

VILLAGE ECHOES

In the gardens, hedgerows, fields, woods and sky – birds – we see them everyday and everywhere yet, surprisingly, almost the only mention of them among the vast store of information in the Goudhurst Jubilee and Coronation books from 1935 and 1937 is James Bridgland recalling how, at the age of 7, he was paid 4d a day to go “rook-minding” in, other words, bird-scaring, and that at such a young age he was more scared than the birds when thunder threatened. In the mid 1850s Mr Southon, the butcher, kept a tame blackbird which he not only taught to sing and whistle, but also, apparently, to call out the name of the curate of St Mary’s, Walter de Veare, whenever that individual walked past the shop.

In 1901 Goudhurst, like many other places in the country, formed a Rat and Sparrow club. Although not a new idea, the object of these clubs, which at this time were formed at the instigation of the Board of Agriculture, was to safeguard the food supply, especially corn, against the ravages of these particular “pests”. The fifteen members of the club were given monthly targets of supplying between 250 and 500 sparrow heads each, or their equivalent in bullfinch heads or rats’ tails; one bullfinch was the equivalent of 4 sparrows and one rat-tail equalled 3 sparrows. They were also encouraged to collect sparrows’ eggs. Anyone who fell short of their monthly target was fined one penny per sparrow, whilst prizes were awarded to those who produced the largest number of heads and tails. The club ceased after 3 years (presumably through the dwindling number of suitable targets) but was revived briefly in 1917 when Cranbrook Council paid 2d a tail; this revival, however, was also short-lived and the club closed for good in 1920. Nowadays, both the sparrow and bullfinch populations are in decline and it is actually illegal to trap or kill the latter without a special licence.

Sometime later in the twentieth century, someone had the idea of listing all the bird species which could be, or had been, seen in the parish. The end result, entitled “The Wild Birds of Goudhurst” was compiled from the efforts of nine amateur bird-watchers, a typescript of which is held by the Local History Society. Unfortunately, the document is un-attributed and undated, but from the occasional date noted in the comments it would appear to date from the mid-1960s; for instance, the editor noted that the sparrowhawk was now rarely seen as a result of the usage of “persistent chlorinated hydrocarbons in seed dressings and sprays” and attributed the lack of this predatory bird to the rise in the number of bullfinches – 1,200 were trapped in an area covering 60 acres during 1963/64.

In total, the typescript lists 121 different species of birds, ranging from the unlikely sounding Squacco Heron (a bird rarely seen in the UK) and Grasshopper Warbler, to the more familiar such as blue tit and blackbird. The editor thought it strange, however, that the collared dove, which first appeared in England in about 1955, had yet to be seen in Goudhurst (a rarity no longer!). If anyone knows if this item was ever formally published, the Local History Society would love to know.

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