

Our Sporting Landscape

With the arrival of August, the Queen begins her regular summer break in Scotland, where on the 12th followers of grouse shooting will be welcoming a new season.

In this way the nobility and rich will continue a long tradition of hunting game, going back to the Middle Ages or before. Then kings and nobles controlled large areas of forest and waste as their hunting grounds. Deer were an extra source of protein for them, while the exercise of the chase was useful practice for mounted warfare. Sharing a hunt with your peers also became part of social life. 'Forest' Laws forbade the locals from sharing this and around the Stiperstones, for instance, Manor courts could fine anyone keeping greyhounds, the preferred hunting dog as late as the eighteenth century.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the Middle Ages gave way to the early modern world, most hunting 'forests' and deer parks were converted to agriculture, including one at Shrawardine, following the destruction of the castle during the Civil War. Now, a generation of landowners, many not descended from those medieval knights, sought pleasure in parkland actually surrounding their mansions, where visual enjoyment of landscape was replacing the thrill of the chase. Nevertheless, the desire to hunt still lingered and would be helped by the development of firearms needed in war.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an 'arms race' between competing European states saw the muzzle loading musket, with loose ball and gunpowder, evolve into the breach loading, percussion cap, cartridge loaded rifle. The privately owned sporting gun followed a parallel evolution from the flintlock musket to the shotgun we know today. By stages in the nineteenth century inventions included stronger barrels, better rounded shot and the cartridge, together with smokeless powder. (Meanwhile in this age of innovation bicycles were also taking on their modern form, as illustrated in one of Ernest Lewis' photographs).

Improved guns were thus making it possible to shoot at flying birds, not just 'sitting ducks'. While this made 'grouse moors' possible in the uplands, shooting in lowland estates would have to take place over normal farmland, which did not provide much game worth shooting without some help. Thus big estates reared pheasant and partridge and planted suitable tree cover in order to provide 'good sport'.

All this is well illustrated by our local Onslow Estate, where a 'pheasantry', 'coverts' and plantations were established by the end of the century. In addition, one lake was equipped with a 'decoy' to trap wild ducks. The Hall was also large, run by at least a dozen staff, who would have been able to cater for those weekend shooting parties. Outside, the gamekeeper and his team of 'beaters' would ensure a good show. (Even the two young shooting gentlemen shown in the photograph appear to have two beaters, not in Sunday best, to help them).

As in the Middle Ages laws reserved even wild game for the landowner, who could also enter tenanted land in pursuit of it (evidence from farm leases). Others taking some would have been branded 'poachers' and, if caught, taken before the magistrate. Since so many large landowners were also JPs, poachers could not expect much sympathy here!

Meanwhile, the successes of those medieval knights who chased deer with greyhounds were finding an alternative riding activity in fox hunting. Special packs of hounds were introduced during the late eighteenth century, leading to the formation of hunting societies whose activities could spread over more than one estate.

By now, agricultural improvement was providing much more cover in the form of hedgerows and new woodland, from which a fox could venture out seeking lambs, chicken and also those game birds. Thus hunting became a form of 'vermin' control as well as exercise in horsemanship. This was still important at a time when horses played such a key role in both military and rural life. (The gauchos of Argentina were quite impressed with Charles Darwin's skills, when they met him during the Beagle voyage).

Locally, Charles Morris of Oxon maintained a pack of hounds in his kennels in Shepherd's Lane until 1866. Hunting scenes in the form of coloured lithographs can still be seen decorating some old county pubs.

Such activity was obviously also an important part of rural social life amongst squires and larger tenant farmers, so that Onslow Hall's capacity to host 'Hunt Balls' proved valuable.

In modern times such estates cannot follow the same old ways, while attitudes to blood sports have been changing. Some of this has been expressed in wildlife legislation setting out new rules. Like it or not, those blood sports have helped create and maintain the English rural landscape which we

love today so shooting syndicates, open to everyone still make a contribution. Meanwhile, more peaceful enjoyment continues to be found in fishing – but that is another story.



Bicton village group c.1910

Ernest Lewis

Country Life 1908

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