

Village Echoes

In 1972 Richard Adams wrote a novel called "Watership Down" recounting the tale of a group of rabbits and the trials and tribulations they underwent to find a safe and remote haven away from the brutality of mankind. The book was an immediate bestseller and still adorns my bookshelves today. I re-read it regularly, but as I look out of my window today, I wish the rabbits who are currently enjoying their evening meal on my lawn (they have already had breakfast and lunch there) could read: perhaps then they would take the hint and go off in search of their own Watership Down.

I blame the warreners, those men who looked after the rabbit warrens for their wealthy employers, or perhaps the French who introduced the rabbit into England in the 12th century as a fashionable delicacy for the wealthy. Inevitably rabbits escaped into the wild and, five centuries later, the rabbit as a commodity was available to all and by the Victorian period they had become the pest they still are today. Pest or not, the landed estates classed them as 'game', so woe betide the Goudhurst man who thought poaching rabbits was a legitimate occupation. They could - and did - get at least six months in jail if they were caught rabbiting.

It was safer to do as Amos Mercer did as boy in late nineteenth century Goudhurst, and that was to keep rabbits as a hobby, although 72 rabbits in a three-storey hutch sounds a bit excessive. They would, of course, also have provided a legitimate source of food for the family and indeed did so when someone deliberately muddled the rabbit families up so much that it was impossible to sort out which young rabbits belonged to which adult rabbits!

Poaching, rabbits or anything else, was a way of life for many men and could prove a dangerous occupation for both them and the game-keepers who sought to stop them. In December 1837 a gang of about thirty poachers, having fortified themselves at the Barley Corn beer shop in Cranbrook, set off for Glassenbury woods armed with a variety of guns and bludgeons. Unbeknown to the poachers, the game-keepers at Glassenbury had got wind of their intentions and had arranged with the keepers from the Bedgebury estate to join forces and lie in wait for them. Alerted to the approach of the poachers by the sounds of their guns as they shot at pheasants, the Glassenbury keepers confronted the group and a fight broke out from which the poachers emerged victorious, but not without seriously injuring at least one keeper. The subsequent arrival of the Bedgebury keepers on the scene meant that the victory was short-lived and several of the group were immediately captured, while others escaped only to be apprehended later. The report of the affray in the Maidstone Journal concludes with the comment that the men involved could not claim lack of employment as an excuse for poaching as there was plenty of work to be had if they were so inclined.

In fact, such was the notoriety of this case that it was reported in The Times in March 1838, when the prisoners were put on trial. This states that the men had been part of a gang of desperados who had long been terrorising the eastern part of Kent. They were all found guilty but with varying degrees of severity. Some were transported to Australia, others imprisoned for two years with hard labour, and the most lenient sentence was six months' hard labour for those who had been present but had taken no part in the violence perpetrated against the keepers.

Local History Society