

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE MUTE SWAN IN ENGLAND.

BY

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THE earliest particulars of the history of the Mute Swan in England hitherto known are contained in the statements by Saunders (Yarrell's *Brit. Birds*, IV., p. 327) that "Swans, it is said, were first brought into England from Cyprus by Richard I., who began his reign in 1189; and they are particularly mentioned in a manuscript of the time of Edward I. (1272)." These naturally have been extensively copied (not always correctly) and appear in many books on British birds. Thus, Gurney (*Early Annals of Ornithology*, p. 57) writes "Mr. H. Saunders states that tame Swans are particularly mentioned in a manuscript of 1272, which I have not seen. The passage referred to, as I learn from Mr. Harting who was Saunders' informant, is to be found in the Wardrobe Accounts of Edward I., published by the Society of Antiquaries." As a matter of fact, these Wardrobe Accounts are those for the twenty-first year of Edward I., 1299-1300, so that we may say that the earliest documentary evidence of the existence of the Mute Swan in England so far brought to light belongs to the last year of the thirteenth century.

The authority for the statement that it was brought into England by Richard I. from Cyprus, presumably about 1192 at the termination of the third Crusade, would appear to have been known to Newton, as he designates it (*Orn. Dict.*, p. 930) as "uncertain," but hitherto it has evaded my search. It will, I think, be clear however from what follows that the statement itself is so uncertain that it should be allowed to disappear from the literature of the subject.

Taking 1300, therefore, as our starting point we will endeavour to show what is to be learnt of Swan-history from certain national and other manuscripts, which take us back to the last twenty years of the twelfth century. None of these sources of information would appear to have been previously searched in this connection and only sporadically with regard to other species.

On June 29th, 1295, a commission was issued to A. de Crokdayk and W. Inge on the complaint of Robert de Tateshale, touching the persons who, while he was on the King's service in Wales, entered his free warren at Malteby by Strubby, co. Lincoln, hunted therein and carried away hares and at Wyme carried away forty swans. (*Cal. Rot. Pat.*)

Amongst the Pleas at London in the Middlesex Iter XXII. Edward I. (1291-2) one A. brought a writ of Trespass against B. in respect of thirty swans, which he had taken by force. (*Year Book* 22 Ed. I., p. 588.)

On August 11th, 1283, a commission was issued to Richard Pevenese and Nicholas le Gros touching the persons who carried away swans of Giles de Fyenles at Wertlinge, co. Sussex, during his absence on the King's service and under his protection in Wales. (*Cal. Rot. Pat.*)

On August 20th, 1282, a commission was issued to Solomon de Roff' and John de Sandwyco touching the persons who came by night to the water of la Rivere, co. Kent, and carried away eight swans of Stephen de Penecestre and assaulted Roger le Swonhirde his man (*Cal. Rot. Pat.*). This seems to be the earliest mention of the office of swanherd.

On November 16th, 1276, a commission was issued to Richard de Holebrok touching the persons who by night took two brood swans and four cygnets of William de Saham at Be. . . . , co. Norfolk, removed the mark of the said William with which the said swans had been marked and extracted the chief quills from their wings and still detain the cygnets (*Cal. Rot. Pat.*). This is the earliest mention of the use of swan-marks.

On January 11th, 1276, the King issued an order to John Russel, bailiff of Clarendon, co. Wilts, to deliver to the sheriff of Winchester fifteen swans from the King's swans in his custody, to be carried to the King at Winchester; also an order to the sheriff of Winchester to receive them and cause them to be carried to Winchester (*Cal. Rot. Claus.*). This is the earliest mention of the royal game of Swans that was maintained for many years on the river Avon in connection with the royal manor of Clarendon, and concerning which there are several entries in the Patent Rolls of Edward III.

In the Close Rolls for 4 Edward I. is entered a memorandum of agreement dated the Wednesday after St. Katherine (November 25th, 1275) between Lady Eleanor de Verdun and Sir Theobald de Verdun concerning her dower, to the effect that he has granted to her as dower certain manors in Warwickshire and Leicester, with all oxen, etc., on certain of them, excepting the swans, the foals of the stud and the swine of the manors, driven away or slain before the making of the agreement, on condition that she answer to him for as much money as he acquired them for from the executors of Sir John, her late husband.

In 1274 Swans were a sufficiently common article of food amongst the upper classes of the City of London as to make

their appearance on the stalls of the Poulterers, so that we find them included in the orders that were issued in that year fixing the prices at which they and other commodities were to be sold. A translation of the heading of these orders reads "In the time of Henry le Waleys, mayor of London, Nicholas of Winchester and Henry of Coventry, sheriffs, was made by command of the King and with the assent and consent of the nobles of the kingdom and the citizens of the aforesaid city, the *Statuta Poletricæ*." By these the price of a swan was fixed at 3s. (*et unum Cygnum pro iij solidis*). (Letter Book C. of the City of London.)

In 1256 a commission was issued to Reynold de Cobham and Alvred de Dene to enquire as to the persons who stole the crops and swans of Bertram de Crioll in divers places in the county of Kent, while he was Constable of Dover, and to do justice on such as they found guilty therein. (*Cal. Rot. Pat.*)

Between 1247 and 1251 Henry III. issued many requisitions (entered in the Close Rolls) for provisions to the sheriffs of the different counties of those parts of England, where he happened to be going to keep the chief feasts of the year. These requisitions, though they contain promises of payment, were issued in the most peremptory terms, *e.g.*, in 1247 the sheriff of Hampshire was ordered as he valued his body (*sicut corpus suum diligit*) to deliver at the castle of Winchester on the Sunday or at latest the Monday before Christmas (amongst other things) six Swans. In the same terms the sheriff of Somerset and Dorset was bidden to provide twelve, the sheriff of Oxford and Berkshire ten, the sheriff of Wiltshire six and William Passelewe six.

Twenty-two Swans, amongst other things, had to be provided for the feast of St. Edward (March 18th) 1249, and the sheriffs of Essex and Hertfordshire, Surrey and Sussex, and Kent were commanded "as they valued themselves and all their belongings" to buy six apiece in their bailiwicks, and the sheriff of Middlesex four, and to deliver them at Westminster on the vigil of the feast at the latest. In June of the same year further requisitions were sent out to the sheriffs of most of the southern and eastern counties for similar quantities and kinds of provisions, to be held ready for when the King should send for them, and Swans were included to the number of eighty-two.

The largest requisition during this period was one sent out from Windsor on October 28th, 1251, to the sheriffs of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Northumberland, Cumberland and Lancashire, for the provisioning of the court at Christmas, which

was to be spent at York. The enormous amount of food to be provided on this occasion included no less than 125 Swans, of which even the Bailiff of Lincoln and the Mayor and Bailiffs of York had to provide ten each. Four other requisitions of a similar kind were issued during this same year.

In addition to these, letters were several times sent, couched in less peremptory terms, to the heads of the great Fenland religious houses "requesting" them to supply the King with certain wild-fowl and Swans. Thus, in the same year, the Abbots of Thorney, Croyland, Ramsey and Peterborough and the Prior of Spalding were asked to send Swans, Cranes and other wild-fowl for the Feast of St. Edward; and on June 6th, 1249, the Abbots of Peterborough, Thorney and Ramsey, and the Priors of St. Neots, Barnwell, Spalding and Ely were requested to supply as many Swans, Herons, Bitterns and Cranes as they could get.

Within the same period, namely in 1250, the See of Winchester fell vacant and the King at once seized the opportunity and commissioned one, Peter Chacepore, to collect to the King's use, throughout the Bishopric, as many kids, rabbits, Swans, Cranes, Pheasants, Partridges and other wild-fowl as he could get.

By ancient custom the Swan has long enjoyed a unique position amongst domestic and semi-domestic animals, in that the ownership of the brood does not follow, as with others, the ownership of the dam, but belongs equally to the owners of the parents, if they be different. An order entered in the Close Rolls of 1246 is particularly interesting in this connection, as showing that at that date the custom was as yet hardly established on a sure basis. Incidentally it infers that Swans were marked at this date, though there is no mention of the fact. The order was issued by Henry III. from Windsor on September 25th to the Sergeant of Kennington, that of the seven Swans that he had seized out of the brood of the King's Swan and the Swan of the Hospital of Hampton, he should keep four to the King's use and restore three to the Master of the Hospital, until it should be argued in the King's Court, whether the brood was the King's or the Hospital's, or whether it belonged equally to both.

On December 4th, 1242, a requisition was issued to William de Boeles to procure for the King's use, twenty or more Cranes and as many Swans and other wild-fowl as he could and to deliver them on the third or fourth day before Christmas. (*Cal. Rot. Claus.*)

About this period (1235-1259) Henry de Bracton wrote his famous treatise *De legibus et consuetudinibus Angliæ*, in which he laid down, amongst other things, the status of wild animals as regards ownership, and in which the keeping of Swans in a domesticated or semi-domesticated state is specifically referred to. After discussing the method and limitations of the ownership of wild animals, he goes on (Translation, edited by Twiss, 1878), "If wild animals have been tamed and they by habit go out and return, fly away and fly back, such as deer, swans, sea-fowls and doves and such like, another rule has been approved, that they are so long considered ours, as long as they have the disposition to return; for if they have no disposition to return they cease to be ours."

The earliest mention of the Swan in the Close Rolls occurs in an order, dated November 4th, 1231, to the Constable of Marlborough to the effect that Ralph Briton is to have two brood Swans (*duos cignos aerrarios*) by gift of the King. A reference a year earlier is to be found in the Charter Rolls, wherein is enrolled an allowance, dated April 20th, 1230, to Roger le Duc, citizen of London, of an agreement between John, son of Robert, and the said Roger, whereby Roger or his assigns were to hold the manor of Evre, co. Bucks., except the mills and the Swans, of the said John for a term of five years from the quinzaine of Easter, 14 Henry III.

The Calendars of the Patent, Charter and Close Rolls go back to 1216, 1226 and 1227 respectively, but contain no earlier references than those cited. From these it will be seen that not only were royal games of Swans maintained on the Thames, on the Avon and on the Kennet by Henry III., but that certainly before the middle of the thirteenth century they were kept by many of the great religious houses and inferentially by many commoners, amongst whom their possession was reckoned a considerable asset, while even a single pair was deemed of sufficient value to form a royal gift. In addition, Swans were evidently by this date very generally distributed throughout England (except perhaps in the western midlands and extreme south-west, about which there is no information), several of the ancient customs with regard to their keeping were already in use or in process of evolution and they were to be obtained for food in very considerable numbers.

Prior to 1230 there are so far two pieces of evidence to bring forward, in the first of which, owing to what appears to be a slip on the part of a seventeenth century translator, there is a little doubt as to the exact date. It is contained

in a deed dated September 6th, 1398, of which a translation, dated 1618, is given in *The Cockersand Chartulary* (Chetham Society Publication, Vol. 57). It is endorsed (presumably by the translator) "A coppie of a deed from K. Jo. confirmed by K. Ric. the 2 freeing all the launds of Cockersaund Abbey from all manner of secular exactions, suytes and servises wsoever." It embodies a command by John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, etc., to certain people named, that they shall not molest or otherwise grieve the Abbot and Canons of Cockersand, contrary to the provisions of the grant which, together with its confirmation by Richard II., it proceeds to recite. Amongst the long list of "secular exactions," etc., enumerated, from which the Abbey is to be exempt is "Swanadge," *i.e.*, payment for the right to keep Swans. Unfortunately the name of the King, the original grantor, is not mentioned in the body of the deed, though given in the endorsement as King John (1199-1216). The wording of the sentence where the name should occur is awkward and unusual, so that it is certain that the omission is an error or slip on the part of the translator; while, seeing that Cockersand Abbey was not founded until the end of the twelfth century, it is all the more probable that such a charter of liberty from secular exactions would have been granted in the first place by John. That being the case, payment for the right to keep Swans was evidently recognized as one of the profits of the Crown at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The second piece of evidence is contained in the story of the tame Swan of St. Hugh of Lincoln, as related by Giraldus Cambrensis in his lives of St. Remigius (*c.* XXIX. *De Hugone Lincolniensi*) and St. Hugh (*c.* X.), Bishops of Lincoln, that together compose the manuscript No. 425 in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, known as the Lincoln Treatises. The original has been edited for the Rolls Series by J. F. Dimock and forms Vol. VII. of the works of Giraldus. No English translation has been published.

Of the authenticity of the MS. the editor writes, "of all early manuscripts of Giraldus's different works, this has the best claim to be looked upon, if not as his own autograph copy, yet as written and revised and added to under his own eye. At any rate it was in all likelihood written before Giraldus's death [*circa* 1220]. It certainly gives us a most correct text; and the text probably of Giraldus's last revision." The story of the Swan occurs in both treatises, but the essential passages for the present purpose

are word for word the same in both. It was evidently first written for inclusion in the life of St. Remigius, as a remarkable occurrence of recent happening and afterwards copied into its more relevant position in the life of St. Hugh. The latter was probably completed at Lincoln, after Giraldus returned there in 1203. The former was, from internal evidence, written before the death of St. Hugh (in the autumn of 1200), but not before 1197, most probably between 1196 and 1199, when Giraldus was residing at Lincoln. Here he not only had access to the cathedral archives but was necessarily more or less in contact, if not with St. Hugh himself, with his immediate following, only eleven or twelve years after the events he relates took place.

After referring to St. Hugh's wonderful gift in taming wild birds, for which he appears to have had a great reputation, Giraldus goes on to remark that on the attainment of his episcopacy this gift was immediately manifest in the case of, not a small bird, but a large and royal one (*ab ave grandi et regia*) a significant phrase from an historical point of view. He then goes on:—"For on the very day, or about the day before, that Bishop Hugh was first received and enthroned at Lincoln [September 29th, 1186], there flew down on to his manor, pleasantly situated amongst woods and meres near Stowe, some eight miles distant from Lincoln City, a swan such as had never before been seen there. Who, within the space of a few days, overwhelmed with his great bulk and slew all the swans, that he found there in large numbers; one however, of the female sex, he saved alive, not for the increase of her fertility, but for the comfort of her society. He was in truth by quite as much larger than a swan as a swan is bigger than a goose; he was nevertheless in all things very like a swan, especially in colour and whiteness: in addition to his size he was also unlike them in this, that he did not exhibit the knob and the black colour on the bill after the manner of swans (*quod tumorem in rostro atque nigredinem more cignorum non præferebat*), but had in truth the same part of the bill flat and together with the head and upper part of the neck, becomingly adorned with yellow."

Giraldus goes on to relate how he immediately attached himself to the Bishop and would only feed from his hand or in his absence from the hand of his bailiff and attacked those that approached the Bishop at meal times, etc., etc.

Giraldus, like other ancient chroniclers, appears to have been vague as to dates, but this failing apart, his text, as Mr. Dimock remarks, with regard to the strictly historical

part is sober and trustworthy enough. From the description, St. Hugh's pet Swan would seem to have been a Whooper and its actual existence as a sort of house-dog is vouched for by the fact that Giraldus remarks in another passage that he himself had seen it. Whether the anecdotes he relates about it are literally true or not does not matter, neither do the one or two inaccuracies in his description of it, the exaggeration of its size and the extension of the yellow colour from the bill on to the head and neck; they are just the kind of exaggerations to be expected in a chronicle of this period. The important points that emerge are, that the Swan was already reckoned a royal bird and that Giraldus was quite well acquainted with the Mute Swan and its outstanding features, which he refers to quite accurately, while it is well nigh impossible for him to have invented certain details of the story, had not Mute Swans been pretty commonly kept in such places as the Bishop of Lincoln's park at Stowe in A.D. 1186.

This, together with the facts already referred to showing that the Mute Swan was distributed in considerable numbers over the greater part of England prior to 1250, seems to dispose finally of the statement that it was introduced into England from Cyprus by, or in the reign of Richard I., who did not commence his reign till 1189 and did not return from the Crusade before 1192. In any case it could hardly have been necessary to have gone as far as Cyprus for them.

What then was the origin of the Mute Swan in England? Two other hypotheses have been suggested. The first, by Dresser (*B. of Europe*), that it was introduced by the Romans, the acclimatizers of the Fallow Deer and Pheasant and perhaps of the Peacock, is, however probable, pure supposition. There does not at present appear to be any evidence in the least bearing upon it.

The second, which had already afforded me some food for thought, has been recently suggested by Mr. A. H. Evans (*Nat. Hist. of Wicken Fen*, p. 31), viz., that the species was in remote times indigenous in East Anglia, though perhaps not in large numbers, and that it was gradually brought into a condition of semi-domestication, with, as time went on, a corresponding gradual extinction of the wild stock. It is, of course, quite easy to see how such a state of affairs could be effected and the suggestion is undoubtedly attractive. As a theory it is paralleled to a considerable degree by the history of the Grey Lag-Goose in the same area, and is not necessarily invalidated by Newton's dictum that "all the legal

protection afforded to the Swan points out that it was not indigenous to the British Isles." Mr. Evans bases his suggestion on the fact that Swan bones (*sp. incert.*) have been found in the Fenland peat deposits, and that this is too far south for the Whooper. There seem to be two drawbacks to this deduction, the first is the doubt as to whether, except in the case of the sternum and perhaps in the case of the skull, the bones of the Mute Swan can be distinguished from those of the Whooper; the second, that if it were proved that these remains are those of the Mute Swan, it would not necessarily prove that the individuals to which they belonged were indigenous rather than migrants, though the former is certainly the more probable. The bones would with little doubt be accepted as evidence of its former indigenous status, in the same way as those of the Crane and the Pelican are, but for the fact that it has been domesticated for so many centuries and the universally accepted theory that it was originally introduced.

I do not know that the matter is worth arguing further at present, but there are one or two points that are perhaps worth mentioning. In the first place it is certainly a fact of some significance that in the tenth century Anglo-Saxon Vocabulary of Archbishop Ælfric two names are given for the Swan corresponding to the Latin equivalents *cignus* and *olor*. One of these must have been applied to the Mute Swan and it is perhaps more probable that an indigenous species would have been known by a distinct name than a migrant. East Anglia in the tenth century and for long after would have afforded the largest areas in England suitable for its requirements, while at the same time it is that part of England which is nearest to those of western Europe (Denmark and S. Sweden) where it is known to be indigenous. All the evidence goes to show moreover that it was in this part of England that it afterwards flourished in greatest numbers, and it is to this area that the greater proportion of its later, written, history appertains, while the greater simplicity of the swan-marks used on the eastern side of Norfolk suggests very forcibly that it was here that the earliest domestication of the species was effected.

A single point against all this is the omission of any mention of the Swan amongst the half dozen or so birds named in the description of the Fens in the eleventh century *Liber Eliensis*. But after all this is only negative evidence and cannot do more than suggest that it was, as compared with the ducks and other wild-fowl, not a very abundant species.