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DIARY DATES

Dec 2nd: Mrs Bart's

Christmas Fair, Bathealton

Village Hall, 2.30pm

Dec 2nd: Bingo at Wivelis-

combe Community

Centre, 7.30pm

Dec 5th: Wiveliscombe

and District Floral Art

Club - Christmas Open

Demonstration by Mary

Fielden "The Twelve

Days of Christmas", at

Wiveliscombe Primary

School, 7.00 for 7.30pm.

Tickets £6.50 to include

refreshments, all wel-

come.

Dec 6th: Wiveliscombe

Garden Club - 'Photogra-

phy in the Garden

throughout the seasons'

by Paul Handy, 7.30pm,

Primary School

Dec 8th: Wiveliscombe

Primary School PTFA

Christmas Craft Fair,

6pm-8pm.

Dec 9th: Kittisford Christ-

mas Dinner at

Brookbank, 7.30pm

Dec 10th: Ashbrittle PCC

Christmas Sale in Village

Hall

Dec 20th: Wiveliscombe

Rugby Club Bingo,

7.30pm (NOT 13th)

Dec 21st: Christmas Sing-

along, Appley Pavillion

Jan 2nd: No Wiveliscombe

Garden Club meeting

Jan 21st: The Sun, Cine-

ma Obscura, Wivelis-

combe Primary School,

7.30pm

Feb 6th: Wiveliscombe

Garden Club - 'Creating a

Wildflower Garden' by Dr

Gavin Haig, 7.30pm, Pri-

mary School

The Gamekeeper

EDWARD Thomas, in his poetical works written in the early 1900s, gives us a remarkable sense of the beauty of England's countryside.

He wrote these lines about the South Downs, but the sentiment applies equally well to our Wivey landscape.

"...That is how I should make hills had I to show
One who had not seen them what hills were like..."

If we take the road from Wiveliscombe that goes north to Monksilver, or south to Bathealton and beyond, or west through Waterrow, we find, today, many hills that we would 'make' to delight, say, the unpractised traveller from the flat lands of Holland.

The countryside has evolved over the centuries. But . . . by whose hand has it been made? Was it the city dwellers and planners, or, perhaps, the Rural District Discussion Groups, who formed our vistas? It was not!

It was the farmers and the gamekeepers who secured the legacy that we see around us.

Of the farmers we hear much, but it is not these unsung heroes of Arcadia that concern us now!

It is the gamekeepers of the 21st century to whom

our attention is drawn.

There are some 5,000 in the United Kingdom, and more than 7 million hectares (17.3 million acres) are under their care. This represents an area larger than the combined spread of Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall.

The gamekeeper's primary duty, not surprisingly, is to wildlife - be it bird or quadruped - but this necessarily means that many of his working hours are spent maintaining and improving the habitats that are best suited to his charges.

Not far from Wivey is the Combe Sydenham Shoot. It has its base on the estate, but extends for 3,500 acres (1,416 hectares) and incorporates adjacent forestry land and farmland.

In conversation with Pete Conachie, who is one of four gamekeepers employed to look after the pheasant population, I learned that sporting shoots, such as his, generate an estimated £20 million for the general area of Exmoor. The figure is closer to £400 million for the United Kingdom as a whole. This is a very significant contribution to our rural economy.

Peter's New Year, the new cycle of life in the wild, begins on 1st February, which is the end of the shooting season. The following months are

dedicated to preparing for the next season, which begins on 1st October.

A brief summary of a keeper's year must start in March when wild pheasants, from which are bred the next generation of chicks, are captured. The hens and cocks are collected in the ratio 8:1. It is worth noting that many of these breeding birds will have been among those that were released during the previous summer.

Some 60% of released birds evade the guns, if not the predators, and learn to survive in the wild.

The gamekeeper will care for the hens in the laying pens, watch over their eggs in incubation, and transfer the resulting poults (young birds) to 'release pens'. These pens are open to the sky, but are wire-fenced at ground level to keep out foxes and other predators. This is where the birds are acclimatised, and when they are about six weeks old they will disperse into the wild.

To encourage the young birds remain in the vicinity of the shoot, a gamekeeper will strive to provide an environment where food and shelter are plentiful. He ensures that his charges

have sufficient ground cover for their safety. This may be in the form of kale, or other

suitable growths, that he has planted himself.

The pheasants also favour deciduous woodland. The traditional coppicing of such areas, and the extension of broadleaf plantations over the centuries, has resulted in some of the finest views to be seen in the English countryside.

The keeper's skills provide the space and light needed for the regeneration of the woodlands, and enable the pheasants to find safe roosting places between the forest trees.

The gamekeeper's focus on the environment also provides a favourable habitat for songbirds. These small birds will take a share of the pheasant's winter food, and will thrive in the surroundings created for their larger cousins.

Unfortunately, in the many millions of acres that are not tended by gamekeepers, corvine numbers (the crow, rook, etc.) dominate, and severely limit the songbird populations.

Pete Conachie remarked that "game keeping is a way of life, and the job - in the countryside of Somerset - gives me the best workplace I could ever want".

It is difficult to disagree with him . . .

Simon Turnbull

The Wonderful World of Wiveliscombe (reprinted from issue number one)

A CAT with wings? What? Yes, the Winged Cat of Wiveliscombe, aka Thomas Bessie, was roaming the streets of our town in the 1890s.

Apparently there was nothing extraordinary about his appearance when he was a kitten but as he grew Thomas Bessie developed wings about the size of a pigeon's and covered with fur.

This wondrous beast, who belonged to a local lady, was mentioned in the letters page of The Sunday Times in the 1930s. There was a long correspondence concerning the appearance of winged cats in Spain and a Darwin inspired theory about the evolution of



different varieties of species. Obviously cats were mutating in order to be able to seize their flying prey on the wing.

Thomas Bessie was also featured in the Strand Magazine Vol 18 page 599 where this photograph, taken by Mr G

W French of Wivelis-

combe, was printed. Alison McKinley of Carousal Pig provided the initial material about Thomas Bessie.

What other Wivelis-

combe Wonders are there? This could run and run . . . or fly.

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