

Site D2: Salmon at the Sluices

These sluices act as traffic controls for both smolts (young salmon) and adult fish as they travel between river and sea. When the pressure of a rising tide shuts the sluices, mature salmon, moving in from the sea to spawn in the gravel of the River Fleet some km upstream, gather in the pool below the bridge. They don't feed but simply 'mark time' until their path up the river is open. Nobody knows for certain how the fish find their home river, after at least a year at sea, but marking has proved that they do so. It is believed that they probably recognise the river by its smell. Salmon may come upriver at any time of the year but the main run on the Fleet generally occurs in July.

An old rhyme "The first spate of May takes the smolts away" gives a clue to the conditions that trigger off this departure to the sea: rising temperature and water level. When they leave the young fish are about 15 cms long and from 1-3 years old. Unlike adult salmon the smolts feed hungrily in freshwater and move in schools. When large numbers are held back by the sluices their fly-catching activities create an ever-changing pattern of dimples on the water above the bridge. Once the sluices open the smolts pass quickly downstream, often tail first if the current is strong, and run the risk of being eaten by birds or seals before they can reach the sea.