

**RABBIT - RABBIT - RABBIT**  
**LOCAL NIGHT TIME POACHING WITH NETS**  
**IN THE 19th & 20th CENTURIES**  
**(Featuring offenders from Griffydam)**



**BY SAMUEL T STEWART - OCTOBER 2024**

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## INTRODUCTION

There are numerous records in old newspapers of working class people in rural villages being charged with night poaching for rabbits with 'longnets' in the 1800s and 1900s, even though a Parliamentary Night Poaching Act became law in 1828, and it became **an offence at night to unlawfully take or destroy any game or rabbits on any land, open or enclosed, including public roads, paths and verges**. Rabbits were introduced to Great Britain following the Norman conquest and were also known as conies and white tails.

There can be no doubt that night poaching developed as a response to poverty as the result of low wages and irregular work. As lots of commoners were desperate for food, rabbit poaching was one of the popular ways of obtaining something substantial to eat. The poaching of Rabbits at night with nets produced a great return in the numbers of rabbits caught and the poachers were therefore able to gift or sell them for profit to others who could afford to buy them. For most of the 19th century, beef and mutton were considered to be too expensive to form part of the worker's basic diet, except perhaps for the commoner who was able to keep a few sheep on the open commons.

Ground game – rabbit and hare – was consequently viewed as an economical alternative for workers, particularly as it could often be obtained for nothing in the countryside. In the Victorian and Edwardian periods, rabbits were in abundance, and provided food in thousands of working class homes, and poachers had little difficulty in finding a ready market.

Longnets were very effective when used correctly at night. As darkness falls, rabbits leave the safety of their burrows and venture far out on grass and arable land, often travelling considerable distances in the search for food. Rabbit poaching at night was often practiced with military precision, and longnets were used to catch huge quantities of rabbits and hares that had been driven across a field into them by poaching dogs such as whippets. For example, at Burleigh near Loughborough, in October 1859, a group of night poachers said to number 12, were seen on the land of W. P. Herrick of Beaumanor; when chased off after a fight they left an 80 yard net. At Shepshed in September 1865 a gang of night poachers left 380 yards of longnets when they fled.

The fact that there were far fewer people prosecuted for night poaching than for day poaching indicates that there was more day poaching, but it was the night time activity which worried the authorities and game preservers most. Night poaching was a source of such concern for two reasons: it accounted for the greatest loss of game, and it publicly showed that the police were unable to prevent or control those responsible. Groups of night poachers caught significantly greater numbers of animals than day poachers, who generally caught a few animals at a time, whereas successful group night poaching expeditions for ground game (rabbits and hares) could obtain hauls of up to 100 rabbits. For example, a group of poachers returning to Mansfield

in the early hours of the morning in 1861 were reported to have 50 rabbits in their possession, and 69 and over 90 rabbits were found in the possession of night poachers near Derby in 1876.

The landlords of enclosed large estates such as the Beaumonts' at Coleorton and the Ferrers' at Staunton Harold often with rabbit breeding warrens were the worst affected but they certainly didn't care about the common people going hungry and would have made little charitable effort to try and help them, which may have solved the problem in itself.

The price of meat reduced towards the end of the 1800s and eventually an over supply of rabbits and hares became available from illegal poaching providing butchers with a good, but illegal trade in the sale of their rabbits and skins. The poachers themselves of course benefited also.

*This changed during World War One, when 'Food Control Committees' were established who were responsible for implementing food rationing and preventing restrictions from being evaded. **This legalised the selling of wild rabbits which was known as the 'Wild rabbits pricing order'**. Two examples of local butchers being fined for not adhering to the rules are recorded at the end of the publication.*

**Continued over page**

**Transcribed from the Leicester Mercury – November 6<sup>th</sup> 1858**

**Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions, Saturday October 30<sup>th</sup> –  
Before T. Mowbray Esq.  
Monday November 1<sup>st</sup>**

Henry Kinsey (Alias Bird), collier, Griffydam, and William Hickling (Alias Butt), Belton, were apprehended on Saturday night by Sergt. Moore, on a warrant, charged with poaching and seriously assaulting, the keepers of Sir George Howland Beaumont, bart., on Sunday night, October 24<sup>th</sup>, in the parish of Worthington, were remanded, in order to give time for other parties concerned in the affray to be apprehended.

The facts of the case are, that on the night in question, about 9 p.m., two of Sir G. Beaumont's gamekeepers were out watching, when they saw some men setting a net, and that they also had a net with them. The keepers tried to get possession of the nets, when they were attacked by three men with bludgeons and stones. One of the watchers, named Cooper, was struck just above the temple, and on the back of the head, and was very seriously wounded.

All the poachers ultimately made off, leaving their nets and two caps behind them. One of the men drew a knife, and swore that if either of the keepers offered to take him, or follow him, he would rip them open. Information was at once given to Sergt. Moore, and an inquiry set on foot, which has led to the apprehension of the above prisoners, who have been identified by the keepers.

The other man, who is known, but has absconded, will no doubt be apprehended in the course of the week.

**Transcribed from Leicestershire Mercury – October 10<sup>th</sup> 1863**  
**COUNTY PUBLIC OFFICE**  
**LEICESTER ABBEY**

George Walker, Griffydam, and Henry George Kirby, Thringstone, colliers, were charged with having in their possession at Leicester Abbey, on September 28<sup>th</sup>, when searched by P.C. Jabez Widdowson, four nets and net pegs, also 61 rabbits and six hares, which had been unlawfully obtained by going on land in search of game. Defendants did not appear. P.C. Widdowson stated that on the 28<sup>th</sup> ult., he met defendants in Abbey Lane, Leicester and his suspicion caused him to search them. Nine other men were with them, but they ran away. On Walker he found nine rabbits, two hares, a net, seven net-pegs, and a stick. He told defendants he suspected they had been poaching. They said, "It is a hard case to be out all night, and have it taken from us". Kirby called out to the others to come back, and not to be taken in that way. He said also that they were a frightened lot, and he would never go out with them again. It was half-past five o'clock when he met them. The nets appeared to have been recently used, as they were wet. They were nearly new and made of good material, and they had on them bits of fur, briars, &c.

The game he found was warm. – P.C. Lyner corroborated. He helped to search defendants. They had both been previously convicted of poaching at Ashby, under the new Act. Two poaching dogs were with them, which got away. Kirby gave the name of Henry Stevenson, Mountsorrel, which he afterwards found was wrong. – P.C. Farmer, of Ratby, stated that Walker said his name was John Ratcliffe, of Loughborough. He knew that that was false, and told Walker, and he afterwards gave his right name and address. – Superintendent. Burdett said defendants were most desperate characters. –

Fined £5 each and costs, or three months' hard labour. The game to be sold and the proceeds handed to the county treasurer, and the nets to be destroyed, so as to be unfit for night poaching purposes.

**Transcribed from the Melton Mowbray Mercury & Oakham & Uppingham News – September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1886**

### **Ashby-de-la-Zouch General Petty Sessions SERIOUS NIGHT POACHING AFFRAY**

Samuel Watson, collier, Swannington ; Joseph Shakespeare, collier, Griffydam ; Peter King, collier, Griffydam ; and James Springthorpe, collier, Thringstone, were brought up in custody and severally charged with poaching on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> inst., at Staunton Harold, on land in the occupation of Mr. Thomas Bird. The case created considerable interest, and the Court was crowded.

Mr. W. A. Musson appeared for the prosecution. – The prisoner Watson pleaded guilty to the charge, and the other prisoners not guilty.

Harvey Phuller, gamekeeper to Sir George Beaumont, said he was out on duty in company of several other keepers on the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> inst., about 1.30 (midnight). They were together in Lount Wood, where they had been watching for three or four hours. From something they heard, they all rushed out of the wood, and went into a field in the occupation of Thomas Bird. They saw a lot of men about a dozen yards off, and two of these men were doing something with a net. When they saw witness and the other keepers they ran away towards the gate, and in halting at the gate some of the men turned their faces towards witness and the others, and he plainly recognized the prisoner Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's dog came at witness. He had known Shakespeare for many years. They followed them through the gate for about 100 yards before they made another halt. Witness took the lead, and the other keepers were running behind. Some of the prisoners then began to throw stones and then made another start. They followed another hundred yards. The prisoners then wheeled round upon them. Seven of the men were ready to use sticks, and these were in the front. There were some others behind. Out of the seven in front, four of them were directly opposite witness. The prisoner Watson was one, two others were not yet in custody, and he believed that the fourth man was the prisoner Springthorpe, but he could not swear to this. He recognized the prisoner King and Shakespeare amongst those behind. The four men with sticks came up, and witness was struck on the

arm. The other men behind continued to throw stones. After this they again ran away, and the prisoner Watson was knocked down by his (Phuller's) dog, and he was then taken into custody. Afterwards several nets were found, and some rabbits and other things.

John Cox, gamekeeper to Lord Ferrers, said he was out with the other keepers on the night in question. He recognized the prisoner Shakespeare, who had a dog with him. He was also quite certain that Springthorpe and King were there. Witness was within three or four yards of the men, and could see them quite plainly. There were ten or twelve men there all together, and witness would swear that Shakespeare, King, and Springthorpe were part of the company. – William Whitmee, keeper to Sir George Beaumont, corroborated, and was quite positive that King, Shakespeare, and Springthorpe were among the other men. – William Keen, head gamekeeper to Lord Ferrers, said he brought Watson to Ashby on the night in question, and afterwards examined the field, and found there two nets (one of them partly set, some bags, and five other nets about 70 yards long, 42 net pegs, 27 rabbits and some sticks and stones. – This was the case for the prosecution.

Defendants had nothing to say, but Springthorpe called two witnesses, namely, William Wilton and Edward Morley, but they only spoke as to being in Shakespeare's company until 11 o'clock on the night of the affray.

The Bench retired, and on returning in Court the Chairman said they had decided to convict ; each of the prisoners would have to go to gaol for six weeks with hard labour, and at the expiration of that time to find sureties not to so offend again for twelve months, and in default of finding such sureties to be further imprisoned for six calendar months hard labour.

**Transcribed from and annotated by the author  
Coalville Times - March 1914**

**ASHBY- DE - LA- ZOUCH COUNTY COURT  
FRIDAY MARCH 20th 1914**

**AN INTERESTING CASE -  
WHITWICK SERGEANT AND THE POACHERS**

At the Ashby County Court before his honour Judge W. Moore Cann and a jury at the Ashby County Court yesterday (Thursday), Peter King, collier, Griffydam sued Eli Betts, sergeant of police, of Whitwick for £15 damages and for wrongfully and unlawfully on the 26th day of October last, entering the plaintiff's dwelling house at Griffydam, by reason of which plaintiff's daughter, Nellie, was alleged to have been made ill. The claim included £4 12s for 12 weeks' board and lodgings of the girl, and £2 14s for extra nourishment and 12 bottles of port wine. Mr Watson Wright of Loughborough acted on behalf of the plaintiff, and Mr T. E. Jesson, Ashby, for the defendant.

Mr Wright (for the plaintiff Peter King), opening the case, explained that it arose in connection with a night poaching expedition in which King and other colliers were concerned. Shortly after midnight (Saturday), the men went on to Lord Ferrer's estate and returned about five o'clock on the Sunday morning with a number of rabbits. After the men had been in the house some twenty minutes, the defendant (sergeant Eli Betts) and three policemen entered the house and seized a number of rabbits and nets, charging the men with poaching in the parish of Breedon. Solely on the evidence of the gamekeeper, the men were subsequently convicted at the Ashby Police Court though they denied being near Breedon that night. He did not wish to defend poaching, which was wicked, but there was no defence whatever for the police having entered this man's house as they did.

Peter King, the plaintiff, stated that shortly after midnight he and five friends left his house at Griffydam for Staunton Harold and caught several rabbits. When they returned just before five o'clock, they looked carefully round and no one was about. They had been in the house about half an hour before the police came in and had been having a drink and a smoke. The sergeant was first and the plaintiff ordered him out. There was a tussle over a bag containing eight rabbits, but the police did not get it. They were in the house for half an hour. Subsequently, Corbett, the gamekeeper to Mr Paget (presumably renting land on the Ferrer's estate) appeared on the scene and said he should charge him with poaching at Breedon. They were never near Breedon that night, but he was sentenced to one month's imprisonment at the Ashby Police Court for night poaching at Breedon.

Plaintiff then stated that the effect of the police entering the house caused his daughter to faint and she was suffering for twelve weeks and had to have special nursing and treatment. The house was dirtied and damaged by the police entering as they did and the subsequent struggling.

By Mr Jesson (For the defendant ) : The defendant worked at the Coleorton Colliery. He admitted twelve convictions for poaching. They did not get 42 rabbits that night, they got 41 (laughter). He (Mr. Jesson) was not aware that a printed circular "That Justice Must Be Done", had been issued in connection with the case inviting subscriptions from the public to prosecute certain people for perjury. "How much did you collect from the gullible British public asked Mr Jesson?" - Plaintiff (Peter King replied) : "Nothing". "How much was collected?" - "I don't know" (Peter King replied). Answering a further question, plaintiff said his house was not a regular meeting place for poachers.

Thomas Townsend, a collier from Griffydam, one of the men convicted at the police court in the case, gave evidence as to the entry of the police in the house and the tussle for the bags. He was previously fined £2 2s. at the police court.

By Mr Jesson (for the defendant sergeant Eli Betts) : He (Thomas Townsend), had two convictions against him for poaching. Witness added that he did not think there was anything wrong in poaching. It was much more wrong to let children go hungry than it was to go and catch a rabbit.

By Mr Jesson : He was not secretary to the appeal fund and could not say how much had been collected. There was a committee formed of which Mr. Holland was chairman. He said, "they had not offered subscribers 2s in the £ on the damages they won in the case."

Robin Robinson, coal miner, Thringstone, another of the men convicted in the case, also gave evidence. He said "he was fined £1 11s. 6d on this occasion."

By Mr Jesson : He (Robin Robinson) had been convicted four times in all, once at Loughborough since this case at Ashby. It was not true that the men and the police all rushed into the house together. He (Robin Robinson) heard King order the police out, saying he paid 5s a week for the house.

Henry White Robinson, coal miner, Thringstone said he was one of the men wrongly convicted at Ashby and he got a month's imprisonment. He admitted 19 convictions. He then gave his version of the affair.

Harry King, 16, son of the plaintiff (Peter King), said he got up at five minutes to five on the Sunday morning to let his father and five other men in. Before going back to bed, witness put some beer for them in the back room. He heard the row afterwards and came down again. It was about 25 minutes after the return of his father and the men that the police came. The latter were struggling over the bags for about a quarter of an hour. He heard his father order Betts (sergeant) out of the house. His sister fainted. Eliza King, plaintiff's wife, corroborated.

By Mr Jesson : Her daughter (Eliza King's) was usually out on service, but was at home unwell. She had been at home over a fortnight suffering from anaemia, but was much better then.

William King, 22, another son of the plaintiff (Peter King) also gave evidence and in reply to Mr Jesson, admitted that he had been convicted of a poaching offence.

By Mr Watson Wright : His (William King's) conviction was under the Poaching Prevention Act when he tried to get a rabbit during the coal strike.

**This was the case for the plaintiff.**

Mr Jesson submitted that what the police did was perfectly lawful and quoted law extracts in support of his contention. They were actually in pursuit of the men when they entered the house and legally there was no trespass. Before Mr Jesson called his evidence, the Judge said there was no evidence as to special damages.

Sergeant Eli Betts, the defendant, said he had been 23 years in the Leicestershire Constabulary. He and three policemen met gamekeeper Corbett by appointment at Stocking Lane, Breedon, on the morning of October 26th. They had just parted when they heard Corbett whistle and they ran back. The gamekeeper told him he had seen six men in a field and gave them five names. They went in the direction of King's house at Griffydam and



when about 40 yards away they saw six men come out of a field opposite the house. They had bags on their backs and ran when they saw the witness. He and the police followed and chased them right into the house, entering practically at the same time. There was no tussling. The boy Harry King was not there at all.

By Mr Wright : He had not seen the men that night until they crossed the road to enter King's house. Geo. Hy. Corbett, game keeper to Mr W. B. Paget, said he was with the police that night, and entering a field, the gate caught against a net which he followed up and saw six men. He recognised the men Robinsons, King, Townsend, and Platts and subsequently gave their names to the police. Later he visited King's house with Sergeant Betts and tried the door which was locked. Witness shouted to them that he should charge them with night poaching.

By Mr Wright (for Peter King, plaintiff) : He (Corbett) took the net from the field and had since destroyed it. The net produced at the police court was not the one seized in a previous case. He knew James Morley, and had had him under the Poaching Prevention Act. He did not know that Morley claimed the net.

Mr Wright : Why didn't you (Corbett) pursue the men instead of waiting to take up the nets? Corbett : Would you pursue six men in the dark? (laughter). I waited for help. P.C. Brown corroborated the sergeant's evidence, asserting that they were in hot pursuit of the men when they entered the house.

By Mr Wright : It was not a concocted story.

Mr Jesson : You (P.C. Brown) have not conspired with your brother officers to defeat justice? Witness P.C. Brown : Certainly not sir. P.C. Jones gave similar evidence and denied Mr Wright's suggestion that it was not a concocted story. P.C. Collis's evidence completed the case for the defence.

The judge said the points for the jury were whether Corbett saw King taking game and whether the sergeant assisted in pursuing. **The answer was in the affirmative and judgement was given for the defendant (Sergeant Eli Betts) with costs.**

**Transcribed from Leicester Daily Post – April 14<sup>th</sup> 1919**

**Ashby - de - la - Zouch Petty Sessions  
DEAR WILD RABBIT**

William Henry Bennett, dealer, Griffydam, was summoned under the 'Wild Rabbits Prices Order' for selling a wild rabbit which weighed 2lbs 4oz. for 2s. 3d. (which was in excess of the above order), at Coalville. –

Mr. J. F. Jesson prosecuted for the 'Coalville Food Control Committee', and Mr. J. J. Sharp defended.

Arthur Otty, Executive Officer, Coalville, said the price for wild rabbits brought in the skin was 10d. per lb. – Mrs. Johnson said she purchased a rabbit from defendant, who said it weighed 2½lbs. with the skin on, and that there was a half penny a pound for carting. Witness paid him 2s..3d. for the rabbit, which he skinned for her, and he gave her a penny back for the skin. Witness had the rabbit weighed, and it was 2lbs. without the skin.

P.C. Bursall said rabbit skins fetched from 1s. 6d. to 2s. a dozen at marine store dealers. A skinned rabbit of 2lbs. would have a 5oz. skin.

Defendant produced the following notice fixed on his cart ; 'Rabbits 10d. a pound in the skin ; 1/2d. extra for carting ; 1d. for each skin given back" The weight of the rabbit given sold to Mrs. Johnson was, he said, 2lbs. 9oz. The skin would weigh anything from seven to 12 ounces. – Mr. Sharp said that if the weight of the skin was as stated by defendant the price was correct. Defendant who had a previous conviction, was fined £5 5s., and ordered to pay £3 3s., advocate's allowance, and 5s. for witness. £8 13s. in all, or 14 days.

**Transcribe from the Leicester Daily Post – May 12<sup>th</sup> 1919**  
**Ashby - de - la - Zouch Petty Sessions**  
**FOOD CONTROL CASES**

Mr. W. P. Musson prosecuted in several cases on behalf of the 'Ashby Food Control Committee'. – Wm. Henry Bennett, dealer, Griffydham, summoned for selling rabbits above the maximum price at Coleorton, pleaded guilty, and said he was practically ruined in rabbit-selling. He had lost £80 by the drop from 5s. to 1s. 6d. a dozen for rabbit-skins when he had 4,000 in stock. – A conviction for a similar offence was recorded, and defendant was fined £7 8s. costs, and £3 3s. advocate's fee, the chairman remarking that it was doubtful if he ought not to have been imprisoned

**Note**

*Food Control Committees were responsible for implementing food rationing and preventing restrictions from being evaded during World War I. Part of this included the 'Wild rabbits pricing order'.*