

Poaching

One activity which was common in both urban and rural areas and which held some importance to the makeshift economy was poaching. The specific activities which came under the general rubric of poaching, defined as the illegal hunting or capturing of wild animals, changed over the years and contributed to an evolving legislature.¹ As an activity poaching was multifaceted covering night poaching as well as daylight offences often focused on rabbits and the eggs of game birds. Commonly assumed to be primarily an economic reaction to social and economic conditions, it has equally been recognised as form of social deviance and resistance, reflecting the class tensions and power base within the rural community.

One of the predisposing causes of poaching was the enclosure of common land which had previously been available for grazing or hunting and was now deemed to be private property. Local land owners seemed to remain resolved to restrict customary rights on what they insisted was their exclusive property which was in conflict with labouring rural populations' perceptions of traditional law. This loss of grazing and hunting rights contributed to economic hardship, whilst enclosed land was deemed to be more profitable, and often led to increased rents. In Chinnor, open fields remained intact until the nineteenth century although there were some earlier enclosures around Henton and Wainhill and around the boundary of the parish. Early game laws in England prohibited the lower classes from possessing weapons which allowed the nobility to prevent disruption and rebellion whilst in fourteenth century England it was feared that hunting activities could conceal conspiracies against the nobility.

A review of local newspapers and court reports indicated that during the 19th century the majority of convictions were for poaching or stealing food. From 1900, fewer incidents have been identified. In 1902, Chinnor residents, Bert and William Hopkins were convicted for trespassing for game on John North's land and Mrs. Evans was convicted of stealing four wood faggots in 1911 and Sidney Hewitt for trespass in December 1912. At the time Mr. Rose was writing, the practice of snaring small birds for food had declined due to their reduction in numbers. He also reported on the danger of taking pheasant eggs as the local gamekeeper knew where most of the nests were and, if caught, a tenant could be turned out of their cottage.² The reduction of cases could possibly be due to the lack of reporting of poaching as a crime. Within the countryside in general there was often an ambivalent attitude to poaching which could result in a reluctance to report it and some landowners hesitated to prosecute, dependent as they were on local labour, for fear of reprisals.

However, the rural poor did have access to customary rights within their locality which provided material benefits to their standard of living and could, on occasion, make the difference between getting by and poverty. Key to these rights was gleaning and, in addition in Chinnor, the collection of wood. See makeshift economy.
