

The Swan with Two Necks

(Swan-opping on the Thames)

July strollers along the banks of the River Thames above Sunbury-on-Thames in Middlesex may be fortunate enough to observe a half-dozen Thames skiffs, flying special flags and manned by colorfully-costumed men, going by. This small flotilla is carrying out the ancient annual custom of Swan-Upping (or Swan-Hopping, as it is sometimes known), that is, establishing ownership of mute swans on the river and marking

by Mary Reed
Springfield, Illinois

Photo courtesy British Tourist Authority



Her Majesty's Swan-Upper (in foreground) about to mark a cygnet with Her Majesty's mark.

the year's crop of cygnets accordingly, a ceremony which has its roots in what was once considered to be a very great privilege.

Swan Marking and Swan Upping by C. Skilbeck notes that, historically, there is some disagreement as to whether or not the mute swan is indigenous to Britain, some holding that it was introduced to the country (perhaps from Cyprus) during the reign of Richard I (1175-1199). The mute swan may be distinguished from the other common British variety, the whistling swan, by its orange beak (which turns redder with age), and the black knobby wattle where the beak joins the head, which is more pronounced in the mute swan than in other species. It is, however, the mute swan which is regarded as the "royal bird," being under the protection of, and the property of, the monarch, a situation dating from the time when swans were, prior to the advent of refrigeration, extremely prized for their contribution of fresh meat to winter larders. They were particularly favored for banquets, and in 1247 Henry III requisitioned forty swans (from six counties, including Dorset, Hampshire and Oxfordshire) for the Christmas feast at Winchester, and two years later he requisitioned a total of 104 swans from ten counties (including Kent and Sussex) and London. Before turkeys were eaten, swans were also very popular for Christmas fare, and at one time Norwich in Norfolk (which maintains a swan pound once used for fattening these birds for table) was famous for its swans. In the *Good Housekeeping Cookery Encyclopedia* (Sphere Books, 1968), the authors give a recipe for cooking cygnets, but this recipe is, of course, of academic interest only, since swans, as other wildlife, are protected by the law.

Although two companies still hold swan feasts (the Worshipful Company of Vintners in November, and the Worshipful Company of Dyers on the second Wednesday in October),¹ swan is rarely eaten. On the odd occasion when it appears on the menu, the bird would have been found recently dead from accidental causes (for example, by having flown into a power line), and the body plucked and frozen for the feast. In such cases, the meat is mixed with that of, say, goose to augment it for the meal. In 1967, the Vintners' Company Swan Feast menu included a cygnet orange salad and madeira sauce (following a main course of lamb), the cygnet being broiled, and in 1984

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smoked cygnet was served for the first time.

A Game of Swans

Thames swans, in fact, have other guardians, in addition to their legal protection. Jan Morris's *Oxford* (Oxford University Press, third edition, 1978), mentions a noticeboard which stated that "Any ill treatment of the swans should be reported to the Vintners' Swan Marker, the Dyers' Swan Marker, Her Majesty's Swan Marker, or failing all . . . to any Police Officer," (p. 32). This awful warning, however, went unheeded in the nineteen-fifties, since, later in the same book, the author mentions that a swan was found "loitering elegantly on the pond in the middle of Tom Quad (a quadrangle on one of the Oxford colleges), wearing a black bow tie around its neck," (p. 212). This incident was particularly ironic in that, at one time, Oxford was granted the privilege of a "game" of swans—a privilege much sought after, not only because of the fresh meat and eggs thus obtained, but because selling swans for consumption was very lucrative. For example, in 1274 the "Statuta Poetrice" of the City of London set the price of a swan for eating at 3/-, expensive when compared to 2½d for what is termed "best capon," 5d for a goose, and 4d for

a pheasant.²

Needless to say, of course, swanpoaching occurred, and when it became known that "persons of little reputation became possessed of swans," an Act of Parliament was passed in 1483 (22 Edward IV c.6), ruling that only the King's sons could possess a "game" of swans, or a swan mark (the "brand mark" on a particular bird), unless a special grant or license had been issued to do so. Individuals who applied for ownership of swans had to own freehold land or property with an annual rental value of five marks,³ but once granted, the privilege of owning swans and a swan-mark could be handed on to descendants, being regarded as a "freehold of inheritance."

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, swans were widely kept, and a register of swan marks is extant from Elizabethan days. These marks (sometimes based upon the owners' arms, or his merchant's mark) were usually made on the bird's upper mandible. At one time, the birds were also pinioned, that is, the tip of one wing was cut off so that the bird could not fly, but, due largely to public pressure, this is no longer carried out, although as a consequence of the swans being able to mix with "wild" swans, their care is rendered more difficult.

In addition to the royal swans, there are now only two institutions licensed to own swans on the Thames, these being the Worshipful Companies of Vintners and of Dyers, both in London. The earliest record of the Master of the Royal Game of Swans (now known as the Keeper of the Queen's Swans) occurs about 1295, although the office is certainly older than that. The Keeper of the Queen's Swans must earn his living by working on the Thames. He must also be a Master Man, that is, own his own business, or otherwise be in a position to deal with swans whenever needed. Destruction of records in the Great Fire of London (1666) means that it is not known when the Dyers' Company was granted ownership of swans on the Thames, but it is thought to have been around 1550, perhaps earlier. The Vintners' Company have exercised their privilege since the early 1500s; it may date from the 1483 Act mentioned. The Dyers' Company Swan Master (known as the Bargemaster) also has the ceremonial function of preceding his Company's Wardens in state processions, on which occasions he wears scarlet waistcoat and pantaloons, white stockings, and an embroidered blue coat whose shoulder plate bears the Dyers' Company arms. He also carries his Swan Hook, a sort of miniature

Photo courtesy British Tourist Authority



Here are seen representatives of all three swan marking authorities: Keeper of the Queen's Swans, Vintners' Company Swan Marker, and Dyers' Bargemaster.



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shepherd's crook on a long pole, with which the birds are caught. As in the case of the Keeper of the Queen's Swans, both he and the Vintners' Swan Master (known as the Swan Marker) look after their avian charges year-round, and as early as 1509, Vintners' Company records state: "Item — Paid in the Great Frost to James the Under Swanherd for Upping the Master's Swans — 4 shillings."⁴

Swans were picked up during frosty weather quite frequently in the old days and, indeed, Mr. F.J. Turk, the present Keeper of the Queen's Swans, writes that it has happened during his time. However, this particular type of "upping" is not the annual swan-upping ceremony with which this article is concerned.

At one time, swan-upping was carried out between London Bridge and Henley-on-Thames, but this has not been the case for the past several years. The 1985 voyage followed the river from Sunbury-on-Thames, Middlesex, to Pangbourne, Berkshire, during the week of July 15th.

Account of Swan-Upping Voyage

The courts of the two companies witness the work. The occupants of the skiffs mentioned can be identified by their garb, as follows: (all wear white trousers); *Keeper of the Queen's Swans* — brass-buttoned scarlet jacket, left arm with badge depicting a swan, the words "Her Majesty's Swan Keeper" written round it, and a hat with a Royal Crown badge. *Her Majesty's Swan-Uppers* — white trousers and scarlet jerseys. *Vintners' Company Swan Marker* — green, silver-buttoned coat, decorated with silver braid, and a peaked hat with a badge of the Company arms, which also appear on the coat. *Vintners' Swan-Uppers* — dressed all in white. *Dyers' Bargemaster* — blue coat with gold braid and brass buttons, badges with Company arms on hat and jacket. *Dyers' Swan-Uppers* — blue jerseys and white trousers.

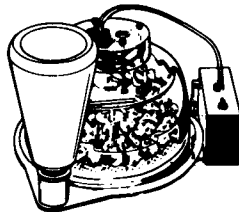
Both the Dyers' and Vintners' Swan-Uppers jerseys bear the legend *Vintners' Royalty*, or *Dyers' Royalty*, a sort of shorthand rendition of the phrase used in Company records for the granting of a license to keep swans, to wit, "A Grant of a Royalty of a Game of Swans."

Additionally, flags identify the skiffs according to occupancy. The Keeper of the Queen's Swans flies a white flag with a crown and the Royal cipher (ER/II). The Dyers' and Vintners' flags both depict swans (the former on a blue

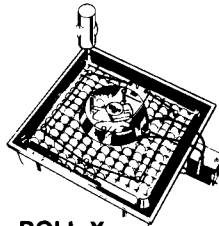
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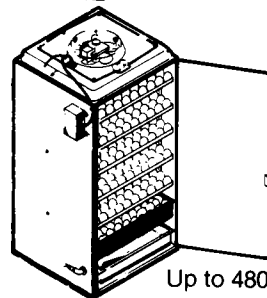
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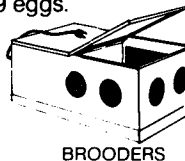
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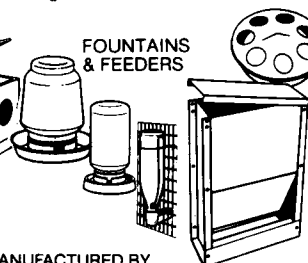
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November 15, 1986**

Jacksonville Airport Hilton Inn
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Bobby Nipper, Rt. 10, Box 147
Gainsville, FL 32605
(904) 372-0299

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background, the latter on red) and each flag bears the Company arms. Interestingly, the Vintners' Company arms have swans (bunches of grapes round their necks) as supporters, and the Vintners' Hall in Upper Thames Street has swans incorporated into the design of their metal gates — although, ironically, the office of the Clerk of the Vintners' Company is in *Black Swan House* in Kennet Wharf Lane.

The actual swan-upping is carried out as follows: as the skiffs progress along the river, the first person to spot a raft of swans gives the traditional cry of "All-up!", this being a warning to the boats to maneuver into position around the birds. Ownership of the cygnets born in May is established via the swan marks on the parent birds, cygnets being allocated to the owners of the cob (male) and pen (female) alternately, the cob being the "lead" bird and its owners allocated the first cygnet. Odd cygnets in unequal-numbered broods are generally allocated in rotation among the three owners, or sometimes to the owner of the cob.

Royal cygnets go unmarked. Dyers' Company birds receive one small nick on their beaks, those belonging to the Vintner's Company being given two small nicks. It is the latter swan mark which is said to have given rise to the public house sign depicting "The Swan With Two Necks."

The birds are also counted. As recently as the 1920s they were numerous enough so that a policy of leaving only two eggs per nest was adopted, but the swan population having declined disastrously since then, this is no longer done. Indeed, concern is such that the Crown and the two Worshipful Companies have commissioned an investigation (to last three years) into the life cycle of the swan.

The Vintners' Company provides the following count for the 1984 census:

	H.M. The Queen	Vintners'	Dyers'
Adult birds	22	1	3
Cygnets	19	9	12

Since unmarked birds, some of which may be "wild," are claimed for the Crown, the larger number of swans noted as belonging to H.M. the Queen is, perhaps, not too surprising. In addition, 106 adult birds without cygnets were also sighted, but not identified.

The 1985 count, overall, produced a higher total than last year, largely in the upper reaches of the river. In view of the decline in the swan population noted earlier (due largely to lead

poisoning from discarded fishing weights, and, among other factors, nesting disturbances and river traffic), this is most encouraging. For comparison, the 1985 figures, again courtesy of the Vintners' Company, are:

	H.M. The Queen	Vintners'	Dyers'
Adult birds	29	2	1
Cygnets	27	18	20

In addition, 83 adult birds without cygnets were sighted, but not identified.

Although the increase in the swan population is small, it is very heartening, and perhaps we may hope that it will continue. If it does, it will be due in very large measure to the Swan Masters and their Swan Uppers, modern caretakers of the birds, as well as carrying on an ancient and noble tradition.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are due to the following: Mr. F.J. Turk, M.V.O., H.M. Keeper of the Swans; to the Clerk of the Vintners' Company; and to the Clerk and the Honorary Archivist of the Dyers' Company for valuable assistance.

"Swan Marking and Swan Upping," a paper written by Mr. C. Skilbeck, Honorary Archivist of the Dyers' Company, London, contains much interesting historical and background information on the subject. Extracts used in this article by permission.

References

- "Swan Marking & Swan Upping," C. Skilbeck, Honorary Archivist of the Dyers' Company, London. Text of paper given to the Guildhall Historical Association, November, 1984.
- "Swan Upping," leaflet N.34, March 1978 (revised April 1979 and August 1980), Lord Chamberlain's Office, London.
- Letters from Mr. F.J. Turk, M.V.O., Her Majesty's Keeper of Swans, dated 4 June, 11 July and 1 August 1985.
- Letters from the Vintners' Company, London, dated 25 October 1984 and 1 July 1985.
- Letters from the Dyers' Company, London, of 27 June and 29 July 1985.
- Source for figures: Letter of 23 October 1985 from Clerk of the Vintners' Company.

Additional Reading

- "Swan Marking & Swan Upping," C. Skilbeck, Honorary Archivist of the Dyers' Company, London. Text of paper given to the Guildhall Historical Association, November, 1984. Contains much interesting historical and background information on the subject.
- "The Mute Swan in England," Norman F. Ticehurst, Cleaver-Hune Press Ltd., London, 1957.
- "Swans," J.J. McCoy, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1967.

Footnotes

1. These Companies are descended from the medieval trade guilds, and can best be described as fraternal and charitable organizations for certain trades and crafts, although these are not their only functions.
2. 1/- (one shilling) was 12d (sterling pence). The current U.K. decimal coinage has 5p ('new' pence) to the shilling.
3. The mark, now obsolete, was worth 160 sterling pence, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 1971).
4. Same as 2. ●

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