

Chapter 12

The Estate Game Shoots.

A lot of these large estates used to have game shoots and Tawstock was no exception. I can remember a Mr Robert Shapland who lived at Smemington. He was the head game keeper for the Wrey Estate for many years, married with a family of three sons and one daughter, Harry, Jack, Bob and Dorothy. All the sons were game keepers on the estate in their younger days.

One day I had a little chat with Jack and his wife in their home at New Bridge. I felt very privileged, as they told me quite a lot about the game keepers job in those far off days. He said his father Robert came to Tawstock as a game keeper from Shirwell, to be game keeper for Sir Robert Bouchier Sherard Wrey in the late 1800's or early 1900's.

Then in 1907 Sir Bouchier let the shooting rights to Mr Paton who lived at Newton Cross House, Newton Tracey for a period of 10 years. Mr Shapland was employed as head game keeper the same as he had been for the Wreys. Mr Paton was a very nice man Jack told me. After this in 1917, The Wreys let Tawstock Court Mansion and all the shooting, sporting and fishing rights to Mr Basil Peto for a period of 21 years 1917 - 1938. He became the Conservative Member of Parliament and later became Sir Basil Peto. In 1938 a Colonel Mac.Phearson of Bideford I think rented the shooting for a few years then it all stopped during the war years.

Jack said we all went to school at Tawstock. Then as we boys left school we would help father and learn the art of good game keeping. As they grew up they were able to take on more of the responsibility of rearing the pheasants, leaving father to do more of the organizing of the shoots and easier jobs.

It was very interesting for me to listen to Jack telling me about the years work as a game keeper. In the early spring they would put down wire cages in the woods with food in the cage to attract the pheasants into the cages to be caught for breeding stock. Usually a breeding pen would consist of 8 hen birds and 1 cock bird. They would be put into wire netting pens for breeding the next seasons pheasants. On average a pheasant would lay about 25 - 30 eggs each. The eggs would be collected daily, sometimes he said you would come across a nest of pheasants eggs in the woods with as many as 30 eggs. These would be picked up and hatched out in the hatchery under broody hens, as the foxes would probably have the eggs in the wood.

Then we would set up rows of hen coops in the field put moss or chopped hay in the coops to form a nest. The eggs would be set under broody hens to hatch. By rearing about 2000 young pheasants a year meant they had to have something like 80 - 100 broody hens. A broody hen was not always readily available at the right time.