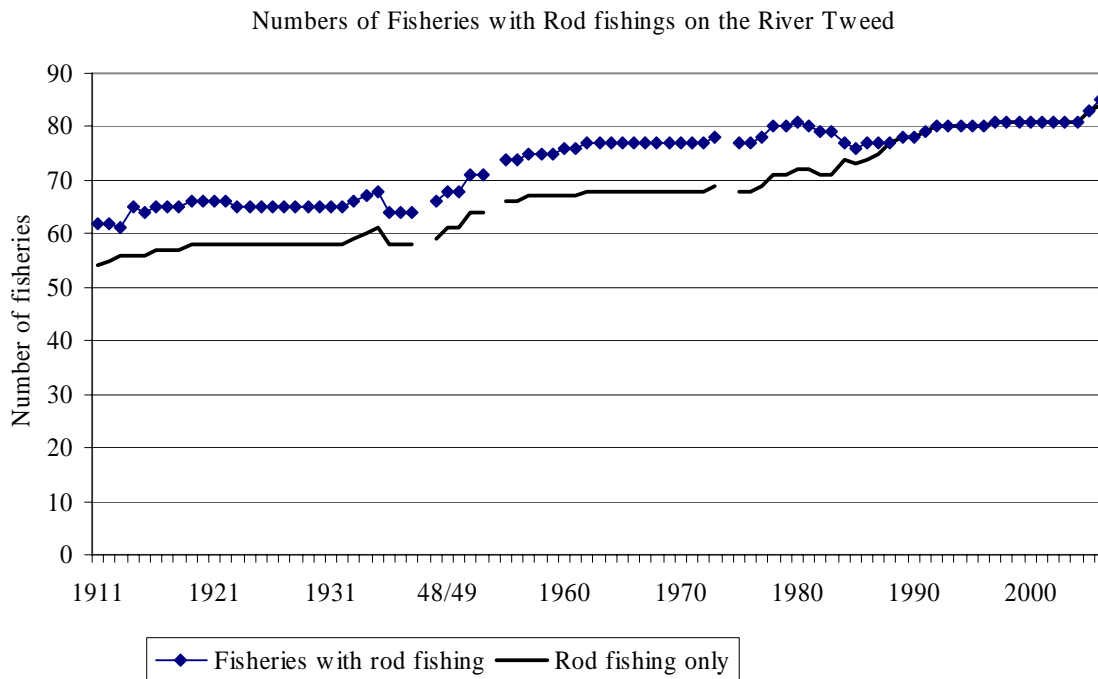
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clear that nets were used at times all the way up the river in those days, as can be seen from the evidence of Robert Kerse quoted above.

Over the years, these original fisheries have split (and occasionally amalgamated) and those that were fished by both rod and net have become purely rod fisheries as shown in Graph 4.2.1, which is based on a detailed analysis of the RTC's fisheries registrations since 1911 (the period 1831-1910 has not yet been examined, though the records exist).

Graph 4.2.1 :



In 1911, there were 62 fisheries that could be identified as being fished wholly or partly by rod, and eight which had both rods and nets. By 2006, this had become 84 rod fisheries, with only one that was both angled and netted. In terms of purely rod fishing, the increase was from 54 to 84, some 30 fisheries in 95 years, an increase of 55%. The full analysis is given in Appendix D2. The above covers only the main channel of the Tweed, the beats on the tributaries have not yet been analysed, but are much more variable in numbers.

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# THE *Tweed* FOUNDATION

*A Tweed Foundation Paper*

While the number of beats can be, more or less, counted over the years, changes in the cultural side of fishing effort are much more difficult to assess. At the beginning of this period, in the 1910s, Salmon angling was much more social than commercial, with many beats fished only by the proprietor and friends, though sometimes let for a whole season. On a daily basis, too, it was a less pressurised business than today, with effort concentrated on days when conditions looked good, and days with poor conditions not fished at all. Again, this was very different from today, when anglers with weekly or daily lets fish regardless of water and weather conditions. A story that sums up this difference is of an upper Tweed proprietor of the past whose system was for his boatman to inspect the river and then come up to the house to report through the bedroom window. If this report was sufficiently encouraging, the owner would then get up and go down to the river – but if there was no action within half an hour or so, he would return to bed. One set of data does exist, however, that shows this change in style – at Boleside, from 1928 to 1939 the numbers of hours fished per season were recorded. These varied from 628 to 1353 hours, with an overall average of 973 hours, the equivalent of 23 weeks fishing a year out of a season of 40 weeks (57%). At the present day, however, Boleside is fished most days of the year.

## **( C ) The relative numbers of net and rod fisheries over the Years :**

The well known change-over from the Tweed being a river dominated by net fishing to being a sport fishing river is quantified in Graph 4.2.2. Rod “fishings” are plotted here, rather than rod “fisheries” - there were for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century areas that were recognised being fished by both rods and nets.

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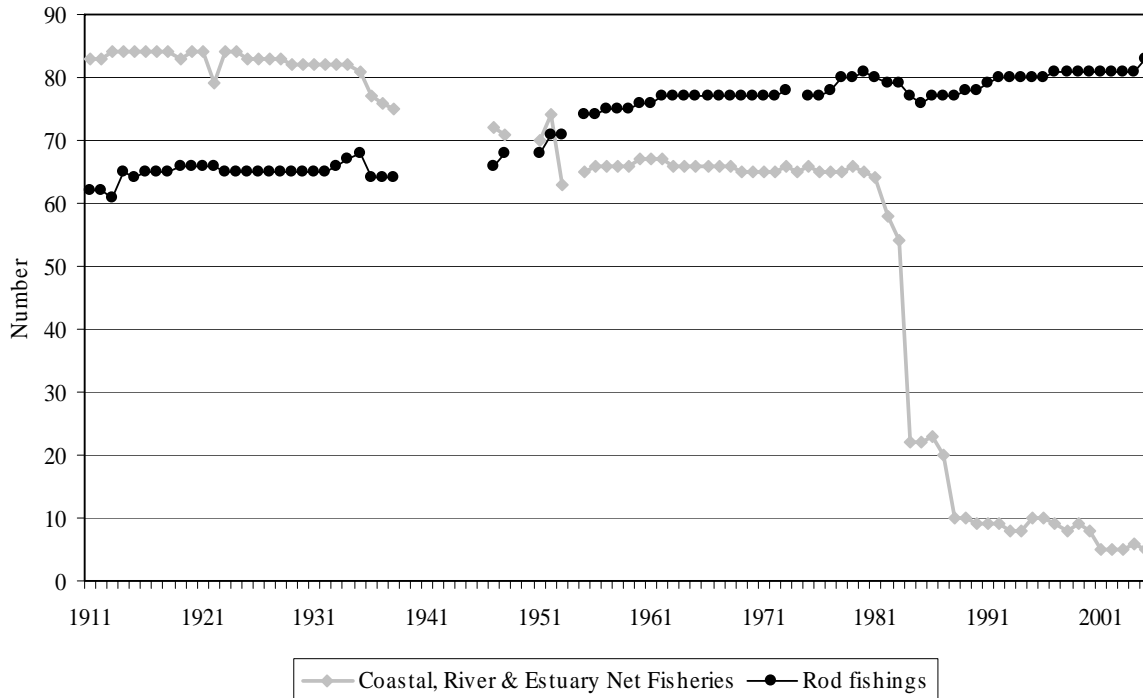
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Graph 4.2.2 : The relative numbers of net and rod fisheries on the Tweed.



The steep decline in the number of net fisheries in the 1980's is related to the end of the Berwick Salmon Fishing Company. While some of its netting stations were revived under new ownership, most ceased to operate in the difficult new financial environment created by the rise of salmon farming and the degrading of salmon from being a luxury food commanding high prices to the cheapest fish in the shops (and with an unfortunate reputation for chemical residues). Net and Coble fishing, with its crews of five and operating time limited by tides and the laborious nature of the work (a netting crew is actively fishing for about 20 minutes in the hour, the rest of the time is spent hauling in and re-ordering the gear) simply could not make money. If a premium price had developed for wild salmon over farmed (as it should have) they would have been able to continue. However, it is only now that such a premium is developing.

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