

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GANNET COLONY ON LUNDY

By

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This Lundy is a nymph to idle toys inclin'd
And all on pleasure set, doth wholly give her mind
To see upon her shores her fowl and conies fed,
And want only to hatch the birds of Ganymede.

Drayton, *Polyolbion*, 1622

Until the colony was deserted at the end of the nineteenth century, Lundy was the only nesting site of the gannet in England, and the most southerly of its breeding stations.

Soon after Edward I made his first return to England as king, in 1274, he ordered a general investigation into the activities of royal and baronial officials and, as Lundy was then in the hands of the Crown, a clerk was sent there to make an inquisition. It was found that "...the rock of gannets is worth 5s; there are other birds, which are not sold". The worth of the gannets was less than that of the rabbits, which were highly valued at that time and estimated at 110s per annum (Calendar of Inquisitions Misc. 3 Edw I, 979, June 1275).

By 1321, when Edward II ordered another inquisition, the yearly value of the gannets had risen from 5s. to 66s.8d. It was reported that there was "...a certain rock, called the gannets' stone, with two places near it where the gannets settle and breed, worth in ordinary years 66s.8d. but this year destroyed in part by the Scots Also one tenant who should keep the said gannets during the whole season of their breeding thereon, for which service he will be quit of his rent of 2s" (Steinman Steinman). It is uncertain what accounted for the large increase in value between 1275 and 1322; this may perhaps represent an increase in the size of the colony, or an improved market for the produce, or an increase in the population of the island which resulted in intensified exploitation. The arable acreage had doubled in the same period, which might support this latter view.

Stow quotes an effusive description of Lundy, written when Edward II tried unsuccessfully to escape there a few years later, which relates that "... it hath Pigeons and other Fowles, which Alexander Necham calleth Ganimeses Birds, having great nestes."

It can only be assumed that the gannets continued to breed on the island as, although no further records are found, they were still there in 1830: "I am assured that they have so long been accustomed to resort to Lundy Island that one spot received the name of Gannets' Cove" (Moore). Moore writes again in 1837 that the gannet is seen around the coasts of Devon "as late as April, when it retires to Lundy Island to breed".

Throughout this time seabirds formed a vital part of the Lundy economy and, together with rabbit skins, provided the tenants with their income. Although the eggs seem to have been the main target for predators, at times the gannets were also taken for the flesh as they gave a good quantity of meat. The grease obtained from them was thought to have curative properties, and the feathers could be used for down, although they needed treatment to get rid of the smell. In 1654 the birds sold for 2s 1d apiece; by 1764 the price was 20d, and after about 1820 their value declined. Waters (1955) says that, "Gannet was a favoured dish when palates were stronger than they are today. In Shakespeare's time it was eaten as an hors d'oeuvre ... Young birds were eaten in London a hundred years ago and as recently as the 80's were served in the cheaper dining-rooms in the Midlands...."

There is no doubt that when the illegal activities of marauders were added to the

slaughter carried out by the islanders, the plunder of seabirds and their eggs was immense, but there is no way of judging what the size of the gannet colonies may have been, nor how far they were affected in particular. According to the anonymous journalist of 1787 the main victims were "Murrs". Both Mr W H Heaven and his son did their best to reduce the number of birds and eggs taken, and in the years when they were resident on the island, and it was run as a private domestic estate, the economy no longer depended on the trade. Their authority may have had some effect, but they were never able to monitor all the residents or to control robbery by pilots and other seamen.

Gosse, who visited Lundy in 1853, noted another hazard for the nesting gannets. He described a visit to the North End where he walked to, "a point on the distant cliff which was cut into a series of rocky ledges, like a wide flight of steps... On these were seated a dozen or twenty gannets, beautifully snow-white birds... We could easily have scrambled to their rock, but our friend [the Rev H G Heaven] was reluctant to have them disturbed. This fine bird used to be numerous here ... but having been much annoyed by idle gunners from the main, they had deserted the island, it was feared finally. Lately, however, a few pairs have returned, to the gratification of the proprietor, who is desirous of their increase. In truth, they are noble and beautiful birds Another reason why the gannets should not be disturbed, while so few as they yet are, is the bold, piratical character of the larger gulls. These are ever on the watch to destroy the eggs of the gannet, the moment both parents are flown".

It seems that Gannet Rock had been abandoned, certainly by 1892, as "...they were so constantly harried by the Channel pilots that they shifted quarters to another station on Lundy itself, where unfortunately the cliffs are not sufficiently precipitous to prevent their nests being plundered by the egg-stealer ... the eggs finding a ready sale at one shilling each to tourists and others" (D'Urban & Mathew 1892). In 1894 "the number of nests varies from 15 to 30. They are always placed on the NW Point and never on the Gannet Rock. This is strange because the NW Point is easily accessible and the rock is not" (ms notes written inside a copy of Chanter in 1894).

Gurney (1913) considers that the taking of birds or nests could only be done by intrepid climbers, willing to withstand the stench of ammonia, and only in calm dry weather. But this is not borne out by Dr Crespi, who lived on the island for over three years: "...a few, only, alas! very few gannets ... Solan geese select by preference a few bare ledges, not very difficult to reach, and few, indeed, of their eggs are hatched out ... the wonder is that ...what with the rats, what with the assiduous hunts of the islanders, the sailors and the pilots, any escape ...". A visitor in 1900 found that, "...they built their nests in places where any child could take them without danger" (Blathway). The birds were also vulnerable because they were very tame: they "will allow themselves to be stroked by the hand without resistance" (Yarrell 1839).

Unfortunately, when the lighthouse was built in 1896-7 the nesting site that Gosse described was destroyed: "I fear the North End one [lighthouse] has driven away the gannets, for their nesting site has been taken for making the approach from the sea to it, and the stairs or steps cut right up through the benches on which the gannets used to breed" (letter H G Heaven 17.3.1898). Another disturbance was that the lighthouse was furnished with a fog signal - against all objections by Mr Heaven - and this gave out loud intermittent blasts of noise, sometimes over many hours.

In the 1890's awareness of the threat to bird species was growing, so that legislation was passed for the preservation of wild birds and their eggs, and in 1889 a group was formed which, after two years, became the Society for the Protection of Birds. An entry in the Heaven diaries for 17th March 1904 reads: "Phi [H G Heaven] had letter from Hon. Sec. of Wild Bird Preservation people about the Gannets being looked after (with his permission) on the island." There are no further references to the subject, probably because of Miss Amelia Heaven's grave illness. The Society appointed a watcher to the island for two seasons, but the measures taken were too little and too late so far as the gannets were concerned.

A sad commentary was made by D'Urban & Mathew in 1892: "... the modern history of this interesting bird in its ancient haunt is a sad tale of persecution." In 1887 a visitor wrote that there were, "more gannets but their eggs are all taken, and not one hatched,

this cannot be helped as they nest in such an accessible place from the water as well as the land" (Gurney 1913, xliii). The number of nests that year was estimated at fifteen or sixteen (*Ootheca Wolleyana*); in 1890 at about seventy (D'Urban & Matthew 1892); in 1893 about thirty pairs, and in 1900 just three, when it was doubted that any young would be raised (Blathwayt 1900). Even after the lighthouse was built a few birds struggled on: in 1901 seven pairs were present but, "whether they all had eggs I was not told; if they had probably they were robbed". Five pairs were found nesting in 1903 in a cove below the lighthouse and there were five eggs, but they were all taken, and there are no records of any eggs being found after this (Gurney 1913, 49-50).

The Report of the Society for the Protection of Birds for the year 1904 states that a "special effort has been made at Lundy Island... Representations on the matter were received from Professor Newton, who reported the colony to be in imminent danger of extermination, not a single young bird having been reared for seven years. Lundy is nominally a protected area for all eggs, but owing to the peculiar circumstances of this quaint little seigniory the law has never been enforced, and while the inhabitants have regarded wild birds' eggs as a saleable perquisite, visitors are stated to do an amount of egg-lifting which must seriously affect the interesting bird population of the island ... a watcher was engaged for the breeding season; warning notices were circulated; Pilotage Boards were asked to instruct their pilots; and officials at Trinity House agreed to direct their Lundy lighthouse keepers to co-operate with the watcher in his task. Unfortunately the Gannets did not nest this year... A watcher will be on the island again next summer."

The *Bideford Weekly Gazette* of 11.12.1906 reported that the sea birds on Lundy were, "sadly diminished through a ruthless trade in eggs. Whilst the quarries were being worked, one or two of the rarer species disappeared... Though Mr Heaven did all in his power to stop the traffic in birds' eggs". A visitor c.1910 wrote that the gannets were not to be found: "I am told the reason is because the beams from the North End lighthouse disturbed and drove them elsewhere" (Anon. MS n.d.).

Lloyd gives an account of an unsuccessful attempt to build a nest on Gannets Rock by a single bird in 1922. Mr M C Harman made an attempt to re-establish a colony in 1938 with twenty eggs that were sent to Lundy from his other island of Grassholm: "Last year the eggs arrived rather late and were put rather lavishly into the cormorants' nests and a few others. I rode up to the north end of the island and looked through field glasses at our Gannet Rock. There were two young birds at the top of the rock that I believed were gannets. Others confirmed the view, but it is not certain. Unfortunately our cliff-climbing youngsters were not available to make certain In 1939 we will try to be a little more scientific. I am quite set upon re-introducing gannets..." (letter M C Harman to James Fisher, 11.1.1939). The colony on Grassholm is thought to have been settled by the gannets displaced from Lundy, but Mr Harman's attempt to restore them to the island was overtaken by the outbreak of war.

The gannets lay one egg in a nest that is constructed mainly of grass and seaweed, which develops adhesive properties as it dries. The birds will lay again if one egg is taken, and incubation is carried out in turns by both birds, who sit on the nest facing inwards to the cliff (Gurney 1913, Ch 19). Crespi described them as, "that noblest of British sea-birds" sitting on their nests "in contemplative and philosophical fashion", a sight which - to the infinite sadness of all interested observers - is no longer to be seen on Lundy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The RSPB has kindly supplied copies of *Bird Notes and News* 7 of October 1904, and Report No. 2, of 1905, 6-7. Letters and MS copies are in possession of the author.

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