The Heronries of Somerset.

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"GAME of Heronsewes. Also there were vewed at this present Survey certayne Heronsewes, which have allwayes used to brede there, to the nombre of iiii."

In these words the Surveyors appointed by King Henry VIII to take stock of the "Landes, Woods, Waters, Games of Fesauntes, Games of Suannes, Heronsewes, and all other possessions . . . apperteyning unto the late atteyned Monasterye of Glastonbury," give us a glimpse, albeit only a glimpse, of a Somerset heronry of the XVI Century.

The extract is taken from the Survey Roll of the Glastonbury Abbey properties under the heading of "The Mannour of Mere,"[1] in the woods attached to which Manor, two in number, of five and four acres in extent respectively, the heronry was situated. The date of the Survey is not given, but as the report refers to the late Abbot, who was hanged in 1539, it was probably made, or at least commenced, in that year, and Meare seems to have been one of the first properties visited.

The phraseology of the extract above given leaves us some-

1. Peter Langtoft's Chronicle . . . By Thomas Hearne. To which are added . . . "A Roll concerning Glastonbury Abbey, etc.," 1725, Vol. II, pp. 343, 346–7. *See* also Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum*, new edit., 1846, Vol. I, p. 11; and *The Glastonbury Lake Village*, I, 42.

I am indebted to the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt for calling my attention to the existence of this record.

what in doubt as to whether the number iiii refers to the number of 'games' or to that of birds only. If the latter were the case, which the wording suggests, the heronry was a remarkably small one, especially considering its situation in a district so eminently suited to the birds' habits, close to Meare Pool,[1] at that time five miles in circumference and teeming with fish.

We are not however told the time of the year at which the heronsewes were 'vewed,' and that might have made an appreciable difference in the count.

But whatever the size the Meare heronry was, it has long since vanished, and left no record behind it beyond that quoted above.

Negatively also the Glastonbury Survey Roll has a certain interest, for in not one of the other numerous and widely-spread properties described therein is any mention made of 'heronsewes,' as assuredly there would have been had any such existed. We are therefore justified in concluding that Meare was the only place within the jurisdiction of the Abbot of Glastonbury, at which a heronry existed at the time of the dissolution of the monastery.

The Meare heronry was contemporaneous with the palmy days of falconry, when this fashionable sport was assiduously followed by king and nobles, and when in order to provide quarry for the lordly falcon, herons were carefully preserved, and severe penalties were enacted both for killing the birds themselves and for the taking of their eggs.

But beyond their use for sporting purposes these birds were valued also for the table, and 'heronsewes' figured in the bill of fare at all great feasts. Probably it was as much for the latter purpose as the former that the abbots of Glastonbury preserved their heronry; and it was for this purpose also that heronries were valued after the great decline in the practice of falconry, which set in more particularly after the great Civil War, had caused them to be in little demand for sporting purposes.

1. *See* Speed's map reproduced in *The Glastonbury Lake Village*, vol. i, fig. 2, p. 43.

Willughby indeed in his work on Ornithology,[1] referring to English heronries, says that " the owners make yearly a good profit of the young " showing that they were still at that time in good demand for the table.

It is a far cry from the middle of the XVI Century to the beginning of the XIX, but I can find no reference to any other Somerset heronry until the time of Montagu, who in the Supplement to his well known *Ornithological Dictionary* (1813) mentions the fact of a heronry existing at Pixton, the seat of Lord Carnarvon ; whilst Rutter in 1829 called attention to the Brockley heronry.

For many years after the latter date these two were the only heronries known to exist in the county, and they are alluded to by all subsequent writers upon Somerset birds, but these writers were for the most part content merely to chronicle the existence of these heronries without giving any details concerning them, so that the information we possess with respect to their former status is very meagre.

It was not until 1872 that any further addition was made to the list, but in that year J. E. Harting recorded a heronry as existing at Knowle, near Dunster ; whilst in 1883 C. Smith published for the first time an account of the Halswell Park heronry.

The number was raised to five in 1893 by the Rev. Murray A. Mathew, by the inclusion of the Mells Park heronry in his List of the Birds of Somerset, and at that figure it has remained ever since, the same five heronries being enumerated by the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt, the latest writer on the subject, in his article on Birds in the *Victoria County History of Somerset*, vol. I, 1906 ; and some details in respect to these heronries were given by the same author in his " Notes on Heronries " (*Zoologist*, 1908, pp. 452–3).

To this number I am now able to add a sixth, as a large heronry is located in the Somerton Erleigh woods, near Somerton. The existence of this heronry was unknown to the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt at the time he published his ' Notes,' but it having subsequently come to his knowledge that herons bred

1. *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby*, 1678, p. 278.

in the Kingsdon woods (which adjoin Somerton Erleigh woods) he was good enough to inform me of the fact.

This makes in all six heronries which exist, or have till lately existed, in the county, located respectively at, Brockley Park, near Bristol ; Pixton, Dulverton ; Halswell Park, near Bridgwater ; Somerton Erleigh, near Somerton ; Knowle, near Dunster ; and Mells Park, near Frome. The two last-named however are now extinct, so that there are at the present time only four heronries in the county actually occupied, so far as I have been able to ascertain.[1]

Having been enabled through the courtesy of the proprietors or tenants of the different properties on which these heronries are situated to visit all those at present in existence, I propose now to give a short account of each of them, together with such details of their histories as I have been able to gather. I am including in this account the two recently extinct ones as it is only of late years that these sites have ceased to be occupied, and in the case of one of them—that at Mells Park—there is reason to hope that the birds may re-establish themselves.

Brockley Park Heronry.

Although no records are extant with respect to the early history of this heronry, it is undoubtedly a very old one, being one of the two oldest heronries in the county. The park in which it is situated, the seat of the Smyth-Pigott family, has been in existence for many centuries, and herons are known to have been located there for at least one or two hundred years.

The earliest reference to this heronry that I have been able to find is contained in the pages of Rutter, who in his description of Brockley Hall given in his well known work[2] states that

1. Some years ago a small heronry existed in a plantation on Cossington Manor estate near Bridgwater, and the birds appear to have bred there for many years. I have been unable to obtain any details with respect to this heronry, but Mr. Broderip, the owner of the property, has informed me that he has not seen the birds about for some years, so that presumably the heronry is no longer in existence.

2. *Delineations of the North Western Division of the County of Somerset*, by John Rutter, 1829, p. 30.

the park " contains an ancient Heronry, an object now become rare, but formerly much coveted by English gentlemen for the sport afforded by these birds in the favourite amusement of hawking." As in the year 1829 the heronry was then spoken of as an ' ancient ' one, it may reasonably be inferred that at that time it had been in existence for quite a hundred years, and probably for a much longer period, but for how much longer can only be matter of speculation.

Although the existence of this heronry has been known since the time of Rutter, no writer upon Somerset birds during the past century, made any attempt to estimate the size of the colony, and it was not until 1908 when the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt published his ' Notes '[1] that any attempt at enumeration was made, the number occupying the site in that year being given at about ten pairs of birds.

On April 4th, 1917, through the kindness of Mrs. Smyth-Pigott I paid a visit to this heronry. It is situated in the park on a gently sloping hill-side, and the nests were all placed in tall deciduous trees, ash, oak, etc., the tops of some of which were more or less dead. The nests were all high up in the trees, near the top, or almost at the very summit. The heronry was mixed up with a rookery of considerable size, which made it rather difficult to count the number of nests of the herons, for though these were usually readily differentiated from those of the rooks by their bulk and comparative flatness, there were cases in which, as seen from below, it was not possible to decide with certainty. The rooks however mainly congregated in the trees near the bottom of the hill, whilst the herons patronised more the trees on the higher slope ; but there was no marked line of demarcation between them, for in a few cases there were herons' nests (from one or two of which I saw the birds fly) situated right amongst those of the rooks, whilst on the other hand a few odd rooks' nests occupied trees on the higher ground amongst the herons. Some of the herons' nests were single ones placed in isolated trees, but it was more usual to see two or more in a tree. The number of the nests however did not correspond with the

1. *Loc. cit.*

number of breeding birds for a fair number of them were certainly unoccupied.

On the whole, after making the most careful calculation possible under the circumstances, I estimated the number of occupied nests at from ten to twelve. As in the year 1908 the number of breeding pairs of birds was computed to be about ten, it would appear that the size of this heronry has remained practically stationary during the last ten years.

Pixton Heronry.

Considerable interest attaches to this heronry, not by reason of its size, which is at present comparatively small, but by virtue of its known antiquity and the history connected with it.

As already mentioned Montagu[1] was the first writer who in 1813 called attention to the existence of this heronry, but he merely mentioned the fact of its existence without giving any details concerning it, so that unfortunately no record of its size, at that time, exists. Its authentic history however goes back far beyond the above date.

Dr. Sydenham of Dulverton, a member of the old Sydenham family which has been established in the county for several centuries, has most obligingly furnished me with some details of the history of this heronry.

It originally existed at Combe, on the property of the Sydenham family, about a mile to the south of Dulverton. Dr. Sydenham's father told him that he had heard his grandfather say, that the heronry existed at Combe when the Sydenhams first acquired the property there by marriage in the year 1545. How much earlier it may have been located there cannot be known, but there appears to have been no break in the continuity of the colony until the year 1790, when in consequence of a number of trees having been cut down on the Combe property in the wood where the herons nested, the birds migrated to Steart wood on the Pixton estate, on the left bank of the Barle, about a mile and a quarter south-east of Dulverton, and about a mile distant from Combe.

1. *Supplement to the Ornithological Dictionary*, by George Montagu, 1813.

There they remained until the year 1831 or thereabouts, when some of the trees in Steart wood having been felled they shifted their quarters to Allers or Ellars wood, which is situated on the hill-side on the opposite (right) bank of the Barle, and therefore nearer to their old birthplace at Combe. The main body indeed of the birds so migrated, but three or four pairs elected to remain in Steart wood where they continued to nest up to about thirty years ago.

When the birds first removed to Allers wood they took up their quarters in the highest part of the wood, but about the year 1890, owing to some of the nesting trees having been blown down in a gale, they shifted further down the hill, towards the middle of the wood, to the position which they now occupy.

When the heronry was located in Steart wood it was the custom for the young to be annually shot by Lord Carnarvon and his friends. Some details of these heron-shooting parties were given by F. J. Snell[1] in his account of the life of Dr. Chas. Palk Collyns, of Dulverton, which were supplied by the latter's son, the late Dr. J. B. Collyns,[2] who also furnished the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt with similar information.[3]

Dr. Chas. Palk Collyns used to join these heron-shooting parties, which took place annually in mid-June, and which appear to have been occasions for festive gatherings. It was the custom to give a bird to each of the shooters, which when skinned, stuffed, and roasted was considered a delicacy. These heron-shooting parties seem to have been discontinued when the birds shifted to Allers wood, the date of which is given in Snell's book[4] as 1831 ; but although no longer molested they have decreased in numbers since that time.

On May 7th, 1917, I visited this heronry, which I was enabled to do through the courtesy of Colonel the Hon. Aubrey Herbert, M.P., who most kindly permitted me to go over his

1. *A Book of Exmoor*, 1903, p. 310.

2. Dr. J. B. Collyns died in 1917, aged 95, so that his memory carried him back to the time when the heronry was located in Steart wood.

3. *Loc. cit.*

4. *Op. cit.*

property, and gave me every facility for inspection of the birds.

The heronry is situated, as before mentioned, in Allers (Ellars) wood, on the right bank of the Barle, about a mile to the south of Dulverton. The wood is a fairly extensive one, on the hill-side sloping towards the river, and consists mainly of coniferous trees. All the nests seen were placed near the top of tall, somewhat slender, spruce fir trees, about the middle of the wood. I was able definitely to locate seven occupied nests, and I saw two or three others, the occupancy of which was doubtful; there might also have been one or two outlying nests which I did not see. Altogether I should say that the size of the colony, at the time of my visit, might be put at about nine pairs of birds. This was probably a lower figure than the average number in the heronry, which was partly explained by the fact that Colonel Herbert reluctantly yielding to the importunities of the fishermen, who considered their interests to be prejudiced by the birds, had permitted one or two dozen to be killed off during the previous autumn. This year (1918) according to information furnished me, the birds have increased somewhat from what was probably the abnormally low level of 1917, and last season there may have been as many as fifteen nests.

We have but scanty data by which to compare the present figures with those which existed in former times. That the heronry was considerably larger in the first part of the last century, when Lord Carnarvon's shooting parties took annual toll of it, can scarcely be doubted, but Dr. J. B. Collyns' statement[1] that the birds have decreased since then, gives us no definite information as to its magnitude at that time.

Actual figures indeed are not available until 1872, in which year J. E. Harting[2] gave the number as about ten pairs, whilst Blathwayt[3] in 1908 put it at about seven or eight pairs; so that the colony for many years past has apparently been of small dimensions.

1. Snell, *Op. cit.*
2. *Zoologist*, 1872, pp. 3262–3.
3. *Loc. cit.*

The birds are threatened with another danger in the tree-felling that is now in progress in the wood for Government purposes, but this is fortunately at present confined to the larch trees, and the spruce firs in which the birds build are I understand to be spared; but tree-felling in the immediate neighbourhood of the nesting-trees can scarcely fail to have a disturbing effect on the birds.

Threatened indeed from more than one quarter we might be concerned for the safety of this ancient heronry, already reduced to quite modest limits; but fortunately the colony is under the watchful care of a sympathetic owner who values this interesting link with the past, so that there is good reason to hope that it may long continue to survive.

The extinction indeed of a heronry with such a history, were such a calamity to take place, would not merely be a matter of sincere regret to all lovers of birds, but would deprive the county of a most interesting association with olden times.

There can be no doubt that this was one of the ancient heronries, which supplied birds for the renowned sport of falconry, and for an unbroken series of several centuries these birds have reared their young within sight, or almost so, of the waters of the Barle. The descendants of such an ancient race may surely be allowed, within reasonable limits, to live in security amidst the scenes of their ancestors.

Halswell Park Heronry.

This heronry is situated in Halswell Park, the seat of Lord Wharton, to whose kindness in affording me every facility for inspecting it, and for furnishing me with information concerning it, I am greatly indebted.

Cecil Smith was the first person to give any account of this heronry. When that author wrote his 'Birds of Somersetshire' (1869) the existence of this heronry was unknown to him, but in April, 1882, when out hunting he came across some herons nesting in fir trees in the woods at Halswell; and in April of the following year being in the same place again, he more closely investigated this heronry, and saw a good many birds sitting upon their nests, which were all placed at

the top of tall fir trees. From information given him by a farmer who rented the adjoining land, he learned that a few birds had nested there for many years past, but that during the previous two or three years they had increased considerably, and his informant estimated their numbers at that time, at between thirty and forty pairs (*Zoologist*, 1883, p. 221). In an addendum to this communication the Editor of *The Zoologist*, J. E. Harting, stated on the authority of Mr. E. Barham, that the heronry was started about the year 1871, and that in March, 1883, it was computed to number some fifty nests, a higher estimate, it will be observed, than that given by C. Smith.

The date of the starting of the heronry however, above given, is incorrect, as Lord Wharton has informed me that the first pair of herons built in the wood which they now occupy in the year 1856.

In April, 1885, C. Smith again visited the place and saw the herons on their nests; he was told by the keeper that he thought there were not quite so many nests that year as in the previous one, which was attributed to the fact that one or two of the taller trees which the birds had been in the habit of using as look-out places, had been cut down in thinning the plantation (*Zoologist*, 1885, p. 235). The number of pairs breeding in 1901 was given by the Rev. F. L. Blathwayt[1] as between twenty and thirty.

On March 25th, 1918, I made a careful inspection of this heronry, which is situated in a wood known as "The Thickets," at the top of the Deer Park. The wood is a large one consisting of tall mixed deciduous and coniferous trees, the former being mainly beech, but with a sprinkling of oaks, etc., and the latter comprising both Scot's pines and spruce firs. The nests were mostly in the tops of the tall Scot's pines and spruce fir trees, but a fair number of them, roughly about one-third, were placed near the tops of tall, somewhat slender, beech trees. All the nests occurred within a limited area of the wood, and were not scattered generally throughout it. It was possible in this case to make an accurate census of the number

1. *Loc. cit.*

of occupied nests which I put at twenty-one. This is a considerable falling off as compared with former years, as Lord Wharton informed me that about twenty-five years ago the heronry comprised about eighty nests, the reduction in number since that period being attributed partly to the felling of timber, and partly to the destruction of the birds on other properties.

Somerton Erleigh Heronry.

This heronry, which is situated in woods between Kingsdon and Somerton, is now wholly comprised within the Somerton Erleigh property, but it was formerly more diffused, occupying woods on the Kingsdon Manor estate nearer to Kingsdon. These two sets of woods are however conterminous, being only separated by the artificial dividing line of different estates, so that herons nesting anywhere in them may be considered as belonging to the same colony.

I am much indebted to Mr. and Mrs. G. Neal, the owners of Kingsdon Manor, and also to Mr. R. Pretor-Pinney the owner, and Captain G. S. Phipps Hornby the tenant, of Somerton Erleigh, for kindly permitting me to go over their properties, and for affording me every assistance for inspecting this heronry, as well as for furnishing me with information concerning it.

On March 26th, 1918, I visited this heronry, which is by far the largest in the county, being at the time of my visit larger than all the others put together.

The woods in which it is situated occupy an area of, roughly speaking, some 150 acres, and the adjacent Kingsdon woods perhaps 150 more. The woods are situated for the most part on low hills, extending down into a broad shallow dell, in which latter part the herons' nests were concentrated, although there were some on the higher ground. There was a large rookery in these woods which was to a certain extent mixed up with the heronry, some trees containing both herons' and rooks' nests, but in general the rooks' nests were on the higher ground and on the outskirts of the woods, whilst the herons' nests were thickest in the tall trees in and near the centre of the dell. The trees were all deciduous there being no conifers

amongst them, and consisted largely, indeed mainly, of ash, many of which were remarkably fine trees, with a fair sprinkling of beech and a few elms and oaks.

The nests were numerous, many of the trees containing several, and one, a fine old beech tree, as many as nine.

In a heronry of this size it was naturally difficult to make an exact count of the number of occupied nests, and it was especially so in this instance as the birds having been disturbed by the woodmen engaged in felling the trees were in many cases absent from nests which were undoubtedly occupied, but after making the most careful examination possible I estimated the number of occupied nests at from seventy-five to eighty.

It will be apparent therefore what a fine heronry this is or was ; but, alas ! the exigencies of the war had invaded even this peaceful spot, and the insatiable demand for timber had necessitated the demolition of these fine trees, and with them of course the herons' nests situated in them. The destruction of this fine heronry was in active progress at the time of my visit ; many of the trees containing nests were already lying prostrate, and it was lamentable to see recently hatched young birds and broken eggs in various stages of incubation lying on the ground. The trees however were apparently not all going to be felled, and some of the nests doubtless therefore escaped, but the destruction of the best portion of the breeding ground cannot fail to have an injurious effect upon this large and flourishing colony, at any rate for a time.

Fortunately however the surrounding woods are extensive, and the birds will probably diffuse themselves more over them, especially perhaps on the Kingsdon side of the woods.

Of the early history of this heronry as located in the Kingsdon woods nothing definite seems to be known, but according to Mrs. G. Neal's information herons have bred in these woods for a longer period than the oldest inhabitant can remember. As regards its present location in Somerton Erleigh woods we have however more precise details as Mr. Pretor-Pinney has informed me that it was first established there about forty years ago, the herons having migrated there from the Kingsdon woods in consequence of the fir trees on the latter estate, in

which they used to build, having been cut down. What the size of the heronry was at that time does not seem to be exactly known, but twenty years ago it contained about thirty nests, and ten years ago about forty. As this year the number of nests was about eighty, it is clear that this heronry has undergone a substantial increase.

Whether, when the herons migrated to Somerton Erleigh, the Kingsdon woods were entirely deserted I am unable to say, but J. Marsh, the keeper on the Kingsdon Manor property, informed me that during the eight years he had been employed on the estate no herons had bred in the Kingsdon woods except on one occasion, in the spring of 1917. In that year there were three nests in a fine old Scot's pine which was however felled last winter.

Knowle Heronry (near Dunster).

The earliest published reference to this heronry was made by J. E. Harting in 1872, in a paper on "British Heronries."[1] The colony at that time was said to consist of about thirty nests on larch, and to have been in existence for fifteen years, which would put the date of its establishment at 1857.

In 1895 this heronry was still flourishing, as allusion is made to it by D'Urban and Mathew in their list of West Country heronries,[2] at which date it is stated that almost every tree bore one or more nests. Probably the number of occupied nests at that time was not so great as the above statement might seem to indicate; or else there must have been a rapid decline in the number of breeding birds, for only eight years later, in 1903, as I have been informed by G. Hewett, formerly head keeper on the Knowle estate, there were only about six nests.

Between 1903 and 1912 the average number of nests was four, and about the latter date the birds ceased to breed there altogether. They still however remained in the neighbourhood, and last year (1917) three or four pairs nested in a fir

1. *Zoologist*, 1872, p. 3265.
2. *Birds of Devon* (1895), p. 182.

covert on the hill-side only about a quarter of a mile away from their former quarters. They did not however nest there this year (1918), for when I visited the spot last April, there were no birds to be seen. This was probably due to disturbance by timber felling on the hill-side immediately adjoining the fir covert, though the fir trees themselves were untouched.

The old heronry was situated on a small isolated wooded hill, about 300 feet in height, at the back, or north side, of Knowle House. Occupying as it did a more or less isolated position, with higher ground all round, it was exceptionally well placed for observation, and must when in its prime have presented a picturesque appearance, as D'Urban and Mathew pointed out.[1] The trees which clothe the hill are, or lately were (for at the time of my visit last spring they were in process of demolition) mostly of a deciduous character, but about the top was a scattered cluster of tall, oldish, Scot's pine trees, and it was in these trees that the herons used to nest. It was indeed the cutting down of some of these old Scot's pines about six years ago that caused the birds to forsake the place altogether. As it appears probable that the trees on this hill will be completely demolished, this heronry may be regarded as finally extinct.

Mells Park Heronry.

This heronry is included in the Rev. M. A. Mathew's "Revised List of the Birds of Somerset,"[2] which is the first printed reference to it.

I am much indebted to Sir J. F. F. Horner, the owner of Mells Park, for obligingly furnishing me with details with respect to this heronry, which formerly existed in Melcombe wood, within the precincts of the park.

This is a large wood of 120 acres, and it is situated about 800 yards from the nearest point of the principal pond on the estate.

1. *Op. cit.*
2. *Proc. Som. Arch. & Nat. Hist. Soc.*, XXXIX, ii, 119.

As long as Sir John Horner can remember anything he can recollect herons coming and fishing in the ponds and streams, where they were never molested, but never nesting anywhere about, the nearest heronry being the well known one at Longleat, in Wilts, eight miles off.

In 1891 however a pair built in Melcombe wood for the first time, the nest being in one of some oldish Scot's fir trees, which are still standing there. In 1892 there were two nests and in 1893 five ; and that was the largest number ever noted, so that the heronry was always a small one.

The birds continued to nest in this wood until about the year 1906 when they abandoned the site, apparently, in part at any rate, as a result of disturbance from the cutting of the coppice wood in the neighbourhood of the colony, although the trees in which the birds nested were left untouched.

From 1907 to 1917 Mells Park was let to a tenant who was a great fisherman, and who did his best to keep the birds away from the place.

An interesting fact mentioned by Sir John Horner, is that whereas before the birds nested in Mells Park they were always seen about fishing in the ponds, after they built there they were very seldom seen at the ponds, and the keepers said they always flew away from the wood early in the morning, and came back at night ; but after they left off nesting there, they used to come and fish again, as was formerly their custom, and they do so still.

It is pleasing to know that the birds have in Sir John Horner a staunch friend, and that should they ever return to Melcombe wood, they will be afforded every encouragement and protection.

I may add that an attempt at the establishment of a new heronry was made in the spring of 1913 on Col. J. W. Gifford's property at Chard. There were two nests in one of the woods in that year, Col. Gifford informed me, and the birds apparently reared their young. He was good enough to take me through the wood in question, which is situated near Chard reservoir, and consists mainly of coniferous trees, including some tall, oldish, Scot's pines. The site appeared a very suitable one

for the birds, but they did not continue to occupy it, and have not nested there since the year named.

Reviewing the accounts given above the outstanding fact which the figures lead up to, is, that the heron is diminishing as a breeding species in the county. Of existing, or recently existing heronries, two, those at Knowle and Mells are now extinct. Brockley appears to be stationary ; Pixton although diminished as regards former times has probably not varied much in recent years ; whilst Halswell contains little more than one-fourth of the numbers which it had in its most prosperous days.

The only heronry which has definitely increased in size is the Somerton Erleigh one, and here the increase appears to have been substantial, but even allowing a liberal estimate for the increase in this case, this would be far from making good the known losses in other places.

It is probable indeed that at the present time there are not more than about 126 breeding pairs of birds in the whole of the county.

There can be no question as to the main cause of this decrease. The predilection of the birds for fish is well known, so that the ban of the angler is upon them, and in fishing districts they get ruthlessly destroyed whenever opportunity offers. Indeed were it not for the protection afforded them by the owners of several private estates, within the precincts of which they breed, the birds would probably ere this have become extinct in the county.

That herons feed largely upon fish, and, at times, especially in droughty seasons when the streams are low, may do considerable harm to fisheries, cannot be denied, but the damage that they do has been exaggerated. Even their liking for fish is not without its advantages, as they consume useless and harmful fish, such as pike, equally with the trout upon which anglers set such store, and to that extent may be regarded as the friends of the fisherman. Moreover amongst fish they prey largely upon eels, a repast which no fly-fisher surely would grudge them.

Calculations based on the number of fish found in a heron's

crop multiplied by the number of days in the year, give an altogether erroneous presentation of the subject, for the birds feed on many other things besides fish. Frogs, newts, mice, water-voles and crustaceans, enter largely into their bill of fare, whilst the young of water-fowl, such as coots and moor-hens, are not unfrequently taken.

Furthermore, herons obtain a considerable portion of their subsistence on the sea-shore, where they may often be seen looking for food at the mouths of rivers and estuaries, and amongst the rock pools, where they are certainly doing no harm to the fisheries.

Altogether it may be said that though the bird is by no means guiltless of poaching on the preserves of the fisherman, he is not so black a character as he has been painted.

It would indeed be a lamentable thing, if a too great devotion to the cult of fishing, were to banish this interesting bird from our midst. It is the sole British resident representative of a beautiful family of birds widely spread over the surface of the globe, one which gives keen delight alike to the ornithologist, and to the lover of nature generally, and if the bird were once lost it could hardly be re-established. Not, indeed, that there is any immediate danger of this, but we have to recognise the fact that a diminution has set in, and the hostile influences at work will tend to accentuate this.

But the birds have another danger to face besides the hostility of the fishermen, and that is the destruction of their breeding grounds. Herons, although much attached to ancient breeding-places, are notoriously sensitive to disturbance; and the felling of trees, even if only in the neighbourhood of their quarters, often causes them to abandon a site altogether.

At the present time the exigencies of the war have caused this factor to become of considerable importance, for however inevitable may be the tree-felling which is now actively in progress, and which is likely to continue on a large scale for some time to come, we must recognise the fact that this is bound to have an inimical effect on the birds.

The number of suitable breeding-sites, affording the requisite security, is even now by no means unlimited, and such

sites, under present conditions, will become more and more restricted.

Birds may survive a good deal of slaughter if they are allowed to breed in security, but no bird can survive the destruction of its breeding-grounds. It is therefore all the more necessary that the available sanctuaries should be carefully preserved. More than ever is it the case that it is to the large landowners that we must look for the preservation of this stately and interesting bird to our county fauna.