Fin, Fur and Feather

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My mother usually wanted to know my intended whereabouts. *'Where you off to then?'* she would ask, and for that question there was a number of stock answers like *'down over mill'* or *'up across Hitchen'*. The answers didn't tell her a lot but they were sufficient to keep her parental mind at rest. Whether, with my friends, I actually went down over mill or up across Hitchen was another matter. With so much freedom we might end up somewhere totally different and we usually did.

We might well have ended up down Tail Mill, or Boozer Pit, or Sandy Hoe, or Tinkers Lodge, or Monkhouse Lane, or out across Fourteen Acres or even up Castle Hill, which was a mile or more away. We were free to go just about anywhere our legs could carry us, bearing in mind that we also had to walk home again afterwards.

But down over mill was a particularly favourite spot, mainly because of the millstream with its footbridge and waterfall. It was one of two mills in the village, this particular one being an over-shoot mill where the water was fed over the top of

Down over mill, the stream where we caught 'biddleheads', now overgrown and derelict with the once beautiful Victorian stonework falling into disrepair

the mill wheel, hence the term 'over mill'. The mill was still used occasionally in the 1940's, but very rarely. But water from the stream was still being diverted to fill the millpond, and it was the overflow from the pond that formed the waterfall, sending the surplus water back to join the main stream.

The little footbridge was downstream from the waterfall and in the water close to it was a large boulder - we used to call it *'the pebble'* - from which we often fished for *'biddleheads'*. Biddleheads were in fact, *bullheads*. How on earth bullhead came to be biddlehead goodness only knows! Anyway, biddleheads it was, and we had a special way of catching them.

Biddleheads don't swim about a lot. They spend their time tucked out of sight under a stone on the bed of the stream. The technique we used to catch them involved locating a fish by lying on the bank of the stream and gently prodding the stones with a stick. If you prodded one under which there lurked a fish, it would dart out and head for cover under another stone. Therefore, the next thing was to set the trap that would catch it.

The trap involved gently laying a number of jam jars, preferably the larger two-pound jars that you no longer see, on their side in the water surrounding the stone that hid the fish. The jars had string attached to enable them to be rapidly removed from the water.

The final stage was to gently prod the stone. Out would dart the fish and with a bit of luck it would go straight into one of the jars and, before it had time to realise the folly of its ways, you whipped the jar out of the water to a cry of *'Got one! Got one!'*

Sometimes we fished for minnows, but not down over mill. The best place for minnows was Bell pond. The Bell was a public house, now gone. The pond was close by the pub and provided the head of water to drive Court Mill, which was a couple of hundred yards away. Court Mill was still in use at that time.

The Bell pond was alive with minnows and the best time to catch them was when the water feeding the pond was diverted and the level dropped so that only a few very large puddles remained. When this was so, you could scoop out the minnows by the jar full. We never used nets, always a jar with a string that you placed in the water, waited until the fish obligingly went inside, and then, quick as flash, you whipped the jar out of the water.

A real treat was to land a *'red-breaster'*, a male stickleback whose throat and belly are red only during the breeding season. My goodness, if you caught a red-breaster that was really something. You were a celebrity for the rest of the day. Ah, the magic of it when the cry went up *'Gibber 've catched a red-breaster!'* and all the others came running to have a look. More often than not though, it was someone else who had the luck, not me.

At the end of the morning or afternoon, off we would go home, each with our jam jars and the fish we had caught. A few hours later, sure as God made those little fishes, they'd all be dead. I used to feed mine to the feet-circling, stiff-tailed cat that purred in ecstasy.

Looking back, the thing that interests me is that we never fished in a conventional way with a hook and bait on the end of a line. That was a technique that, in my experience, completely passed us by.

One of my very best friends was Richard Rumsby. Richard's uncle was a farmer and we spent hours and hours freely wandering his fields. We used to spend a fair bit of time rabbiting with a barking-mad much-loved mongrel called Dandy that warned every rabbit for miles around of our impending approach. The stupid animal would rake away in a demented frenzy at a rabbit hole for minutes on end, throwing dirt out in all directions, and all the time barking his head off. We never did catch any rabbits.

But once we caught a mole. Dandy located it, again barking himself silly in the process, and we dug it out from its run with our bare hands. We decided there was only one thing to do with it, train it to do tricks. Snag was it was almost lunchtime, so we'd have to postpone the training session until later.

As luck would have it, there happened to be an old desk of Richard's that was no longer house worthy and so had been relegated to a barn. The desk had a hinged lid. We filled the desk with dirt and then put the mole in. Within seconds, the mole had buried itself and was out of sight. We then found some stout string and lashed down the lid of the desk, tightly, all the time planning the afternoon activities. Then Richard went in to lunch and I went home to have mine.

Lunch was very short affair. Mole training was the day's priority, not food. Soon I was back, knocking on Richard's door. We hurried to the barn. Carefully we undid the string securing the desk lid and cautiously looked for the mole. Our disappointment was almost too much to bear. The damn thing had escaped! I remember feeling very dejected.

Quite often though, what country lads got up to depended on the season, and in particular the farming activity associated with the season.

From an early age there was the fun of haymaking, and in particular being allowed to ride in the empty horse-drawn wagons as they returned from the farmyard, where the rick was usually built, to the field to fetch another load of hay. Then we would race back to the yard again to catch a lift in the next empty wagon to set out.

But by the time a boy was nine or ten years old it was harvest time that had the greater appeal.

'I know where they're cutting!' someone might announce.

'Where? Where?' everyone else wanted to know.

Then off we'd go out Batch, or up Moorlands, or out Hinton Road, or wherever the action was, armed with sticks in anticipation of clubbing a rabbit or two.

If cutting had only just started it could mean a long wait because any rabbits in the corn would stay put until the last moment. But as the binder - this was before the advent of combine harvesters - went round and round the field, reducing the area of standing corn ever smaller, so the excitement mounted.

First one rabbit would make a run for it, then another, then another. Some made it to safety, many others didn't. As the binder destroyed their shelter, so the pile of dead rabbits mounted. Some were victims of a whack with a stick. Others were grabbed by dogs and shaken to death. A few fell victim to the shotgun. All were then subjected to being held aloft by their back legs, having their neck stretched and being 'rabbit punched', a blow delivered with the side of the hand behind their outstretched ears, to ensure they were really out of their misery.

The whole business now strikes me as being rather barbaric, but that's the way it was. I take some consolation from the fact that, throughout my boyhood, and in spite of all my best efforts, I only ever managed to catch one harvest rabbit.

Of the many harvest scenes I witnessed, two I remember particularly well.

On one occasion, in spite of the corn being full of rabbit runs, there was not a single rabbit. As the binder neared the centre of the corn, and with just a few square yards still standing, suddenly there was a great movement. Something was about to make a run for it. The dogs barked, sticks were at the ready. Then out bolted a fox. Everyone was so surprised, the dogs too, that it made a clean getaway, with not even a round of gunshot to send it on its way. It was the first fox I had ever seen.

The other occasion I remember was when Gordon Mitchell's little black Scottie dog came to grief. In the excitement of the rabbits starting to bolt, the dog ran into the corn. The binder severed all its paws. Mercifully, as the poor thing lay there howling in agony, someone produced a shotgun and did what had to be done and poor Gordon was left with the sad task of carrying his little dog home and burying it in the back garden.

Taking home my one and only harvest rabbit gave me a real sense of achievement. A rabbit for the pot was welcome in many households, including our own. We had rabbit stew quite regularly, most weeks in fact. And very good it was too, very tasty. The rear legs were favourite, followed by the front legs, but everything went into the pot, including the rib cage and the head.

Apart from rabbits caught at harvest time, there were people who caught them for their wider commercial worth for there was always a housewife willing to pay a couple of shillings for a freshly caught rabbit. I had nothing to do with these activities but I had friends who were involved. One used ferrets and regularly went 'ferreting'. This was a daytime activity and involved covering all the holes of a warren, except one, with nets. The ferret was then sent down the remaining hole and a short while later the rabbits would start to bolt, trying desperately to get away from the ferret, becoming tangled in the nets as they tried to exit the warren. They were then grabbed and swiftly rabbit punched. Occasionally, the ferret would fail to surface, usually because it had managed to catch a rabbit and chose to stay below and eat it. Often the only way to get the ferret back was to dig it out. Another couple of friends used to go 'long netting'. This was a nighttime activity, when the rabbits were above ground feeding and doing what else rabbits have to do well away from the warren. It involved quietly creeping along the hedgerow, draping a long net at the bottom of the hedge and at intervals pegging it to the ground. With the net set, hands were clapped and the rabbits out in the field made a dash for the burrows, only to be tangled in the net and caught.

People who sold rabbits would usually gut ('paunch') them beforehand. But my mother didn't need this service, she could paunch and skin a rabbit in next to no time, like most country housewives of the time. It was a skill I thought I should have and when I was about fifteen years old she showed me how to go about it. But I never had the opportunity to give it a go, for in the 1950s along came myxamatosis. This contagious virus, transmitted via the rabbit flea, was scientifically developed in Australia were rabbits were a major pest, and was then introduced in the UK, with wide approval of the UK farming community. The result was that the hedgerows and country roads became littered with dead, and dying, rabbits, the latter partially paralysed, dragging themselves along, heads swollen and bleeding. Cars, sometimes unavoidably but often as an act of kindness on behalf of the driver, usually squashed those in the roadways to put them out of their misery. For most people, myxamatosis spelt the end of rabbit stew. Personally, I haven't tasted rabbit since.

Another seasonal farming activity that was a great attraction for young boys, was threshing, or as it was pronounced locally, *'drashing'*. It was a regular feature of late autumn.

There were two threshing contractors in the village, William Mitchell whose yard was down Turnpike (as my father always called it, not Merriottsford) and Arthur Mitchell whose yard was up at Newchester Cross. Their steam traction engines would lumber around the village from one farm to another, towing the pink-coloured wooden threshing machine and behind that the little straw-binding machine. All we kids had to do was note where the machines were being taken and then go along later and join in the fun, where we were permitted to do so.

Not that the dirty, dusty activity of threshing corn could possibly have been fun for the men whose work it was. But it was fun for boys because our involvement was simply one of killing mice and rats of which there were always a fair number that had taken up residence in the corn rick. As the sheaves of corn were pitched from the rick up to the top of the threshing machine, so the mice and rats were disturbed and ran for their lives.

We boys concerned ourselves mainly with catching the mice. Some got away, but not many. Some, I'm almost now ashamed to say, we caught alive and then made them swim in the water trough before they drowned from exhaustion.

Dealing with the rats, however, was a much more serious and urgent task and in an effort to contain them the bottom of the rick would be wire netted to a height of about two feet. As the rats were disturbed, in went the pitchforks; and if they escaped being stabbed, in went the dogs - a grab and a vicious shake and it was soon over, with another corpse being unceremoniously thrown on the ever-increasing pile.

So much for fin and fur, but what of feather? Well, the first thing that springs to mind is bird nesting. Most country boys used to like bird nesting and I was no exception. With my friends, when springtime came I often went. At first, this meant locating nests, keeping the location secret, and monitoring the eggs or chicks at each subsequent visit. It was essential not to visit too often and disturb sitting hens because this could lead to the nest being abandoned, or to use our terminology, being *'forsook'*. We were familiar with the nests of all the common birds and their eggs.

Like many a country boy at that time, I once had a collection of birds' eggs. The procedure was to take just one egg from a nest, never more than one. (The only problem with this is that there might well have been someone else taking just one egg.) But I never, *ever* took an egg from a robin's nest because it was said that if you put your fingers in a robin's nest they would grow crooked. I never ran the risk; my fingers are perfectly straight!

Having taken just one egg, before it could be added to your collection it had to be 'blown'. This involved using a needle to prick a small hole at either end of the egg, deliberately breaking the yolk sac inside the egg in the process. Then you blew in one hole and the contents of the egg were forced out of the other hole. This procedure was quite straightforward for the larger eggs such as blackbird and thrush but not quite so easy for the smaller delicate eggs, which were likely to be crushed between clumsy fingers. If so, there was then the dilemma of whether you could risk taking just one more egg from the nest. Another situation often encountered, was when the egg was not newly laid and contained a partially formed chick, with the inevitable result when you tried to blow it.

I once took all the eggs, four of them, from a moorhen's nest I came across in the reeds alongside the river out Fourteen Acres, but not to add to my collection. Moorhen eggs are eatable and at that time were considered to be something of a delicacy. I took them home to my mother. She questioned how fresh they were and carefully broke one into a cup. It stank to high heaven. I reckon that nest must have been 'forsook' quite some time before I came across it.

Eggs that were eatable and also tasted delicious were those from our own hens. When we moved from the Broadway cottage to live up Hitchen, we had a garden with plenty of room for a chicken run. We kept about eight or ten hens. Bought as pullets, they were nurtured throughout their laying days, providing a steady supply of eggs, but as soon their laying days were over they were destined for the pot.

I recall my father dispatching hens in what at that time was the usual manner but now seems to have been rather cruel. He would go into the run and, ignoring much squawking and flapping, grab a hen by its legs. Then, holding it upside down, he'd tie the legs together with string. The bird, still squawking and flapping its outstretched wings, was then hung upside down on a nail driven into the clothesline post, the bird's tethered legs providing a convenient loop for the purpose. My father then thrust the blade of a sharp knife into its open beak and into the gullet, cutting the bird's throat. As the blood drained from the bird, the squawking and flapping soon subsided and the deed was done. The dead bird would then be hung in the shed for a day or two until it was wanted for the pot, but first it had to be plucked.

Plucking hens, like skinning rabbits, was my mother's job. She made light work of it and might well save the feathers if she had use for them. All our cushions, mattresses, pillows and so-called 'eiderdowns', were stuffed with chicken feather. I never got around to asking my mother to pass on her experience of plucking hens, but perhaps it was just as well. As things turned out, the skill of chicken plucking, like that of rabbit skinning, would have been of little use to me although, in more recent years, I have plucked a brace of pheasants. I did this, as advised by the person who shot them and gave them to me, by placing them inside a plastic bin liner,

thrusting my hands inside the bag and then pulling the feathers out without actually seeing what I was doing. It was still a messy business; feathers and fluff seemed to get everywhere. I can't recall my mother having so much trouble.