

Hunting and Shooting

by Melanie Winterbotham

Ruislip woods were a favourite with the sporting gentry. When Haydon Hall was advertised for sale in 1883, it boasted a keeper's cottage and a pheasantry, as well as having property covered by four local hunts (Hertfordshire Foxhounds, the Royal Buckhounds and the Colindale Staghounds)

This 1864 report of 'Her Majesty's Staghounds' is one of many in the nineteenth century press:

The deer 'gave a first-rate run' through Harefield and 'Mad Bess, then Park Wood and the Ruislip Great Water' and on to Moor Park.

In 1891, Ruislip boasted no fewer than eight gamekeepers and at least one assistant gamekeeper. The Deane family employed keepers and leased shooting rights from the canal company running the Reservoir. Edward Wheatley was gamekeeper at the Reservoir in 1891, living in the 'keeper's cottage' in Fore Street.

Many gamekeepers came from distant parts, Wheatley was from St Albans, another was from Liverpool; none stayed many years. It was a semi-skilled role, but not one that endeared them to the local population.

Under the 1831 'Game Laws', tenants could be fined for allowing people to shoot on their farms, while game proliferated and reduced farm incomes by eating the crops. Farmers were powerless to prevent gamekeepers from trampling their crops. Matters came to a head locally with a public meeting in 1845 after at least four local people had died of starvation, which produced a petition:

'That [the inhabitants of Ruislip] are much oppressed by reason of the great quantity of game

reared in the said parish for the purposes of sporting. The temptation held out to the poor man by the unnatural quantity has a most ruinous and demoralising effect, for, despite of legal theory upon the subject, persons, especially those occupying the humbler stations in society, cannot be brought to look upon game as private property.'

Hares and Snares

Three years later, *The Times* published a letter from Ruislip resident 'Harebrain':

'It is my misfortune to have for one neighbour in the parish of Ruislip a large wood of about 800 acres swarming with hares, and for another a gamekeeper within 200 yards of the place selected by the vermin as a suitable spot for an inroad into my premises. I have set snares 'according to Act of Parliament,' and have succeeded in catching a few of my enemies. But I find that for every three snares set, two are invariable gone in a few hours after.'

Innumerable prosecutions for poaching show that rabbits as well as hares were bred, along with pheasants and partridges.

Ethel Gander, née Martin, was born in 1909 at Mad Bess Cottage. Her father Fred was a gamekeeper for Colonel Cox of Harefield Place. She recalled:

"Father used to breed the pheasants and feed them with meal and chopped hard-boiled eggs and the locals used to let him use their broody hens for the hatching period. At shooting time the village lads were paid one shilling a day and the squire would give them their dinner of Irish stew brought over in large containers from Pinner."

Further reading:

RNELHS Journal 1992 p 9-14 'A hunting we will go'

RNELHS Journal 2007 p 1-9 'Death from Starvation'

RNELHS Journal 2007 p 22-28 'Ruislip and the Game Laws'

RNELHS Journal 2004 p 20-24 'My life in Ruislip' by Ethel Gander (1909-1996)