Swan-upping: a royal tradition

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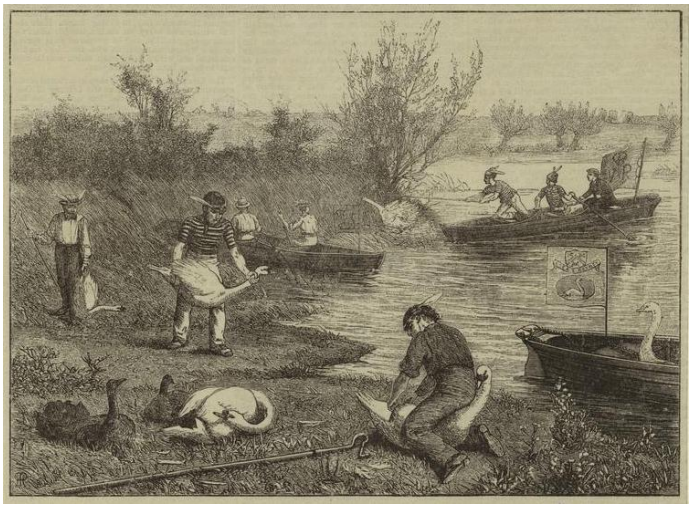
On a balmy summer's day, what could be more quintessentially English than a picnic on a riverbank as mute swans drift past?

But have you ever stopped to wonder to whom those swans belong, or how many there are?



Swan-upping on the River Thames. The skiffs belonging to the queen flying the Dyers' Company and Vintners' Company flags. The crews, sporting swan feathers in their hats, are catching the birds by the neck with swan hooks and immobilising them in the boats by tying their feet behind their backs. Marking – or as shown here, pinioning – of both adult and immature birds is carried out on the bank.

Perhaps you have a hazy recollection that all swans belong to the monarch, or assume they are wild birds and therefore no one's property. Mute swans are a regal bird, both in terms of appearance and heritage, and indeed, in the past, swan ownership required the consent of the Crown.

The granting of a licence to keep swans was an important way for the king (or queen) to bestow honour on a person. It was a royal stamp of approval in times when to be in royal favour had real monetary value that could be traded on – and swans were high value livestock, because no self-respecting medieval or Tudor banquet was complete without swan on the menu. The swan is Britain's largest bird, with cobs weighing up to 12kg, which makes quite a culinary impact.

First mentioned as royal birds in 1186, in historical context it was around this time the Catholic Church got twitchy about paganism and demonised cats as the devil’s familiars.

Swans were mentioned as food in 1249 and, by the mid-14th century, swans were the ultimate in luxury food. Indeed, a swan cost 10 times that of a goose and four times that of a pheasant. And if the thought of eating swan strikes you as decadent, they were removed from the menu of banquets for the Worshipful Company of Dyers as recently as 1984.

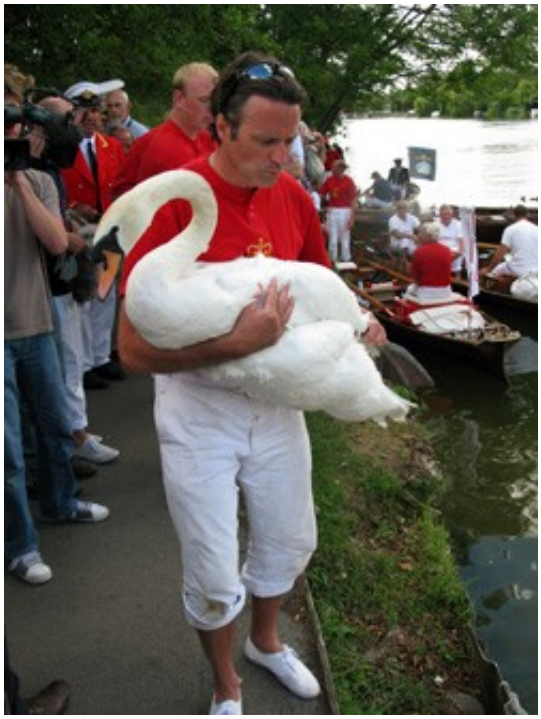
Claiming ownership

In previous centuries, while the Crown nominally owned all swans on open water, noble families claimed ownership of the swans on their estates. Of course, since swans were a valuable commodity, with a habit of moving around, the monarchy devised a system of marks to prevent feuds over ownership.

This involved marking the birds’ beaks with a code or device – the same idea as a hallmark on gold or silver. A registry of marks was established, and between 1450 and 1600, around 630 distinct swan marks were recorded in the official register.

Of course, each year, new cygnets hatched. These birds were claimed and marked, which led to the tradition of swan-upping. In case you thought it was a quaint, but extinct, custom, think again – it happens to this day on the River Thames, usually towards the third week of July when the season’s cygnets are too young to escape and the adults are moulting and less likely to fly away.

Swan-upping



Swan upping at Henley by Bill Tyne, via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0).

What has changed is the reason behind swan-upping. Originally it was to prove ownership, but in the modern era it is to take a census of the Queen's birds and check their health. Our Queen, Elizabeth II, retains the right to own all mute swans in open water; however, she only exercises this on certain stretches of the Thames and selected tributaries.

To this day there is an official Queen's swan warden (from the University of Oxford's zoology department) and also official Queen's swan markers who hail from the Dyers' and Vintners' livery companies – the former company being granted a special swan charter in 1473.

During modern swan-upping, the swan warden and six skiffs (boats) of swan markers row along the Thames on the lookout for birds. They then circle around them with the traditional cry of "all up!" as they ship oars. The swans are caught, counted, inspected, tagged and released.

If the idea of a swan census seems a little eccentric, then it shouldn't because it plays an important role it detecting when there is a problem with disease or environmental factors that could decimate the population – and it happens.

Swan numbers

In 1496, the Venetian ambassador wrote: *"A beautiful thing to behold, one or two thousand swans upon the River Thames."*

Contrast this with the swan-upping of 1985 when there were only seven pairs of birds. The principal reason was swans ingesting lead fishing weights left behind by anglers. The swan's long neck allows it to sift silt in deeper water, thus making it more prone to ingesting lead than shorter neck species such as geese or ducks.
This severe decline in swan numbers helped prompt legislation banning lead fishing weights and, by 2006, the population was recovering, with 28 pairs of swans recorded.

But angling is not the only reason for swan mortality. In 2011 to 2012 deaths also occurred from duck virus enteritis, nest flooding, airgun injuries and dog attacks. Another unpalatable cause was attacks by hooligans and youths.

Perhaps we should take a lesson from history, because in 1895 the punishment for injuring a swan was seven years' hard labour. Henry VIII, however, a man who knew how to intimidate, decreed stealing a swan's egg was punishable by imprisonment for a year (and Tudor prison was grim indeed) and a fine "according to the King's will".

Banquets aside, things weren't always rosy for the swan population. In 1769 fire took hold of a warehouse on St Paul's Wharf of the Thames. Blazing oil spilled out across the water and an eyewitness recorded it "caused a mortality amongst the swans, destroying a prodigious number".

As for marking the swans, thankfully, the custom of making marks on the beaks has long since gone. In 1878 (the same year Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated the first telephone to Queen Victoria) the RSPCA sought to change things. It brought a case against three swan-uppers for the cruel practice of marking beaks.

While the need to identify birds was acknowledged, a different method was proposed. Unfortunately, the first efforts ended badly. They trialled an ivory band around the bird's neck, but the prototype was too tight; the bird couldn't feed and nearly starved to death.

The RSPCA was also against the practice of pinioning wings, describing it as "ancient and time-honoured brutality".

Its angst was totally justified because in 1902, during a harsh winter, parts of the Thames froze and the swans, being unable to fly, could not seek food elsewhere and starved.

Last, but not least, did you know the collective term for a group of swans is a game?

One of the earliest mentions of this comes from the last will and testament of William Romsey in 1554: *"My game of swans to remain to Elizabeth, my wife, during her life."*

Or, alternatively, it was mentioned more graphically by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which reads: *"A game of swans flew there, and the water and the shore beneath were*

fouled with their green-white slime.”