

## SWAN MARKING AND SWAN UPPING

Apart from their natural history and the beauty and grace of form associated with swans they possess an interest to the historian second only to the falcons. It has been until recently generally accepted that the mute swan was brought into this country in the reign of Richard I (1189) and is said to have been imported from Cyprus.

But of more recent years (See Ticehurst *The Mute Swan in England* 1957) this thesis has been much disputed, for it is recorded that between 1247/51 Henry III issued a series of requisitions for provisions to the Sheriffs of the different Counties adjacent to those places where he happened to be going to keep the chief feasts of the year. In 1247 the provision for Christmas at Winchester included forty swans to be procured from the Counties of Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire and in 1249 two such requisitions were made for a total of 104 Swans from Northampton, Cambridge, Hertford, Bedford, Oxford and Buckinghamshires as well as Surrey, Sussex, London, Middlesex and Kent, and in subsequent years similar requisitions were made. There is a wealth of evidence that in the earliest part of the 13th Century the Mute Swan was already extensively spread across the Country and a much valued and protected species.

Considering that the Swan does not breed until it is at least three years old it is well-nigh impossible that such a distribution as far north as Cumberland and Northumberland and as far west as Wiltshire and Somerset can have been derived in the course of fifty-eight years from the progeny of the very small numbers that might have been imported in 1192. It is thus very likely, according to those who follow the second thesis, that the Swan is an indigenous bird.

Follow either theory as to the Swan's origins, there is no real doubt that the Swan was and is a Royal bird and in the possession of the Monarch, but as in the case of other monopolies there were people who desired to be possessors and it is known that towards the second half of the 15th Century "certain persons having the charge of Swans had stolen cygnets, and hence Yeomen and husbandmen, and persons of little reputation became possessed of Swans".

Thus it was that in 1483 an Act of Parliament was passed (22 Edw IV c.6) which enacted that no other than the King's sons could possess a "game" of swans or a swan-mark unless the individual received a grant from the Crown and was possessed of freehold land or property to the annual rental value of 5 Marks. This gift of the Crown granting the privilege of a game of Swans and a Swan-mark was a freehold of inheritance and could be handed down to one's heirs.

The Abbot of Abbotsbury in Dorsetshire enjoyed such a right and had such a game in the estuary formed by the islands of Portland and the Chesil Bank and after the dissolution of the Monasteries it was granted to the ancestors of the Earl of Ilchester.

The City of Oxford too had a game of Swans by prescription and in the 16th Century no State dinner was complete unless Swan is included in the fare.

The history of Swan-Marks is well documented and a great many private individuals as well as institutions and Corporations owned swan-marks through the 16th and 17th Centuries. The marks were nearly always on the Upper Mandible and mostly of complicated design, some even incorporating elements of the arms of the owner or his merchant's mark. There is a full register of the marks of Elizabethan times when the ownership was probably at its highest.

It has to be born in mind that Swan Keeping could be and often was the source of considerable financial profit from the buying and selling of birds for food, and cygnets to add to the owners stock. The rearing of these cost the owners virtually nothing, so any sum they fetched was almost entirely profit.

In 1274 the price of a Swan as food was fixed by the "Statuta Poletrice" of the City of London at three shillings whereas the best Capon could be sold for 2½d a Goose for 5d and a Pheasant for 4d. Before the advent of the Turkey they customarily were eaten at Christmas and no banquet was complete without them.

Swan Upping or Swan Hopping as it has been variously termed for several Centuries was by no means confined to the Thames; for instance Swan Owners on the river Yare carried out the ceremony with considerable pageantry up to 1835 when following the Municipal Reform Act the pageantry has gone but the Annual Swan Hunt continues as a means of controlling and counting Swans and their broods.

The City of Norwich maintains a Swan Pit which originally was used for the fattening of Swans and Cygnets for the table and at one time Norwich Swans were gastronomically almost as famous as Norfolk turkeys.

Now I turn to the history of the Dyers and Vintners Royalty of a Game of Swans on the Thames. Neither Company has an exact record as to when this was granted; in the case of the Vintners it is thought likely that it could date from the act of 1483. The Vintners always had a riverside Hall and, as we all know, royal connections. They were also rich by most standards.

In the case of the Dyers all the Company records were lost in the Great Fire, with a few exceptions, and so we have to rely on "custom" and some conjecture. It is worthy of note that in Tudor times the welfare of the Swans was the responsibility not of the Lord Chamberlain — as it is to-day — but the holder of the office of Keeper of the King's (or Queen's) game. In the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I that office was held by one Sir Robert Tyrwhitt. It is more than probable that he, having made a munificent gift of some riverside property to the Dyers Company, procured the grant for the Company in about 1550 and following this gift the Company erected a Hall on the site which remained until the disaster of the Great Fire and the only remains until recent times were in the naming of a short street or alley as Dyers Hall Wharf and, until recently, a blue plaque stating the one time site of Dyers Hall. However, this indicates that the Dyers with the Vintners had Halls on the river where certainly Swans would congregate.

A minute of the Court proceedings in 1727 reads:—

“The Wardens and Court of Assistants agreed to go Swan Upping the first Monday in August and the Court desired the Renter Warden would be pleased to provide a dinner at Putney Heath, three six oared barges to carry the Company up the water, music and other necessaries as usual, in case John Hopkins Esq., can provide coaches on the same terms as usual”.

As there is no Minute of any change in these arrangements it must be assumed that Mr. Hopkins was able to provide coaches on satisfactory terms.

Thus every July the Swan Upping Voyage takes place with the three Swan Masters and their crews — The Queen, the Dyers and the Vintners. The Royal flag with the Queen’s cipher carried by the Queen’s Swan Master and the Banners of the two Livery Companies with their Arms.

The voyage lasts a week during which time the various broods are rounded up; the Swans counted and the Cygnets counted and marked appropriately according to the Pen. The Royal birds are no longer marked since Queen Alexandra deemed it a somewhat crude treatment but the Dyers maintain a very simple mark — a single nick in the beak and the Vintners two small nicks. This latter mark having over the Centuries given rise to that improbable bird — the Swan with two Necks — best known as a name for a public house.

In 1875 the Royalty of Swans engaged the attention of the Dyers Company in various ways.

The Provost of Eton had desired a private mark for the College. This the Dyers had to say was not within their power to grant. Further the winter of 1875 had been extremely severe so that the number of Swans had decreased.

Discussions as to how the Swans should be protected and what number should be aimed at led to a report. In this it was pointed out that there was a decreasing dislike of the Swans on the part of fishermen and some residents. The report recommended that the number of the Dyers’ Swans should not exceed fifty. In 1878 the RSPCA took exception to the way in which swans were marked and pinioned. The result was a compromise. It was agreed that pinioning was absolutely necessary but that the marks on the bills of the swans be modified. Only recently in the last four years, pinioning has now been given up because of further pressure by the media and in response to the somewhat sentimental attitude by various bodies who do not always understand the care of wildlife. This means that it is more difficult to supervise the Swans on the river because they are more mobile and mixed with “wild” swans from outside.

In 1885 there was more trouble. One Brown made a claim; but the Dyers were so sure of their ground and anxious to discourage idle claims that they would not admit liability or even make an ex gratia payment. In 1886 Sir Gilbert Clayton made a challenging complaint as Lord of the Manor of Hurley. He not only alleged

damage but questioned the right of the Dyers to have swans within his Manor. The Dyers took no action. This letter was then followed by a Petition. This was signed by Sir Gilbert and a number of residents in Hurley. It prayed that the number of Swans on the River Thames be reduced. To this the Dyers replied civilly. They pointed out that the returns from the latest Swan Upping showed a large increase in the number of swans and that very few of those in the memorialists' part of the River belonged to the Company and there the matter was allowed to rest.

Until recent times the voyage started at London Bridge and ended at Henley, but as Swans do not breed on the tideway in these days it has been agreed that the voyage begins at Walton and ends at Whitchurch. The Courts of the Livery Companies make an inspection on successive days and witness markings on the stretch of river on the particular day. The Cygnets are marked as to parentage via the Pen bird but it is not surprising that in view of a large number of young birds coming on to the river and thus unmarked, the greater number of broods are claimed for the Queen. The Count in July 1983 gives:

Queen's Birds	Swans	95	Cygnets	35
Vintners' Birds	Swans	1	Cygnets	22
Dyers' Birds	Swans	4	Cygnets	24
Total	Swans	100	Cygnets	81

It is necessary now to stress that the work of caring for the health and protection of the Swans on the river goes on throughout the year. Each Swan Master has a stretch of the river for which he is responsible which means he keeps a watch on nests and broods and is frequently called out to deal with birds in trouble or sickness such notice being received from members of the public, police or the RSPCA. Nowadays there are many dangers to the Swans, the principal ones coming from the swallowing of abandoned fishing lines and hooks, floating plastic bags encasing the beak and head, collisions with overhead wires and general sickness.

In the Vintners records of 1509 we read of the then care of Swans:

Item — Paid in the Great Frost to James the Under Swanherd for Upping the Master's Swans — 4 shillings and on 10th July 1609 the Swanherd of the Company with His Majesty's Swanherd and the Swanherd of the Dyers' Company to assemble in August at Lambeth and proceed up the river to mark Swans.

Frequently, the Swans were hand fed during hard winters but this has not been necessary for many years but throughout the year the Swans are supervised and the following reports from the Dyers' Swanherd's current report book gives some idea of the sort of work carried out. Add to that the picking up of Swans and Cygnets for the Henley regatta one sees that the Swans are cared for today as they were ever since 1483 when the ownership of Swans was established.

"Report from Lockkeeper at Romney Lock Swan injured in lock cutting Picked up Pen wing injuries. Brought home for care".

"Report from resident at Datchet. Swan in sick condition near Black Polts Bridge. Picked up and brought home for care".

"Report from Uxbridge Police. Swan injured on nearby stream. Found pair with four Cygnets and picked up cygnets with part of fishing line and float attached to wing. Cleared both".

"Report from RSPCA Putney. Swan injured upper side Richmond Lock. Did not find Swan owing to bad light. Will continue to search next day. Did pick up Swan on following day. Found injuries to leg and web of right foot. Brought home for care". These reports give some indication of the care and attention given by only one of the three Swan Masters.

There is record of a special item of care and attention when in 1951 the Dyers' Swanmaster (or Swanherd) received notice from Brentford Gas Works that a Swan had fallen into a large tank containing tar; as the Swan was some 40 feet down in the tank and floating in the viscous liquid there was no way it could be recovered safely and so had to be destroyed. The RSPCA Inspector who was consulted deemed that the only way was to use an air rifle and shoot the bird in the head. A special weapon was purchased and finally a shot through the head killed the bird immediately. The Dyers Company decided to reimburse the RSPCA for the cost of the rifle.

The Swan population has fluctuated over the Centuries and as recently as 1926 it was such that steps had to be taken to reduce it and a policy of leaving only two eggs in each nest was adopted. Now the situation is entirely different and the Swan population has declined very seriously to the extent that the Queen, Dyers and Vintners have commissioned a three year investigation into the whole Swan life cycle. This has revealed that lead poisoning from the discarded lead weights used by anglers is by far the most dangerous of hazards to which Swans are subject and it is hoped that a non toxic substitute can quickly be found.

From time to time the Dyers Company have been asked to make a "Grant of a pair of Swans", sometimes from private individuals who wish to decorate their private waters, sometimes from Civic and similar bodies. The City of York were given a pair from the Dyers Royalty some years ago to help maintain the small local population, and to mark a special celebration the City of Galt in Ontario also received a pair from the Canopy.

The Swan Master is asked to satisfy himself that the waters intended to receive such a grant are entirely satisfactory from both a feeding and a breeding point of view, which only long experience of the requirements of the birds can dictate.

Two small interesting points worthy of mention are that in the case of the Dyers Company the Swan Master is titled Bargemaster and apart from his constant supervisory work on the river is also a ceremonial officer who always precedes the Wardens in procession on state occasions dressed in the particular uniform of a richly embroidered blue frock coat with a repousse silver gilt shoulder plate

exhibiting the arms of the Company, scarlet waistcoat and pantaloons with brass buttons and white stockings and carries his Swan hook in hand.

And in the early 1920's it is noteworthy that all three swanherds — The King's Dyers' and Vintners' were all members of the Turk family, a well known name on the river as boat builders and owners, and the Queen's Swan Master at this very moment is the well known John Turk.

This paper has largely concerned itself with the Swans on the river Thames above the tideway but it will be noted by many that Swans will often be seen around Putney and indeed in the lower river off Rotherhithe.

These are what might be called "Wild Swans" which although technically a royal bird receive none of the care bestowed by the owners of a Royalty of a Game of Swans higher up the river. These wild birds have to rely on the attentions of the River Police and others, or take their chance. Breeding cannot take place in these Reaches but young birds will seek a mate and repair to more peaceful waters.

Finally it is to record that both the Dyers and Vintners Companies treasure and value their Royalty, expending money for the care already outlined and together with The Queen are determined to continue to carry out the duties devolving upon them from medieval times.