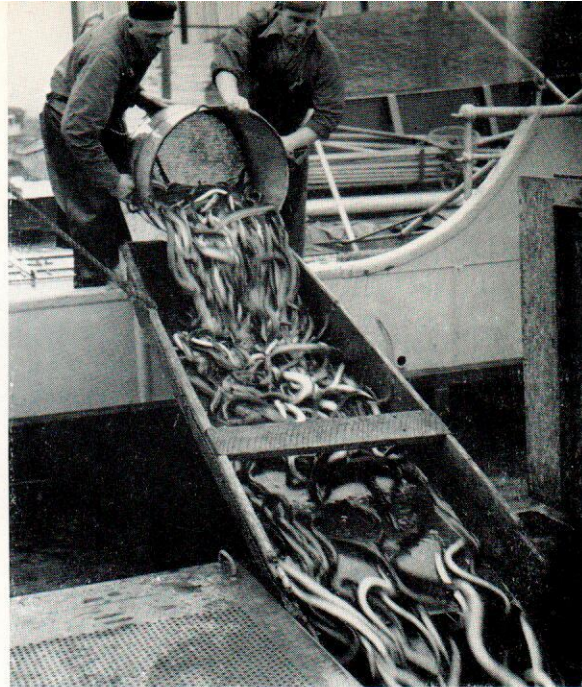




WOODEN eel containers on the Chelmer and Blackwater Canal, Essex

BELOW – Netting eels on the 'Helene' (left) for transfer to the barge (right)



A CHUTE speeds the transfer of the eels from ship to barge



Eels! Eels! Alive-O!

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There is one point, however, on which lovers of the eel all agree. Eels must be delivered alive to the cook – which in any language is a tall order. To understand just how difficult it is to serve live eels to the kitchen, all through the calendar, it is necessary to know something of the life of the eel and to meet Mr H. J. Kuitjen, of Heybridge Basin, in Essex.

All eels share a common home. They are spawned in the Sargasso Sea – that great ocean of weed in the western Atlantic. With a leaf-like transparent body and tiny head, the eel travels with the Gulf Stream towards Europe. It reaches the coasts of the Continent when it is about two years old and the size of a matchstick. Then it undergoes rapid changes. The tiny eels become elvers or glass-eels and in great numbers they ascend the rivers, seeking the freshwater lakes, where they will remain for several years. The largest freshwater lake in the British Isles, Lough Neagh, Northern Ireland, is the feeding ground for

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The eels remain in these lakes for some four years, feeding and growing until on a stormy night after the full moon in September, October or November the spawning fever takes them. Now fully-grown, from six to eight years old and from 12 to 26 inches in length, they descend the rivers on the start of their long journey home to the Sargasso Sea. They will eat no more. On arrival after their multi-thousand-mile passage they will spawn and die.

But on those few stormy autumn nights river fishermen throughout Europe are waiting with their nets. At Lough Neagh, for instance, on 28 October, 1958, over 120,000 lb of eels were caught in a few hours: enough to fill the m.v. *Helene*, waiting in Larne Harbour to load the live eels from the tank wagons that had brought them from the Lough.

The *Helene* is a Dutch ship of 116 tons d.w. She carries a crew of five and is commanded by Captain Deleeuw van Weenen, of Haarlem. She is owned by Mr Kuitjen and there are few coasters like her. She has a perforated hull, so that the water travels through her. Perforated bulkheads divide the hull into compartments for her cargo of eels. Buoyancy is maintained by a double deck and by her diesel oil tanks. She carries, when fully

fuelled, 4,000 gallons of Shell diesel oil: enough for thirty days' continuous sailing.

But the haul from Larne to Heybridge Basin is a relatively short trip. She arrived off the Blackwater Estuary – home of the Essex wildfowler – early in the morning of 3 November. She had kept radio contact with Mr Kuitjen throughout her journey and she was met in the darkness by what would appear to lay eyes to be a tug towing a cut-down submarine.

This submarine is in fact an eel barge, made to Mr Kuitjen's design. She is 110 feet long, 18½ feet wide, with a perforated hull that sinks to just below deck level. At either end and in the centre are buoyancy tanks. The centre tank is used to house two diesel engines, one driving a water pump, the other an air compressor. At either side of this tank are six compartments, each able to hold 12,000 lb of live eels, giving the barge a total capacity of 144,000 lb of eels.

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We were there to watch as the men scooped net after net of the wriggling cargo out of the ship and into the barge compartments. Mr Kuitjen explained the importance of the barge's diesel engines: 'We are putting together many more eels than would be found under natural conditions, so we run polythene tubing with pin-pricks in it the entire length of the barge. Air is pumped through the tubing by the compressor driven by one diesel engine, and so aerates the water. The other diesel engine drives a water pump which keeps the water in each compartment circulating constantly.' He has three such barges which, with four smaller ones and twenty-two wooden cage-like containers, give him storage capacity for about 670,000 lb of live eels.

'Life would be fairly simple for us,' said Mr Kuitjen, 'if all we had to do was load the barges. You see, I buy eels when they are plentiful and sell them when they are

in short supply. That means I have to keep my eels alive for periods up to six months. Now the eel lives in fresh water, but long periods in fresh water give the captive eel "rheumatism" and he loses his wriggle. So once a month I have to tow the barges from the fresh water of the basin and canal out to salt water in the Blackwater Estuary, so that the eels can have a day's dosing of salt water. If they are left too long in salt water, however, the eels will lose the slime on their skins and die.'

From now until the beginning of June eels will be reaching Billingsgate Market, London, from Heybridge Basin at an average rate of 40,000 lb a week. Most of



LEFT – A rogue among the catch, a young conger, held by the Dutch mate of the 'Helene'. RIGHT – The lubrication cabinet in Mr Kuitjen's workshop



these will reappear in jellied form in the East End (when boiled, a fresh eel makes its own jelly), but some will be smoked for serving in the best hotels.

The European markets are also served from Heybridge Basin, for as well as bringing freshly-caught eels from Ireland, Turkey, Greece, and North Africa, the *Helene* and five other ships take eels from this tiny Essex port to Holland. There they are handled by Mr H. J. Kuitjen's two brothers, who operate a fleet of tank wagons for bulk delivery of live eels throughout Europe and even behind the Iron Curtain, in East Germany and Poland.

And the man behind all this activity with eels? Hans Kuitjen is a Dutchman by birth. Now forty-one and with a home at Great Baddow, he came to England in 1937. Heybridge Basin offered the nearest to ideal conditions for the storage of live eels within easy reach of London, and from the few wooden containers he started with the business has grown and prospered to become the largest of its kind in Europe. Today there is a fine new office building, a large garage, a case-making yard. For his transport – both by sea and road – Shell fuels and lubricants are used.

With so many 'lives' at stake, prompt delivery of fuel is most vital, and we have Mr Kuitjen's assurance that Shell-Mex and B.P. have never let him down.

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THE 'HELENE' at Heybridge. In the foreground is an eel barge

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 - Publicatiedatum: ca december 1958
 - Taal: Engels (vertaald met Google translate)
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Paling! Paling! Levend!

Bijschriften bij de verschillende foto's:

- Houten palingcontainers op het Chelmer and Blackwater Canal, Essex
- Paling wordt gevangen op de 'Helene' (links) voor overslag naar de bak (rechts)
- Een goot versnelt de overslag van de paling van schip naar bak
- De 'Helene' in Heybridge. Op de voorgrond is een palingbak te zien
- Een schurk tussen de vangst, een jonge zeepaling, vastgehouden door de Nederlandse stuurman van de 'Helene'.
- De smeerkast in de werkplaats van meneer Kuyten

Praat over paling met de Cockney en je krijgt te horen dat je pas echt leeft als je er een bord van hebt gegeten — in gelei. De Nederlander en de Duitser zullen je vertellen dat paling in gelei slechts een fractie verschilt van gekookte kool — de Engelse keuken. Nee, voor de fijnproever, voor de continentale, moet de paling gerookt zijn. Verder naar het zuiden maakt de Napolitaan met Kerstmis een maaltijd van palingstoofpot.

Er is echter één punt waar palingliefhebbers het allemaal over eens zijn: paling moet levend aan de kok worden geleverd – wat in elke taal een hele opgave is. Om te begrijpen hoe moeilijk het is om levende paling de keuken in te serveren, de hele kalender door, is het noodzakelijk om iets te weten over het leven van de paling en een ontmoeting te hebben met de heer H.J. Kuyten uit Heybridge Basin in Essex.

Alle palingen delen een gemeenschappelijke thuis. Ze worden gepaaid in de Sargassozee – die grote oceaan van wier in de westelijke Atlantische Oceaan. Met een bladachtig, transparant lichaam en een kleine kop reist de paling met de Golfstroom mee richting Europa. Hij bereikt de kusten van het continent wanneer hij ongeveer twee jaar oud is en zo groot als een lucifer. Daarna ondergaat hij snelle veranderingen. De kleine palingen worden glasalen en in grote aantallen trekken ze de rivieren op, op zoek naar de zoetwatermeren, waar ze jarenlang zullen blijven. Het grootste zoetwatermeer van de Britse Eilanden, Lough Neagh in Noord-Ierland, is de voedselbron voor miljoenen palingen. Maar ze worden ook aangetroffen in meren zo ver weg als Armenië, Griekenland, Turkije en Noord-Afrika.

De palingen blijven zo'n vier jaar in deze meren, waar ze zich voeden en groeien, totdat ze op een stormachtige nacht na volle maan in september, oktober of november worden overvallen door de paaikoorts. Nu ze volgroeid zijn, zes tot acht jaar oud en 30 tot 66 centimeter lang, dalen ze de rivieren af als begin van hun lange reis naar huis, naar de Sargassozee. Ze zullen niet meer eten. Bij aankomst, na hun tocht van duizenden kilometers, zullen ze paaïen en sterven.

Maar op die weinige stormachtige herfstnachten staan riviervissers in heel Europa met hun netten te wachten. Bij Lough Neagh bijvoorbeeld werden op 28 oktober 1958 in een paar uur tijd meer dan 120.000 palingen gevangen: genoeg om het m.s. Helene, wachtend in de haven van Larne om de levende paling te laden uit de tankwagens die ze uit het Lough hadden gebracht.

De Helene is een Nederlands schip met een laadvermogen van 116 ton. Het heeft een bemanning van vijf en staat onder bevel van kapitein De Leeuw van Weenen uit Haarlem. Het schip is eigendom van de heer Kuyten en er zijn maar weinig kustvaarders zoals zij. Het schip

heeft een geperforeerde romp, waar het water doorheen stroomt. Geperforeerde schotten verdelen de romp in compartimenten voor de lading paling. Het drijfvermogen wordt gewaarborgd door een dubbeldeksdek en door haar dieseltanks. Wanneer de tank volgetankt is, heeft het schip 15.000 liter Shell-dieselolie aan boord: genoeg voor dertig dagen onafgebroken varen.

Maar de reis van Larne naar Heybridge Basin is relatief kort. Het schip arriveerde vroeg in de ochtend van 3 november bij de Blackwater Estuary – de thuisbasis van de Essex-watervogel. Ze had gedurende haar hele reis radiocontact met meneer Kuyten gehouden en werd in het donker opgewacht door wat op het eerste gezicht een sleepboot leek te zijn die een afgedankte onderzeeër sleepte.

Deze onderzeeër is in feite een palingschip, gebouwd naar het ontwerp van meneer Kuyten. Ze is 33 meter lang, 5,6 meter breed, met een geperforeerde romp die tot net onder dekniveau reikt. Aan beide uiteinden en in het midden bevinden zich drijftanks. De middelste tank huisvest twee dieselmotoren, één die een waterpomp aandrijft en de andere een luchtcompressor. Aan weerszijden van deze tank bevinden zich zes compartimenten, elk met een capaciteit van 5400 kg levende paling, wat de bak een totale capaciteit van 66.000 kg paling geeft.

Zo'n dertig ton van de levende lading van de Helene werd per lier in het schip geladen en de rest werd de volgende ochtend overgeladen toen de coaster aanmeerde naast het schip in Heybridge Basin. We waren erbij om te kijken hoe de mannen net na net van de wriemelende lading uit het schip schepten en in de compartimenten van de bak wierpen. De heer Kuyten legde het belang van de dieselmotoren van de bak uit: 'We verzamelen veel meer palingen dan onder natuurlijke omstandigheden zouden voorkomen, dus we leggen polyethyleen slangen met speldenprikken erin over de hele lengte van de bak. Lucht wordt door de slangen gepompt door de compressor die wordt aangedreven door één dieselmotor, en zo wordt het water belucht. De andere dieselmotor drijft een waterpomp aan die het water in elk compartiment constant laat circuleren.' Hij heeft drie van dergelijke bakken, die, samen met vier kleinere en tweeëntwintig houten kooiachtige containers, hem een opslagcapaciteit bieden voor ongeveer 300.000 kg levende paling.

'Het leven zou voor ons vrij eenvoudig zijn,' zei meneer Kuyten, 'als we alleen maar de bakken hoefden te laden. Kijk, ik koop paling als er veel zijn en verkoop ze als er weinig zijn. Dat betekent dat ik mijn paling tot wel zes maanden in leven moet houden. Nu leeft de paling in zoet water, maar langdurig in zoet water geeft de gevangen paling "reuma" en verliest hij zijn bewegingsvrijheid. Dus eens per maand moet ik de bakken vanuit het zoete water van het bassin en het kanaal naar het zoute water in de Blackwater Estuary slepen, zodat de paling een dag lang zout water kan krijgen. Als ze echter te lang in zout water blijven, verliezen de palingen het slijm van hun huid en sterven ze.'

Van nu tot begin juni zullen de palingen Billingsgate Market, Londen, vanuit Heybridge Basin bereiken met een gemiddelde hoeveelheid van 18.000 kilo per week. De meeste hiervan zullen in geleivorm terugkeren in East End (een verse paling maakt zijn eigen gelei wanneer hij gekookt wordt), maar sommige zullen gerookt worden om in de beste hotels geserveerd te worden.

Ook de Europese markten worden bediend vanuit Heybridge Basin, want naast ver gevangen paling uit Ierland, Turkije, Griekenland en Noord-Afrika, vervoeren de Helene en vijf andere schepen paling vanuit deze kleine haven in Essex naar Nederland. Daar worden ze verwerkt door de twee broers van de heer H.J. Kuyten, die een vloot tankwagens exploiteren voor bulklevering van levende paling door heel Europa en zelfs achter het IJzeren Gordijn, in Oost-Duitsland en Polen.

En de man achter al deze palingactiviteiten? Hans Kuyten is een Nederlander van geboorte. Nu, eenenveertig jaar oud en met een huis in Great Baddow, kwam hij in 1937 naar Engeland. Heybridge Basin bood de meest ideale omstandigheden voor de opslag van levende paling,

vlakbij Londen. Vanuit de paar houten containers waarmee hij begon, is het bedrijf uitgegroeid tot het grootste in zijn soort in Europa. Tegenwoordig staat er een prachtig nieuw kantoorgebouw, een grote garage en een kistfabriek. Voor zijn transport – zowel over zee als over de weg – worden brandstoffen en smeermiddelen van Shell gebruikt.

Met zoveel 'levens' op het spel is snelle levering van brandstof van het grootste belang, en de heer Kuyten verzekert ons dat Shell-Mex en B.P. hem nooit in de steek hebben gelaten.

OORSPRONKELIJKE TEKST

Eels! Eels! Alive-O!

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- BELOW — Netting eels on the 'Helene' (left) for transfer to the barge (right)
- A CHUTE speeds the transfer of the eels from ship to barge
- THE 'HELENE' at Heybridge. In the foreground is an eel barge
- LEFT — A rogue among the catch, a young conger, held by the Dutch mate of the 'Helene'.
- RIGHT — The lubrication cabinet in Mr Kuyten's workshop

TALK OF EELS to the Cockney and you'll be told that you haven't really lived until you've had a plate of them — jellied. The Dutchman and the German will tell you that jellied eels are only a shade removed from boiled cabbage — English cooking. No, for the gourmet, for the Continental, the eel must be smoked. Farther south, the Neapolitan makes a meal at Christmas of eel stew.

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