

Snippets: Medieval hunting with birds of prey

At last September's meeting, a presentation about the Tinsley Rolls revealed that the lord of Tinsley Manor was obliged to send a bird, possibly a hawk, to Tickhill Castle as payment in kind for rent. This is confirmed in Tom Beastall's book *Tickhill: portrait of an English country town*, page 46, where he notes 'Henry of Tinsley held his land there in return for training a hawk from Michaelmas through the winter receiving 7½d a day from the lord at Tickhill. If his horses died during the training then he was to be compensated at their value agreed at the appraisal before the winter's training began. No doubt the training of a hawk in the hilly acreages of Tinsley was hazardous to horses'. This information was taken from a report by twelve jurors to Humphrey of Waldene in 1320. In 1320 the Constable of Tickhill Castle, which by then was owned by the Crown, was John de Cromwell, a parliamentary peer. It was not unusual for a nobleman as well as the king to ask tenants to take care of hawks as payment in kind for rent. Examples of monarchs doing just this can be found in Patent Rolls (see website <<http://sdr.lib.iowa.edu/patentrolls/>> and put hawk in the search box).



One of the best sources of information about medieval hunting with hawks is Robin S Oggins' book, shown left, *The Kings and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England*, Yale University Press, 2004. The cover illustration is taken from a French rather than an English tapestry c. 1500. Hunting with hawks, and this includes various types of falcons as well as hawks, was a sign of high status in the early medieval period, although by the later Middle Ages a wider range of people took part in this sport. (The main targets of these hunts were cranes, herons and ducks, such as mallard and teal, killed in flight.) The most prized hunting birds were white gyrfalcons imported from Iceland or Scandinavia, Norway in particular, for the king's use. Where such rare birds were not imported it was usual to catch hawks just as they left their nests in May and then painstakingly train them to hunt particular prey, time consuming work which their wealthy owners did not undertake themselves.

The king and the wealthiest nobles had their own mews, specially-built large cages to house and train their birds, with skilled falconers/hawkers in charge. (The original meaning of mews related to housing for birds of prey and only later came to mean stabling for horses.) It would seem that there was no such special facility at Tickhill Castle, hence the birds were farmed out. Monarchs did have mews in their castles at Winchester, Salisbury and Nottingham, for example, as well as in London where a large mews was built between 1274 and 1281 at a cost of £525 at Charing on the site now occupied by the National Gallery. Most of Edward I's birds were kept in London, although three falcons were mewed at York Castle in 1299, the likely result of Edward I spending so much time in the north.

Oggins' book details how the birds were trained then used for hunting, before looking chronologically at this sport from Anglo-Saxon times through monarchs' participation in it from William I to Edward I. Records of hunting with hawks and falcons were much less detailed after Edward I's reign but Oggins points out that English monarchs continued to enjoy the sport into the 17th Century. The final chapter is about falconry in medieval life from the 11th to the 16th centuries. Two aspects are worth noting. First the way in which women participated in flying falcons and hawks at least from the 12th Century. That most remarkable of medieval women, Eleanor of Aquitaine, is depicted on one of her seals (right) holding a flower and a hawk above an orb; another of her seals when Queen of England shows her with a falcon. Other noblewomen also began to have seals showing women holding falcons from this time. While these women might not participate in hunting large game, they enjoyed hunting birds. 'The inferior sex excels in the hunting of birds' wrote John of Salisbury (c1120-1180).

A second category of medieval people who participated in hunting with birds of prey is the clergy, especially bishops whose youthful education as aristocrats included falconry. Geoffrey Plantagenet, illegitimate son of Henry II, continued hawking when he became Archbishop of York. Thomas Becket before his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury was an avid hunter with hawks. After his martyrdom ten miracles involving falcons and hawks were attributed to him. Some priests and monks indulged in hawking, but this was seen by critics as inappropriate secular sport or a 'vain pastime'.

Oggins sums up the appeal of hunting with birds of prey: 'the spectacular nature of the falcon's stoop, the drama and uncertainty of the hawk's hunt, the power of being able to recall a free-flying wild creature and the knowledge that mere practice of the sport was an indicator of membership in the social elite'.

