

Treasure from the towpath

Canals have fallen from favour with many anglers, but not Lee Kerry. The England ace urges readers to head to their local 'cut' this winter

Words Mark Parker Photography Mick Rouse

GREAT BRITISH FISHING
The roach sport on Yorkshire's Stainforth & Keadby Canal is as good as it's ever been. Top matchman Lee Kerry shows how easy it is to fill your net
GREAT BRITISH FISHING



CANALS have often been on the receiving end of a bad angling press in recent years. Considered by many as barren and run-down places, there's also a popular misconception that you need to use gossamer thin lines and tiny hooks to stand any chance of catching from them.

However, for those in the 'know' – like Lee Kerry – nothing could be further from the truth. As a lifelong fan of angling on the 'cut', the England international is saddened when he hears people slagging off canals as little more than waterlogged landfill sites sprouting old bikes and shopping trolleys.

In fact, Lee's opinion is the polar opposite. He reckons that there has never been a better time to fish on the nation's inland waterways, and places like the Stainforth & Keadby Canal, where Lee was preparing for a day's roach fishing when we met up with him, serve as the perfect case in point.

"The silverfish sport on this canal has been as good as any you will find on a commercial stillwater," he told us while preparing to cast his waggler 20 yards into the heart of the marina in front of him.

To find out more about why these once-popular angling venues are enjoying a renaissance, we joined the 30-year-old Leeds rod on the bank.

A forgotten paradise?

Dug to connect the River Don to the River Trent at Keadby, by way of Stainforth, for much of its length the canal passes through rural areas, which is perhaps one of the main reasons that the fishing is so good.

"Over the last few years more fish have started to show, not just on this canal, but at most others in the UK as well," said Lee.

"I reckon it's a combination of factors, the main two being that the stocks are not being fished for as much as they used to be, and the big increase in water quality. These elements have helped deliver a winning angling formula which those still targeting these places are now capitalising upon."

Despite being a canal-angling enthusiast, Lee remains a realist. There is a stack of fish in the 'Stainey', as it is known locally, but like all venues, it can have its off days. These tend to be quite rare, Lee says, and the image of canals being the sole preserve of the 'scratching' angler desperate to catch small fish using tiny baits and rigs is far from the truth. You are far more likely to catch a double-figure net of roach with the minimum of fuss, he believes.

"It is phenomenal fishing! You would struggle to get the same level of sport on a commercial water, and this is a semi-urban northern canal," he added.

Holding areas to target

Lee's advice is to visit your local stretch and look around before fishing. There will often be one or two anglers somewhere in the vicinity, so the first port of call should be to enquire what they are catching.



"The silverfish sport is as good as any you will find on a commercial"

Another pristine roach is swung to hand by Lee



After lacing his swim with two pouches of casters at the start, Lee regularly tops it up with loosefeed

Another good way of homing in on the best spots is to study match results in the weekly angling press. There will, of course, be barren areas, but there will be just as many stretches that are full of fish which have thrived on neglect, meaning they will be easy to catch on super-simple tactics.

As with any fishing venue, there are always going to be 'hot pegs' on any canal, as well as those popular with the locals; these are normally within comfortable walking distance of the nearest car park!

In winter, canal silverfish stocks display a very definite tendency to shoal up in areas that offer food, shelter and a little extra warmth. These include town centre stretches and marinas like the one Lee was fishing today.

Marinas represent a safe haven for winter roach largely because many of the boats are occupied and so heat the water beneath.

"As well as providing these perfect conditions, the amount of food scraps and

organic waste that the boats put into the water boosts the natural food levels in the area too," Lee explained.

"This helps the resident fish to put on weight ahead of the rigours of spring spawning, and also keeps them steadily fed throughout the coldest months. This doesn't happen on many commercial fisheries, where the stocks can close down their feeding altogether. Here, however, they'll happily continue.

"Other canal zones worth targeting are structures like bridges, or spots where the canal narrows – as long as it does not narrow too much. Far bank cover, reedbeds and any significant snags can also represent hot spots," he added.

Lee's canal waggler tactics

Being a wide expanse of water, fishing a marina is similar in many respects to fishing a stillwater. As winter advances ▶

Top canal stretches

GRAND UNION CANAL

Try the Galleon Stretch at Wolverton, Bucks. The early pegs near the Galleon Pub, after which the stretch is named, are around 25m wide and can be fished by using a small feeder or waggler cast two-thirds across. Prices: £6 a year. Contact the Gone-Fishin tackle shop on 01908 313158 for more details

TRENT & MERSEY CANAL

Good fishing to be had at Dallow Street, Horninglow, Burton-on-Trent, Staffs. Try Dallow Lock at the northern end of the stretch, for roach (to 2lb), skimmers, perch and the odd bonus big chub. Prices: £2 a day or £12 a season from Burton Angling Supplies (01283 548540) or Burton Carp Tackle (01283 540433).

BASINGSTOKE CANAL

Good roach sport around Fleet and also from Lodge Bridge to Colt Hill Bridge, near Odiham. Controlled by Basingstoke Canal AA. Prices: £4 on the bank, or £3 in advance from local tackle shops or the Basingstoke Canal Centre (Tel: 01252 370073)

KENNET & AVON CANAL

Devizes AA controls about 15 miles of prime angling on the Kennet & Avon. Good areas for year-round sport include from Ladies Bridge westwards to the Semington road bridge near Melksham. Prices: £3 a day in advance. Log on to www.devizesaa.org.uk for more details

BIRMINGHAM & FAZELEY CANAL

Pole anglers looking for good roach, perch and bream sport should head to Dunton Wharf, Sutton Coldfield, Warks, which is controlled by Birmingham AA. Prices: £8 a day. The nearest BAA agent is Alan's of Kingsbury (01827 872451)

Chunky bream like this one thrive in canals



and the colour drops out of the water, the fish become wary of a pole being waved above their heads. This is why Lee believes the waggler becomes the king of the canal in winter and, by only casting around 20 metres (which is beyond pole range), it represents very comfortable fishing.

Lee's kit is in essence just his commercial float set-up. A soft-actioned 13ft float rod fished with a fixed spool reel loaded with 0.13mm (4lb 12oz) Preston Innovations Powerline. The last 8ft of the rig, however, incorporates a 0.21mm (8lb 15oz) length of Powerline to act as a robust leader. This thicker line prevents tangles on the cast as well as allowing the rubber float stops to grip better either side of his waggler.

The floats Lee uses are usually loaded versions with a long carbon stem so that they sit lower in the water and are less affected by wind or tow, giving a much better presentation.

To connect the hooklink to the mainline, Lee always uses a swivel, regardless of where he is fishing the waggler. As well as acting as a small 'dropper' shot (equivalent to a No.9), the extra-small size 20 swivel serves to prevent his double caster hookbait from 'spinning up' the hooklink during the retrieve and causing line twist.

The rig is finished off with a size 16 PR333 hook, to which Lee will add one, two or even three casters.

"As you can see, my approach is far removed from the microscopic hooks and baits many anglers think you need to use on a canal," he added with a chuckle.

Mining a rich vein of silver

With casters being his number one bait for the day, Lee has brought two pints along with him. To back these up, he always brings half a pint of maggots as a change bait, but he is not expecting to have to use many of them.

"Today is a pleasure session, rather than

Lee Kerry's winter canal basics

1. Lee took half a pint of mixed red and white maggots along for the session, but casters were his main bait



2. His loaded waggler had a long carbon stem so that it sat lower in the water and wasn't affected by the wind

3. A pair of rubber float stops trapped his waggler in place, making depth adjustments straightforward

4. Lee likes to use two, or even three, casters on a size 16 hook for winter roach



a match, so I'm looking to catch quality fish from the off," said Lee.

"The beauty of a caster is that as well as quality roach, it will catch everything else that swims - including bream, perch and chub. Things like hemp, on the other hand, can be too species specific."

"I think the crunch of a caster and the 'plink' they make as they hit the water is

very attractive to all fish," added Lee as he used his catapult to pepper his orange float tip with loosefeed.

"For every fish that I catch, I expect there are 50 feeding. So by firing in two full pouches at the start of the session and then making regular top-ups of half a pouch, I am building the fish's confidence with every cast I make."

Despite the far from ideal weather, you could see that Lee was in his element by the grin on his face and, after just four hours of relaxed fishing, he had amassed a bulging 20lb net of plump, pigeon-chested roach, a few perch and a brace of decent bream.

This is exactly the type of mixed bag that any angler would be delighted to have caught from a well-stocked commercial water, but this was on a northern canal, the type of venue that most anglers write off as being fishless deserts and not worth bothering with. They couldn't be more wrong.



How you can fish the venue

Lee was fishing a stretch of the canal which is run by Thorne and District Angling Association. Day tickets cost £3 on the bank. A club website is currently under construction, looking to go live next month. For more details contact club secretary Pete Richardson on 07920 103315.



The roach in most canals are in pristine condition, having thrived on neglect



A fine net of bream and roach, taken in just four hours