

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

800th

ANNIVERSARY GUIDE

The Story Today - Swan Hopping

(Researched and compiled by Roxanne Bennis 1996)

Introduction Of Swans To Stratford

In 1867, the Rev G J Granville, upon retiring from Stratford to go to Pleasley Rectory in Derbyshire, presented his swans to the Stratford Corporation. This seems to have been an informal gift, and circumstances soon led the Corporation to clarify their position. The entry from the Minute Book of the Borough Council, for the Quarterly Meeting on 5 August 1868, reads:

"The Treasurer produced a letter from the Rev G J Granville giving over his claim to the Swans on the River Avon to the Corporation...we direct the Treasurer... to take all necessary steps for the future protection of the Swans on the Avon which shall be considered the property of the Corporation."

The 19th century Borough Council's attitude toward the swans was similar to that of a medieval lord, in that the swans were considered an asset and a status symbol, rather than ordinary wildlife. Swans could be purchased from the Corporation for the price of one guinea per cygnet, the first purchase being made by Mrs Starkey of Rhine Hill in 1868. They were also presented as gifts to other individuals or Town Councils, and over the years, continuing into the 20th century, swans were presented to, amongst others, Lady Trevelyan, Lord Willoughby de Broke, and the boroughs of Glasgow, Bury St Edmunds, and East Ham. It is interesting to note that when swans were presented to other towns, it was always in response to a request from that particular town. Even then there seems to have been a certain mystique surrounding Stratford swans!

On The Corporation's Menu

The Corporation also continued the more prosaic tradition of the swan as a delicacy for the table. Every year two cygnets were caught and prepared for the Mayor's Feast in September/October, where they appeared on the menu alongside tongues, pigeon pies, ducks and geese.

Hopping

In order to maintain their exclusive right to the swans, it was necessary to mark them in some way, and the following year, on 13 August 1869, the Stratford Herald reported an "Interesting Ceremony" - which for almost the next twenty years was to be an annual fixture on the Council calendar. Although the proper term for the procedure is "Swan-Upping", it was consistently referred to locally by the corrupted term "Swan-Hopping". From the almost yearly newspaper articles on the event, it is possible to describe a typical swan-hopping.

Every August or September, the swan-hopping party would assemble at Bridgefoot or the Unicorn dock, and would consist of the Mayor, Borough Chamberlain, various Councillors, Macebearers, the Beadle, Superintendent of Police, Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Headmaster of King Edward VI Grammar School, PC Harris (the town's semi-official swan-keeper), and other gentlemen and ladies of Stratford society.



Swan hopping as photographed in 1886 - with the Superintendent of Police in the first boat

The party would row along the river, starting from Lucy's Mill as far up river as Tiddington, in search of swans. The swans would be corralled in a side creek or between the boats to be caught, or driven up river in advance of the boats to be caught later. Procedures varied - they would be sometimes marked and released on the spot, or transported in boats up river to be marked in a meadow all at one time. This part of the swan-hopping seems to have been a good two to three hours of "messaging about in boats", and there are reports of a macebearer and a police officer falling in the river; mention of "a little splashing and sprinkling, of which the ladies, by sheer accident, obtained rather more than their share"; and a report of a worthy Alderman's beaver hat coming to grief by coming into contact with a weeping willow.

The method of marking the swans was to use a sharp steel punch to perforate a small hole in the web of the left foot. As this could heal over, it was necessary to catch all the birds each year to see if re-marking was needed. The perforating was done by the Beadle one year, and another time the Mayor marked the first swan. The birds were also pinioned, to ensure their remaining in Stratford.

Afterwards there was a picnic on the riverbank of bread, cheese and onion, with beer or whiskey for the men, and sherry for the ladies. This was followed by a leisurely row downstream to Stratford.

Although no definite numbers are given, there seems to have been ten to twenty swans on the river at this time. Throughout the 1870's Stratford Corporation was very proud of its swans and its swan-hopping, with newspaper articles referring to time-honoured customs and ancient ceremonies remaining as a local institution, and at pains to point out that the Stratford Corporation was one of only a few bodies with the privilege of marking their own birds. However, interest diminished gradually through the 1880's, until by 1891 the old custom of swan-hopping was described as having fallen into disuse.

Note: This ceremony was revived on the 18th May 1996 for the 800th Anniversary celebrations.