

## Item 77.55

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### Control of vermin after the repeal of the 1566 Act in 1861.

After the repeal of the Act in 1861, and the role of the churchwardens in vermin control came to an end, the destruction of sparrows was in some places undertaken by voluntary organisations. Beckwith noted that the Wirral Farmers Club paid  $\frac{1}{4}^d$  to  $\frac{1}{2}^d$  for sparrows' heads during 1887-92 and that had resulted in the slaughter of 70,000 birds. He made no mention of any such clubs in Shropshire, which suggests, either, they were so few and of so low profile they had not come to his attention, or there were none. Unfortunately Beckwith died prematurely in 1892 so his review of the birds of Shropshire was never completed.<sup>99</sup> Plymley noted that there were no agricultural societies in the county of any standing in 1813 though one had recently been formed at Market Drayton and another at Shifnal. Both have since disbanded, in the case of Market Drayton no minute books have survived but a minute book for The Shifnal District Agricultural Improvement Society has but tantalisingly for only three years. They formed a Sparrow Club that gave prizes for destroying sparrows, in 1892/3 1820 were killed and in 1894 awards were made for killing an unspecified number.<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately these appear to be the only years for which any minutes have survived, of a society that was founded in 1800. It was still active in 1895 as the Shrewsbury Chronicle of 28<sup>th</sup> June reported that it had made awards for the killing of for 3,636 sparrows. These are the only known records of a sparrow club in the county.

### Control in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

The destruction of sparrows in England and Wales continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century encouraged by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries who published a leaflet in 1908 urging the formation of sparrow clubs. The Board recorded that a club in Kent with 20 working members over three seasons had killed 28,000 sparrows and more than 16,000 rats, in quite a small area, *'with useful effect'*.<sup>101</sup> A likely response to this initiative occurs in the Church Stretton and Ludlow Advertiser of 14<sup>th</sup> October 1909 where it reported that the Wenlock Farmers' Association would pay of 2d per dozen for sparrows heads delivered to them before the Lady Day. To date this is the only known response to the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries leaflet in Shropshire. In other counties clubs were formed and continued the onslaught of sparrows well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, indeed what is thought to be the last club, the Stone Street Sparrow Club in Kent, was not wound up until 2003.<sup>102</sup>

Attempts to control sparrows and other vermin were made again during the First World War. An estimate made then claimed that the minimum annual losses to crops in Shropshire caused by sparrows amounted to £54,822 and that *'powers should be given to parish councils to deal with this matter'* and for them to *'pay out of the rates for the destruction of sparrows as the loss from this pest to all occupiers of land and gardens is very extensive and real'*.<sup>103</sup> The suggestion appears to have fallen on deaf ears as no records of any payments made have been found. The only other mention of sparrows was in 1915, which again referred to the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries earlier leaflet of 1908 encouraging the setting up sparrow clubs. In other counties the destruction of sparrows was pursued, in Hertfordshire, for example, in 1917-18, 40,585 fledged sparrows, 8,670 fledglings and 19,216 eggs were destroyed. Other counties however were not convinced and considered that the destruction of sparrows would lead to a dramatic rise in insect pests.<sup>104</sup> It is possible that this was the view held by some Shropshire parish councils and hence they took no action.

The Salop County Council made a further attempt to encourage the formation of sparrow clubs in 1933 though this initiative did not appear to have the full support of everyone and the farming correspondent of the Shrewsbury Chronicle, for example was more concerned about controlling starlings and wood pigeons.<sup>105</sup> The Salop County Council in

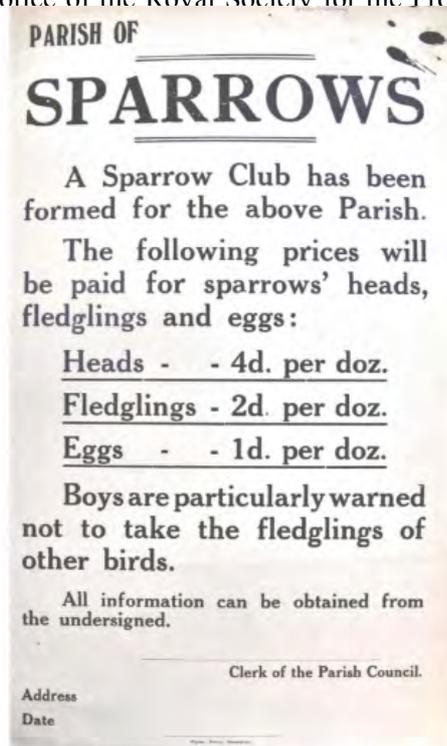
March, 1933, wrote to all the parish councils, expressing their concern at the great amount of damage done to crops by sparrows and urging them to set up sparrow clubs and suggesting that the financing could be raised from *'all those sufferers, to subscribe a definite sum, in proportion to the amount of damage they are likely to suffer'* which sounds easy but would be a difficult concept to agree upon and administer.<sup>106</sup> Documents from 56 civil parishes have been deposited in the Shropshire Archives and of these 13 have no minutes for 1933, 27 make no reference to the County's letter, 10 decided to let the matter 'lie on the table'. Shifnal considered the damage had already been done for 1933 and proposed to reconsider the matter the following year but this did not happen.<sup>107</sup> Clive felt it was a matter for the Farmers' Union and that it should be addressed to them.<sup>108</sup> Two urged the formation of clubs; Conover by writing to the local landowners suggesting they destroy sparrows' eggs while Worfield decided to propose the formation of a sparrow club through the good offices of the parish magazine. Only three (5%) responded directly, Tibberton and Cherrington bought a net while Cheswardine and Wem appear to have formed clubs. Cheswardine parish council wrote to the county council asking what other parish councils had done but no reply was minuted. The clerk also wrote to a Mr Logan requesting the return of the sparrow net he had borrowed so it seems that someone had been catching sparrows before the receipt of county council's letter. Cheswardine made arrangements to accept and make payments for eggs, fledglings and heads of sparrows.<sup>109</sup> The minutes for 1935 and 1936 record that the sparrow catching was left to Mr Swinnerton but no mention was made of numbers caught or costs involved or how the money was raised. Sparrows are not mentioned after 1936.

Wem Rural Parish Council also appear to have set up a sparrow club though its fate, if they did, is a mystery, as no records of its activities or financing have been found. Walkers, a Shrewsbury printer, produced a poster advertising the rewards for the destruction of house sparrows, namely, 4d for the heads of a dozen sparrows; 2d for a dozen fledglings and 1d for a dozen eggs, see below.<sup>110</sup> At the head of the poster a space was left for the name of the parish to be inserted so it would appear that the printers, perhaps at the behest of the county council, were expecting that the parish councils would form sparrow clubs. The intention of Wem to form a sparrow club

came to the notice of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and they wrote to Wem Rural encouraged to steal l *ugly fashion they lik who is not actively k bird against which ; even warblers, both rewarded.<sup>111</sup> Examii showed no payment sparrow club in 193 insufficient local far. damage they are like*

After the let the years immediat question of the crop Committee urged tra Rabbits and woodp appointed to overse the farmers responde is not known as no r

Sparrows w Britain up to the First World War and even later, though no evidence has been found for this in Shropshire. A sparrow pie containing 100 sparrows was served on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1967 at the



Firstly that boys should not be *nests and destroy them in any* quoted John Ruskin, that *'He se sparrow was the only small case that hedge sparrows and are indiscriminately killed and es for the years 1933 to 35 ; therefore if Wem did form a is of the RSPB or there were in proportion to the amount of*

ouncil took no further action in k of Second World War the n 1941 the Salop Agricultural re urged to buy and use them. he rabbit officers, who were use of sparrow traps.<sup>113</sup> How ad on the sparrow population

was a common rural dish in

Rose Inn, Colchester, perhaps to the members of one of the few remaining sparrows clubs. Its popularity as a food may have been enhanced by the belief that it was an aphrodisiac.<sup>114</sup>

The favoured means of catching sparrows appears to have been by setting up nets over the roost after the birds had settled in for the night and then flushing the birds into the net by beating the roost with sticks. Baited drop nets were also used as well as birdlime smeared on twigs to which the birds stuck when they perched. Birdlime was prepared from boiled, pounded and fermented holly bark mixed with nut oil.<sup>115</sup> In Victorian times the use of guns became more widespread and by 1850 poisons consisting of wheat seed soaked in arsenic were used in Hampshire resulting in the unintended deaths of partridges and some concern that the poisoned birds were being eaten.<sup>116</sup> Guns were used in High Erroll in 1733 to shoot birds for which the shot cost 4s 6d, guns however were used much earlier than this, for example, in 1599 in Ditton Priors. Other more humane methods were tried, one such recipe of 1777 was designed to repel sparrows and was based on asafetida, exuded from the roots of *Ferula scorodosma* (common name, devil's dung) This was mixed with hog lard and flowers of brimstone to form 'a thin liquid when warmed over the fire' and applied to large feathers, which were tied to a string and hung over the crops to be protected. Asafetida, as the common name implies, has an especially foul and disgusting smell and one wonders if pervading the air with such a vile odour would have negated any benefits.<sup>117</sup> To sum up it would seem that despite the large numbers of sparrows that were killed the Shropshire sparrow population was little affected. There were too few parishes involved in the cull and any local benefits to those parishes that took part would have been lost by recruitment of birds from the neighbouring non-culling parishes. Despite the early 19<sup>th</sup> century attempts by some parishes to control sparrows by the end of the century the sparrows were still 'most abundant' in Shropshire<sup>118</sup> and were judged by the authors of the Victoria County History to be 'infinitely too numerous and a pest'.<sup>119</sup> It is ironic that now, at a time when no particular effort is being made to destroy house sparrows, they are in serious decline.

In 1933 the Shrewsbury Chronicle reported that starlings and woodpigeons were of greater concern than house sparrows. A view held by the Wenlock Farmers Club as early as 1843 who thought the crow family did more harm than good, while house sparrow, chaffinches and the redpolls did both harm and good. Surprisingly they considered the tits to be very destructive though it was acknowledged that they consumed many grubs and caterpillars. The woodpigeon however was adjudged to be, by far, the most injurious and it was recommended that all landowners request their keepers to use every means to destroy them.<sup>120</sup>

There are a number of reference to vermin in the minutes of the Agricultural Committee of the Salop County Council formed during the First World War though they give no data as to the number of animals killed rather they record the complaints received that rabbits and rooks, in particular, were not being controlled by the complainants' neighbours.<sup>121</sup> The Committee responded by referring the complaints to the local parish council or to the local farmer/landowner. As the war progressed the action became firmer and in some cases trappers were sent in if the farmer/landowner failed to take adequate action. Woodpigeons, pheasants and starlings also get a mention as well as rats but the prime concerns were rabbits and rooks. Rabbits could be very destructive; a farm in Upper Grimmer, Minsterley, had 4 acres of wheat and 7 acres of oats almost ruined by rabbits coming from a neighbour's wood. The owner of the wood was asked to exterminate the rabbits, but whether he did or not is not recorded The method proposed to deal with rooks was to shoot them systematically especially before the breeding season while in the case of woodpigeons it was recommended that shoots should be held every Thursday afternoon and be held simultaneously with shoots in neighbouring counties as this would give the woodpigeons no refuge to escape to. Similar action was proposed for pheasants and in 1918 an inter-county coordinated pheasant shoot was arranged for every day in the week beginning 10<sup>th</sup> February and every Thursday for the rest of the month. However permission was refused to shoot cock pheasants after February presumably to maintain the stocks.

### **Abstracts from the Church Stretton and Ludlow Advertiser (ex Alan Brisbane)**

14.5.1903 Editorial on the sparrow plague. Not only should sparrows be destroyed in the villages and hamlets but attention is needed in every isolated farmyard as well

14.10.1903 Wenlock Farmers' Association offering 2d per dozen for sparrows' heads delivered to them before Lady Day.

11.5.1933 Report on meeting of Salop CC. It was announced that owing to the enormous damage wrought by sparrows on farms and in gardens steps should be taken to form clubs to destroy them and rewards should be offered for the heads and eggs of sparrows.

10.3.1910 Debenham Sparrow Club, Suffolk, last year paid for 14,081 sparrows and 6,292 eggs.

12.2.1910 Haywards Heath Horticultural Society offered prizes for the greatest number of queen wasps caught.

15.6.1911 Marden, Kent paid 1d each for 1200 queen wasps killed. The money was accepted as a deposit in the children's' school savings accounts, though this did not appear to be done in Shropshire.

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2012

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