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Rural and Urban Poaching in Victorian England

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Abstract Poaching is commonly portrayed as the archetypal nineteenth-century 'rural' crime, particularly associated with agricultural districts of southern and eastern England. This study argues that this interpretation is misleading. Judicial statistics collected from the mid-nineteenth century suggest that poaching was much more widespread in the North and Midlands than has previously been acknowledged. These industrialising regions largely determined the national trends in poaching in the second half of the century which have usually been considered to be characteristics of rural society in the South. The South shared neither the national peak in prosecutions of the mid-1870s nor the dramatic decline in prosecutions thereafter. It considers a range of possible explanations for these different regional trends. These include a discussion of the potential motivation of so-called 'steam age poachers' but also the growing regional specialisation in game preservation during the period and the different opportunities, and obstacles, this presented for poaching.

Interpretations of nineteenth-century poaching

Apart from two important national surveys by Jones and Hopkins[1] and a case study of south-west Lancashire by Archer,[2] studies of poaching have concentrated on southern and eastern counties: Sussex, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire, Devon, Suffolk and Norfolk.[3] Although some have argued that motives were often much more complex than mere survival,[4] the historiography has nevertheless also emphasised a strong causative association between the emergence of poaching on a large scale and the casualisation and degradation of the landless, agrarian labour force in England's cereal heartlands.[5] This line of academic argument is integral to a broader radical critique of rural social relations and the loss of customary rights post-enclosure that can be traced back to the Hammonds.[6] Most of the 'popular' literature on, and in some cases by, poachers of the late-Victorian and early Edwardian periods has served to confirm this regional concentration, as well as stereotypes of the offenders' background, character and primary motivation, and supported the view that large sections of the community condoned or supported their activities. Poachers have consequently acquired a reputation, not as criminals, but as downtrodden, agricultural labourers, or as champions of the poor's customary and natural rights in the face of what was arguably the most blatant expression of indefensible class privilege, the hated Game Laws.[7]

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There are apparently logical and defensible grounds for this historiography. Ill feeling generated by the extensive preservation of game was widespread and poaching cases dominated proceedings at rural petty sessions. Most apprehended offenders in southern counties were also agricultural labourers, and many poachers themselves often argued that distress was the principal cause of their offending. 'Poverty is the mother of invention' commented James Hawker, 'poverty made me poach'.[8] The fact that between eighty and ninety per cent of poaching prosecutions were for the relatively minor offence of 'trespass in pursuit of game during the day-time', or day poaching, and could be dealt with summarily, might also suggest that this was often not a serious, premeditated crime but one resorted to casually or out of necessity. One in four convictions in Suffolk during the 1840s were for game offences and even as late as the 1880s poaching constituted twenty-two per cent of cases heard by some rural magistrates in Oxfordshire.[9]

Explanations of poaching's decline from the 1870s have consequently also been framed within these regional and rural perspectives.[10] These stress a widespread reformation of manners, growing respectability and 'shifts in popular sentiment' within southern rural communities whose members became less tolerant of criminals and criminality *per se*. Poaching allegedly became regarded as an inappropriate, unacceptable and irrational activity.[11] Demographic change and specifically the 'massive outflow of labourers from the land' has also been stressed, since out-migration often removed younger and possibly more troublesome elements of the population while improving the prospects of those who remained. Perhaps most significantly, improvements in wages and more regular employment in agricultural districts are viewed as undermining the need to poach 'for the pot'. Howkins, for example, considered rising standards of living among the rural poor to be the 'first and most important' explanation of poaching's decline while Jones has pointed to a 'calculated social welfare programme' for the poor including the provision of allotments. Jones has also argued that potential poachers were deterred by the 'considerable increases in police numbers' in rural districts from the 1860s, their use of surveillance powers enshrined in the Poaching Prevention Act, and their acceptance by the farming community.[12] This interpretation is compatible with Gatrell's wider argument about the emergence of a 'policeman-state', which he credits for much of the decline in real and recorded crime in late Victorian England.[13] The Ground Game Act of 1880 is also seen as significant in this context. By granting farmers the 'unalienable' right to shoot rabbits and hares on their land, this legislation is credited with recruiting them as law enforcers, willing to prosecute or report poachers whom they had often previously tolerated as welcome exterminators of furred vermin. It also meant that fewer tenant farmers were themselves prosecuted for game offences.[14]

National and regional trends in poaching

These assumptions about the regional concentration of poaching have never been systematically challenged or tested quantitatively. For much of the century such a challenge is not possible since there are no reliable, comparative quantitative data on prosecutions, and none that relate to summary proceedings. Occasional official attempts to collect statistics occurred particularly in the 1820s and 1840s but these fell short of achieving comprehensive or reliable returns.[15] From 1858, however, the annual returns

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of comprehensive, judicial statistics by the new county and borough police forces, recording the number of cases brought before all the courts, enable a more informed analysis to be undertaken. The reliability and use of such judicial statistics are, of course, frequently challenged. Some have argued that they bore, and bear, little relationship to 'real' levels of offending because there is a 'dark figure' of undetected and unrecorded crime. Nevertheless, studies of poaching have relied extensively on local case studies of court cases to sustain their arguments about the level, nature and significance of the crime in rural districts and the background and motivations of the poachers. The proportion of crime that went undetected may well have changed over time, but there is no reason to suggest it differed substantially across the country in ways that would undermine regional comparisons. Nor are trends in poaching cases likely to have been the consequence of bureaucratic, procedural and financial aspects of the prosecution process such as those suggested by Taylor which affected the police's approach to serious crimes like murder, since prosecutions for day and night poaching were invariably brought by game proprietors and their keepers who had a direct interest in their outcome.[16] Gatrell has also convincingly argued that there is a strong case for believing that judicial statistics for theft and violence were an accurate reflection of temporal trends in crime itself during the nineteenth century.[17]

Statistics collected after 1858 show that poaching prosecutions in England continued to rise throughout the 1860s from around 9,000 in 1860 to just over 11,700 ten years later. After dipping sharply in the early 1870s to just over 8,600, they then resumed their upward trend, peaking in 1877 at just under 12,400 cases.[18] After that, despite temporary reversals, there was a steady national decline, with cases virtually halving over the next twenty-five years (Figure 1). Jones's view is that this peak in prosecutions in the mid-1870s represented an all-time high, despite the bitterness that characterised the notorious 'poaching wars' of the late-Georgian and early-Victorian periods. The occasional official attempts to collect national figures for these earlier periods indicate that, even in the dark decade of the 1840s, prosecutions were running at perhaps only half the level of the mid-1870s.[19]

Day poaching offences, dealt with summarily at petty sessions, accounted for eighty to ninety per cent of poaching cases throughout the period and were consequently the dominant influence on overall figures. They were almost entirely responsible for the national peak in the 1870s and the subsequent marked decline (Figure 2). Despite the fear and controversy that night poaching aroused and the high-profile coverage which the local and national press gave to serious cases involving assaults on gamekeepers, prosecutions for this offence rarely exceeded five per cent of cases in the second half of the nineteenth century and the figure declined steadily from the 1860s. A different pattern again is evident for offences under the Poaching Prevention Act of 1862, the only offence for which the police were responsible for initiating proceedings. These fluctuated over the period, with a discernible peak in the late 1870s, but they were at much the same level in the 1900s as they had been forty years earlier (Figure 3).

A regional breakdown of these poaching figures, however, reveals that, far from being primarily a characteristic of agricultural counties, industrialising and mining counties of the North and Midlands accounted for a significant proportion of cases. In the late 1860s

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Figure 1. Total poaching offences in England, 1862–1901.

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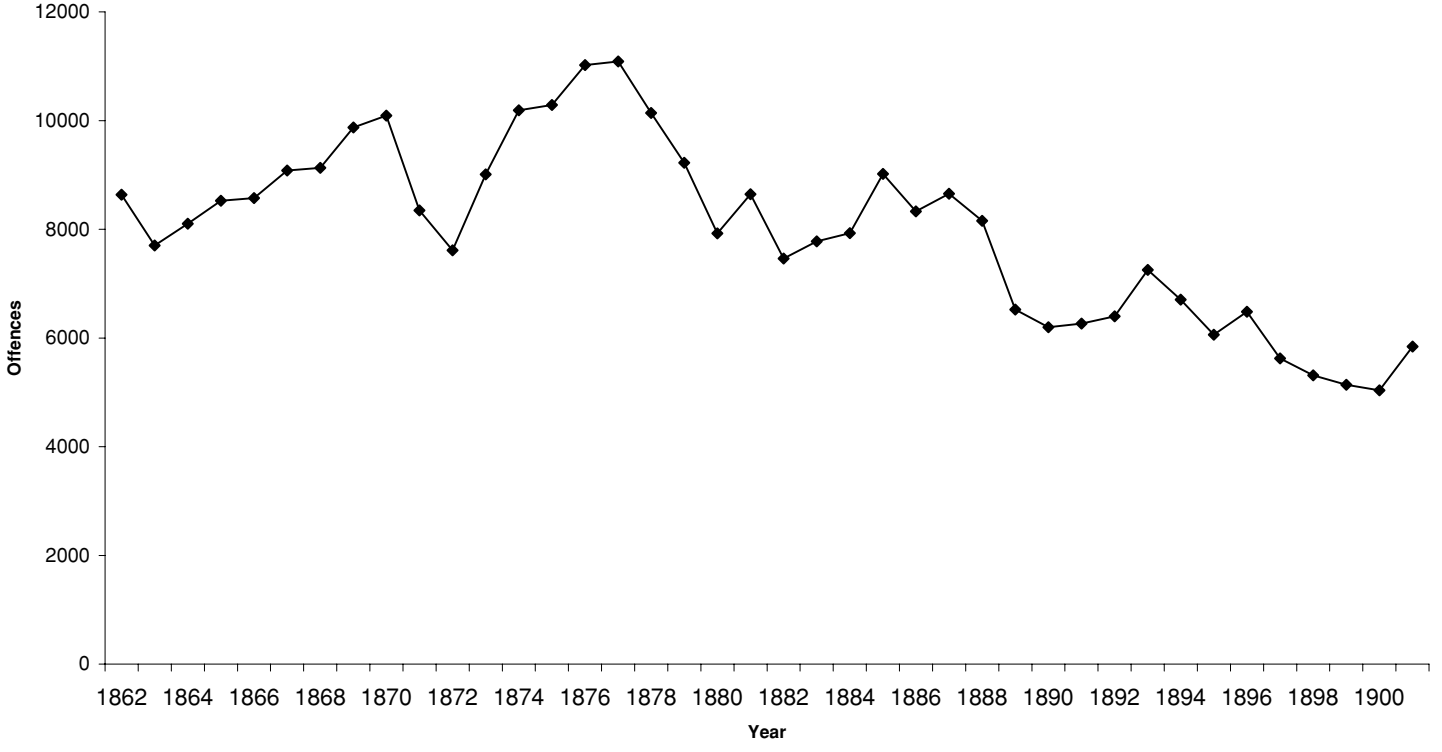


Figure 2. Day poaching offences in England, 1862–1901.

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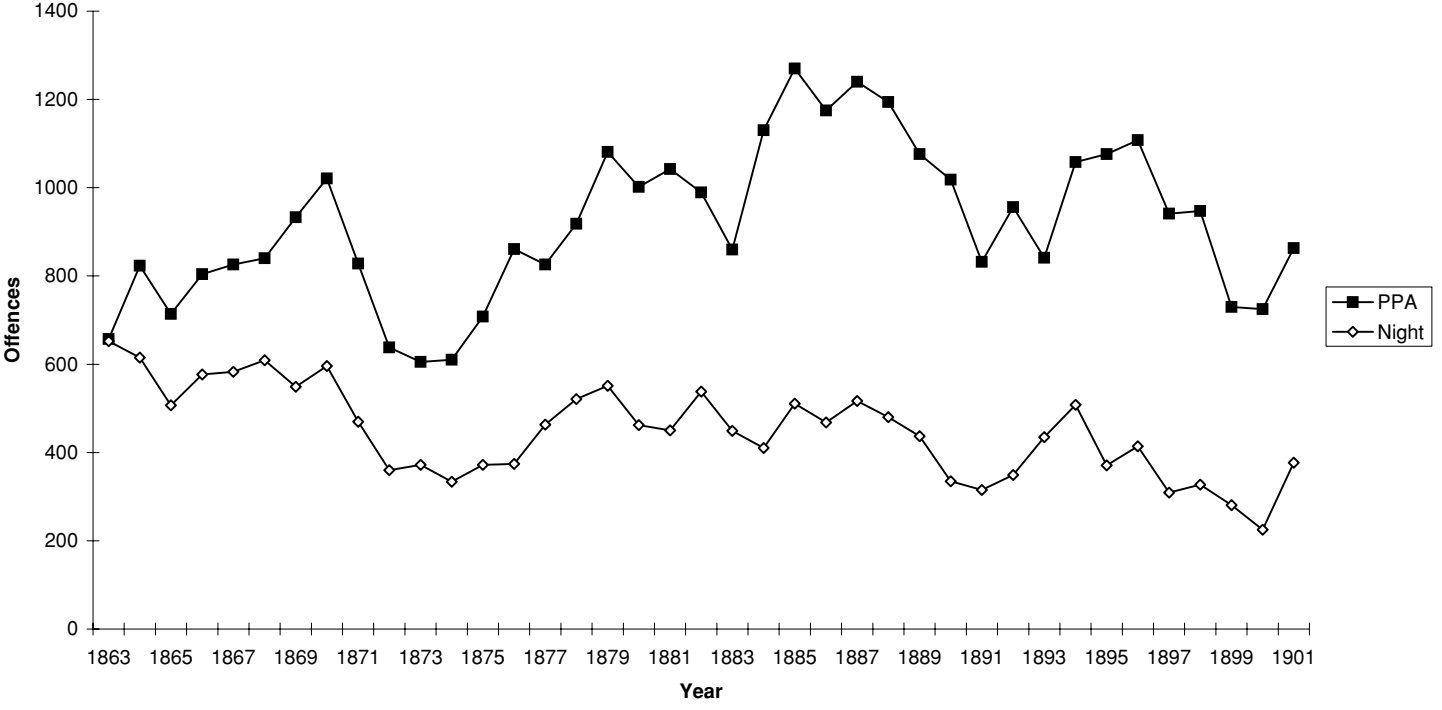


Figure 3. Night poaching and poaching prevention act: offences in England, 1862–1901.

(1865–9), for example, there were around two to three times as many prosecutions for day poaching in the West Riding of Yorkshire (3,698), Durham (2,053) and Lancashire (2,110) than in Norfolk (1,204), Suffolk (1,378) and Essex (1,386). Over a quarter of day poaching cases in England were accounted for by just six counties (West Riding, Lancashire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Durham and Cheshire). The same counties were responsible for an even higher proportion (thirty-seven per cent) of night poaching and cases brought under the Poaching Prevention Act (thirty per cent) during the same period. Such counties were also the major influence on national trends over the next thirty years. The dramatic peak in day prosecutions that occurred in the late 1870s can be explained *entirely* by reference to a relatively small number of counties in the North and Midlands. Between 1872 and 1876 prosecutions for day poaching rose by 167 per cent in Northumberland, 125 per cent in Durham, 114 per cent in Lancashire, ninety-nine per cent in the West Riding of Yorkshire, eighty-three per cent in Northamptonshire, eighty-two per cent in Warwick, eighty per cent in Derby, seventy-two per cent in Staffordshire, sixty-six per cent in Cheshire, sixty-four per cent in Nottinghamshire and fifty-nine per cent in Leicestershire. Industrialising counties were also responsible for the equally dramatic fall in prosecutions from the late 1870s (Figure 4).[20]

By contrast, prosecutions in the agricultural South and East failed to reflect national trends. During the late 1870s they were consistently lower than they had been a decade earlier. Between 1865–9 and 1875–9, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Huntingdonshire recorded falls in excess of thirty per cent with only three counties witnessing any increases: Oxford (four per cent), Norfolk (one per cent) and Hampshire (half per cent). Conversely, when national figures started to fall, prosecutions in these counties actually rose by over a quarter between 1877 and the mid-1880s, reaching a peak in 1885 which was twenty-five per cent higher than the early 1860s. Even in the mid-1890s prosecutions for day poaching in many south-eastern counties were still little different, and in a few cases were actually higher than the mid-1870s. Only after the turn of the century did they consistently fall below levels recorded thirty years earlier. South-western counties fell between these two extremes, exhibiting more modest rises in both the 1870s and 1880s with declines in between these peaks.

Night poaching exhibited similar regional patterns, although the national peak for this offence occurred during the early 1860s, largely because of exceptional numbers of prosecutions in Lancashire and Cheshire during the cotton famine. Offences under the Poaching Prevention Act also declined in the North from as early as the 1860s but were increasingly reported further south by the 1880s. The cumulative impact of these changes meant that total prosecutions for poaching between the late 1870s and late 1890s fell by over sixty per cent in Cheshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Durham, Lancashire, Leicester, Northumberland, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Westmorland and Yorkshire and by over fifty per cent in Nottinghamshire, but by less than twenty per cent in most southern counties (Figure 5).

This regional differentiation is even more pronounced when population changes are taken into account. On the one hand, prosecution rates clearly demonstrate what historians have argued was the case earlier in the century: that the crime rate for this offence was much higher in the southern counties. In increasingly urban counties, where there was

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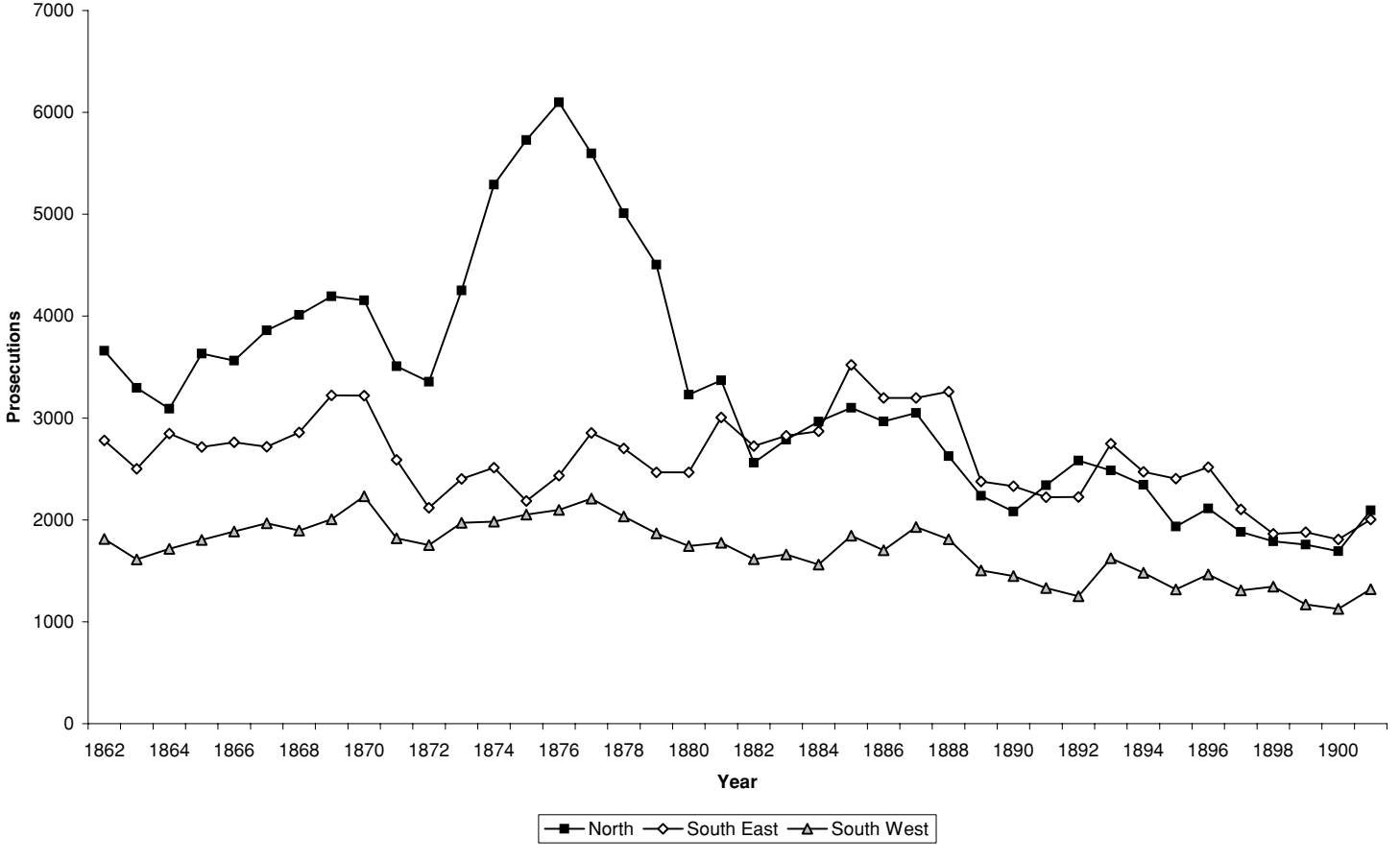


Figure 4. Regional variations in day poaching offences in England, 1862–1901.

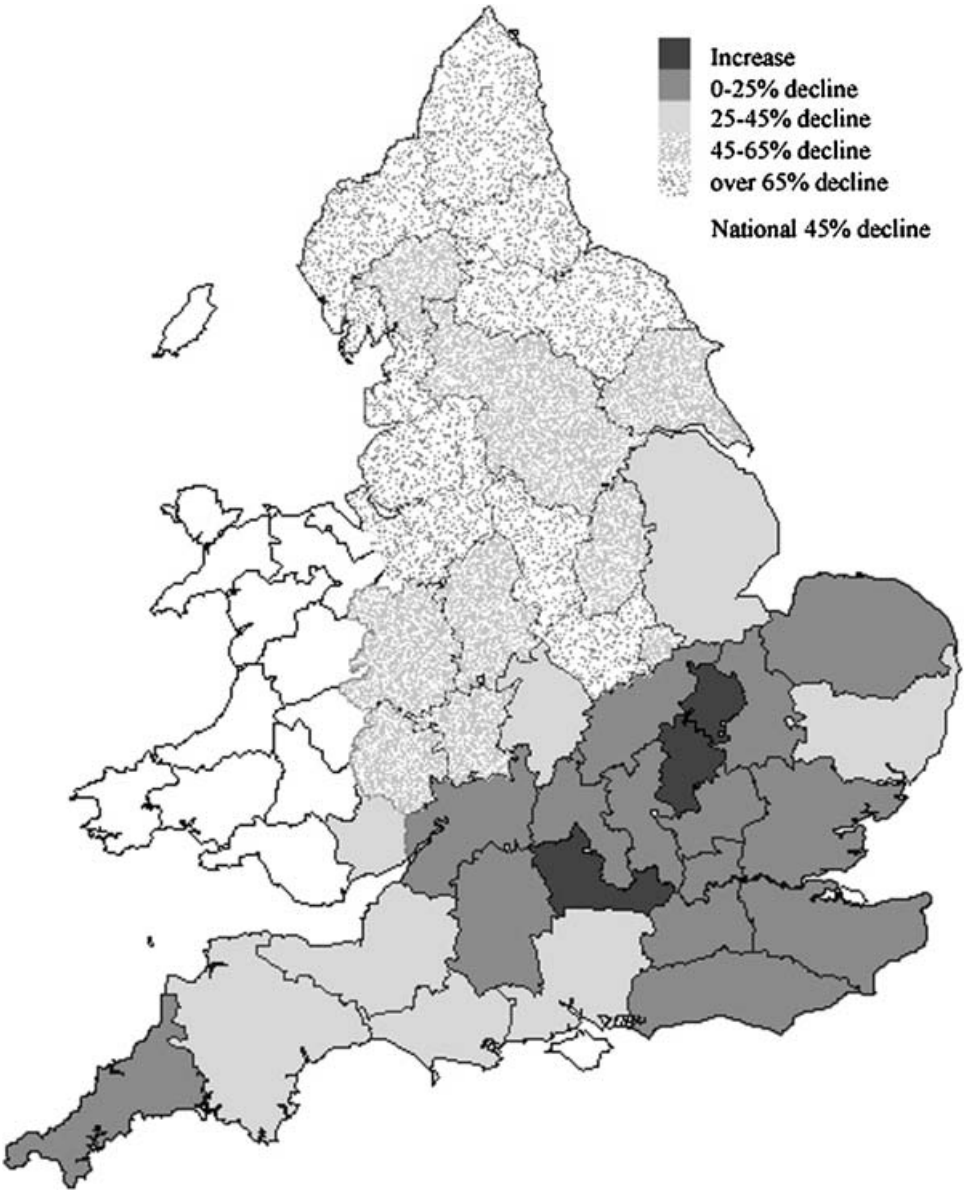


Figure 5. Percentage change in poaching prosecutions, 1875/79–1895/99.

dramatic population growth in the last quarter of the century, crime rates fell substantially. In many parts of the South and East affected by rural depopulation, however, the crime rate remained stubbornly buoyant, and in East Anglia it actually rose in the dying years of the century. Falling populations in rural areas may have contributed to the marginal fall which occurred in absolute numbers of prosecutions over the period, but there was no marked decline in the incidence of poaching among the resident population who remained.

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It is inconceivable that such marked regional differences and temporal patterns were generated solely by chance. Their clarity and long-term consistency strongly suggest that they reflected real differences in experiences and that poaching cannot be considered or explained solely, or even primarily, as a crime associated with agricultural districts in southern and eastern counties.

The industrial poacher

High levels of poaching in the North and Midlands cannot be explained by reference to agrarian social structures, hiring practices or levels of agricultural workers' wages. Furthermore, northern agricultural workers' incentives and opportunities to poach were considerably less than their counterparts further south. Not only were they more likely to experience restrictions on their freedom as living-in farm servants, but they enjoyed better living standards throughout the century.[21]

Contemporary observers agreed that poachers in these regions were not agricultural workers, but were primarily drawn from the ranks of industrial workers such as weavers, framework knitters, potters, colliers, masons and metal workers, who lived either in towns or in the numerous smaller industrial and mining communities which were established from the late eighteenth century.[22] As Archer noted, poaching here was 'a rural crime in an urbanizing environment'.[23] One West Riding farmer observed: 'There are very few [agricultural] labourers who are poachers. They are chiefly of another class, colliers and manufacturers and masons and delve men and quarry men and hand-spinners – they can make their nets cheap'.[24] Articles and biographical sketches of gamekeepers in the late-Victorian professional journal, *The Gamekeeper*, invariably identified the greatest threats to game preservation as occurring on estates close to significant urban settlements or coalfields.[25] Colliers were seen as the most innovative, cunning and dangerous poachers. One headkeeper recalled that, in his youth on a single-handed estate 'in the North Country', he was plagued by poachers and that he still had 'sundry scars, the relics of bruises and cuts inflicted by that favourite weapon of the collier, his clog'.[26]

These contemporary opinions of the northern poachers' industrial background receive substantial support from the qualitative evidence collected by Hopkins and Jones, while Archer's quantitative study found that the overwhelming preponderance of poachers brought before the courts in south-west Lancashire estates resided in urban areas, particularly Liverpool.[27] Surviving petty sessions records for Kirkham, a small market town to the west of Preston, and Higher Blackburn to the east in the 1860s also confirm this connection with industrial and urban workers.[28] The 'labourers' who dominated proceedings at Kirkham were not locals; two thirds gave their place of residence as Preston with the rest scattered throughout the Fylde area. In the area to the east of Blackburn, 'labourers' accounted for less than half of the offenders, with the rest drawn from specific trades in textiles, coal mining and a variety of crafts. Over two thirds of those prosecuted here were from the three major industrial settlements in the area: Burnley, Padiham and Clitheroe.

This correlation between poaching and urban or industrial areas in Lancashire is replicated elsewhere in the North and parts of the Midlands. In 1864 the government

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commissioned a survey of all poaching offences brought before petty sessions and higher courts between 1857 and 1863.[29] In most cases, the returns supplied precise information about the locations at which the crimes were committed, enabling a remarkably detailed picture of their spatial distribution to be constructed. This confirms that areas dominated by textiles, heavy industry and mining witnessed significant concentrations of poaching. In Lancashire, for example, poaching was common around St Helens, Wigan, Blackburn, Burnley, Haslingden and Chorley. In Cheshire, estates to the south of Stockport and around Macclesfield were the prime targets for poachers from these towns. In Cumbria, there were few prosecutions in central Lakeland or the rich agricultural plains to the west of Carlisle but significant clusters close to the industrial towns of the west coast, Carlisle itself, the decaying weaving town of Brampton, and the market towns of Penrith, Kendal, Cockermouth and Appleby. Over the border in the West Riding of Yorkshire, north to Durham and Northumberland, and south into Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, poaching was most common on coalfields, as it was in Somerset (see Figure 6).

Clearly, therefore, views of poaching predicated on the assumption that it was primarily a phenomenon rooted in agricultural communities, largely those located in southern and eastern England, are, at best, partial, at worst, misleading. Explanations of poaching's incidence, of the marked national peak in prosecutions during the 1870s, and of the subsequent dramatic decline must be sought elsewhere in an understanding of the behaviour of so-called 'steam age poachers'.[30] Their motivations are clearly integral to such explanations, but equally significant was the availability of opportunities to poach, opportunities which were radically transformed by revolutionary developments in the nature and location of game preservation and field sports themselves in the late nineteenth century.

The accessibility of game: regional specialisation in preservation

The changing geography of poaching broadly mirrored that of game preservation itself. The numbers of gamekeepers returned in the decennial censuses is a useful surrogate measure of this. The census of 1851, the first to classify keepers as a separate occupation, recorded more in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire than any other counties.[31] Twenty years later, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Durham, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Nottingham alone still employed twenty-five per cent of England's gamekeepers. Their distribution within these counties also suggests that the majority of them were employed on what Hopkins characterised as 'closely preserved estates' adjacent to 'fast growing industrial agglomerations' rather than in the less sparsely populated agricultural, coastal and moorland regions.[32] This reflected the fact that much of the demand for game shooting was likely to have been met locally. This 'juxtaposition of the game estates to the towns and cities' was also specifically noted by Archer as a major cause of intensive game conflict in early-Victorian Lancashire.[33] It was also widely recognised at the time as a problem by the increasingly organised gamekeeping profession who regularly referred to the problems of trying to preserve game close to centres of population, particularly in mining districts.[34] A letter to *The Times* in 1876, referring to a particularly violent

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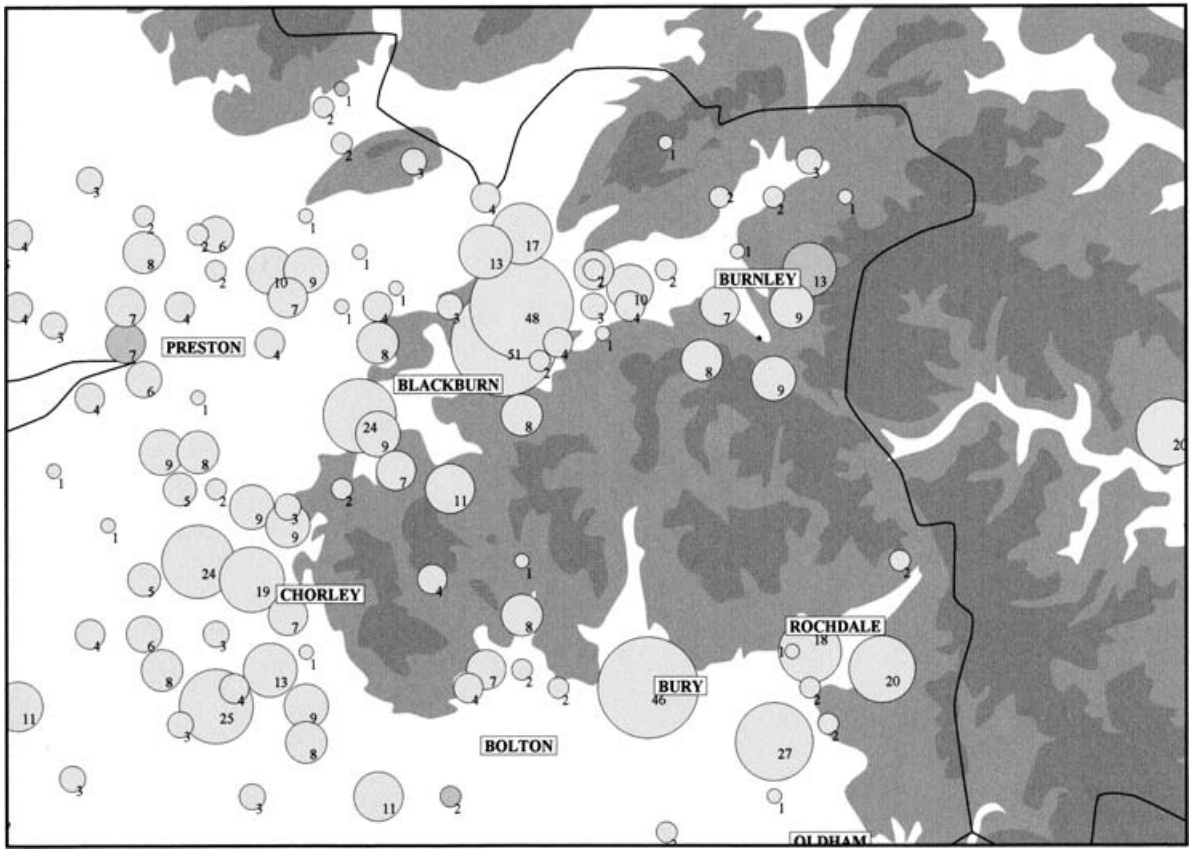


Figure 6. Poaching offences in central Lancashire, 1857–63.

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incident which had occurred at Gloddaeth, midway between Conway and Llandudno, vividly described the problem which faced such estates:

> It occupies, therefore, a sort of suburban position with regard to either of these places. The whole district teems with sailors, miners, quarrymen, rough mountaineers, and the irregular population that ministers to the wants of the tourist class and in so doing becomes well acquainted with the country. . . . Is it possible for an owner of an old place to keep up, in such circumstances, the making of country life these days?[35]

By the third quarter of the century, however, it is clear that game preservers were increasingly choosing to pursue this aspect of 'country life' in more congenial surroundings, untroubled by the threats posed by industrial and urban expansion. Within Lancashire, for example, the Earl of Sefton, whose estates surrounded Liverpool, developed what became the best grouse shooting estate in Lancashire in the remote valley and moors of Upper Wyresdale in the north of the county. Much of the Cliftons' estate at Lytham, once prized for its shooting, was laid out as a seaside resort and golf links. The laying down of arable fields to grass over much of the county also undermined opportunities for shooting, while the annual influx of wild duck was reduced by the draining of Lancastrian moss land.[36] A steel works replaced warreners who were recorded as resident in Trafford Park outside Manchester in the 1881 census, after the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal in the 1890s. The story was replicated over much of the North. Game preservation over much of the Staffordshire coalfield, for example, was reported to have ceased by the early 1870s.[37] Northern estates which continued to produce driven shooting on a grand scale, such as Lambton Castle (Durham), Chatsworth (Derbyshire), Eaton Hall (Cheshire), Castle Howard, and Studley Park (North Yorkshire), were situated away from centres of population.

As pressure from urban expansion and industrial development grew, established landowners and the new commercial and manufacturing classes often preferred, and in some cases were obliged, to pursue their sport in the more congenial environments of new 'sporting estates', ideally situated well away from centres of population, or even in the 'big game' reserves in the imperial vastnesses of Africa and Asia.[38] After 1870 the expansion of sporting estates in the North occurred in the remote, sparsely populated upland moors of Yorkshire, Lancashire, Derbyshire and Northumberland, the valleys of North Wales and the grouse moors and deer forests of the Scottish Highlands, all as yet largely undisturbed by ramblers.[39] Here the lack of people was often specifically singled out in sale particulars for estates as a major attraction and new hunting 'lodges' with all the modern conveniences were erected for extended stays, not just for the owner and his acquaintances but also for wealthy customers who paid for shooting rights.

Over the same period, the pursuit of pheasant shooting became increasingly concentrated in, and associated with, the less heavily populated counties within easy reach of London. The capital's burgeoning commercial success generated the wealth to purchase, develop or lease sporting estates which were being developed on land which was becoming increasingly marginal for cereal production as the agricultural depression deepened. Across a broad swathe of England south of the Wash, particularly

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in Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex, Kent, Berkshire, Hertfordshire and East Anglia, new landscapes were formed, specifically to provide the conditions for driven shooting on a grand scale.[40] It was at this time that East Anglia in particular emerged as England's premier pheasant and partridge shooting region, 'a land of game, beyond any others in England', where apprentice gamekeepers were increasingly advised to go 'to learn your job properly'. Novel artificial rearing techniques such as the Euston and Elveden hatching systems were named after the East Anglian estates on which they were developed.[41] 'Wondrous improvements in our fire-arms', especially the widespread adoption of the breech-loading shotgun after 1865, facilitated a massive expansion in driven shooting.[42] By the end of Gladstone's second ministry, over half a million pheasants were being shot each year, most of them, if reports are to be believed, in the South of England.[43] On leading estates like Elveden, Rendlesham (Suffolk), Six Mile Bottom (Cambridgeshire), Holkham and Sandringham (Norfolk), escalating numbers of winged and ground game were reared and despatched by the great shots of the day, such Lord Walsingham, Maharajah Duleep Sing and the Prince of Wales, in an increasingly competitive annual round of 'grande battues' which only came to an end in 1914.[44] On the Benacre Hall estate, near Lowestoft, nearly 17,000 head of game were shot in the late 1890s, compared to just 3,400 eighty years earlier. Elveden estate smashed all previous records in the 1885–6 season with a staggering 81,877 head. Unlike the remote northern grouse moors, such estates offered potentially rich pickings for poachers.

This regional restructuring of the game industry is reflected in the census. Between 1871 and 1911, the number of gamekeepers in Lancashire fell from 544 to 482, in Cheshire from 366 to 304 and in West Yorkshire from 640 to 602. Only in Cumberland, Westmorland and Northumberland, where there was an expansion of upland grouse moors, were there any significant increases in the North. In contrast to the decline or stagnation witnessed in increasingly industrial counties, gamekeepers increased by over forty per cent in Wales and by even more in Denbighshire, Flint and along the Welsh Marches. They nearly doubled in Scotland from just over 3,500 to just under 6,000, reflecting the substantial expansion of game and stalking estates along the Scottish Borders and in the western and central Highlands.[45] Even more marked increases were recorded in the counties of South-East England. Norfolk, Suffolk, Hertfordshire, Essex, Hampshire, Kent, Sussex and Surrey, which had employed twenty-four per cent of England's gamekeepers in 1871, increased their share to thirty-six per cent by 1911. Over the same period the numbers employed in Hampshire increased from 529 to 980, in Kent from 427 to 606, in Norfolk from 648 to 1,202 and in Suffolk from 457 to 913 (see Figures 7 and 8).

The culture of poaching

This restructuring, commercialisation and relocation of game preservation in the late nineteenth century clearly undermined opportunities for urban and industrial poaching, but it is not a total explanation of the high incidence of the crime in the North and Midlands up to the 1870s; nor is it sufficient to account for the speed with which the crime declined thereafter. An understanding of the motivations of the industrial poacher himself is also required.

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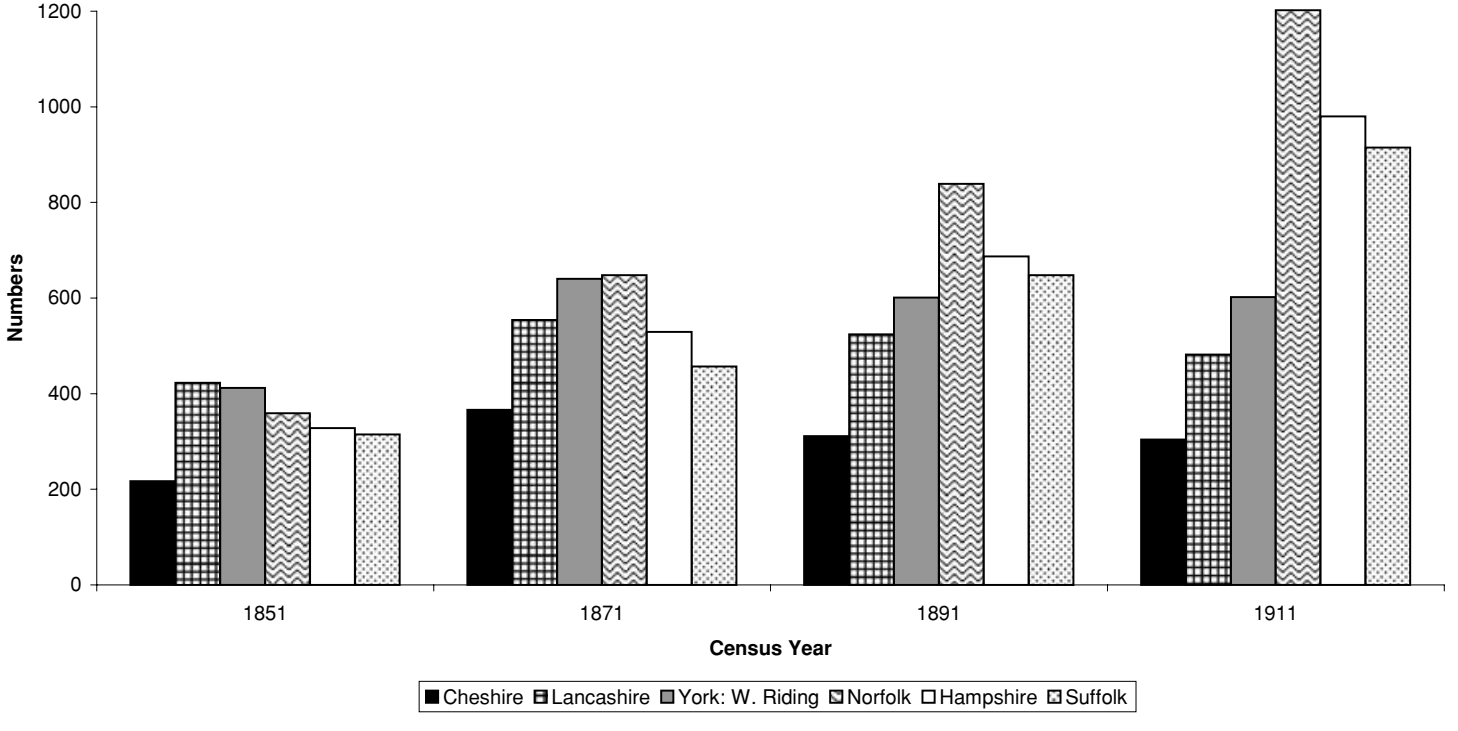


Figure 7. Gamekeepers: selected English counties 1851–1911.

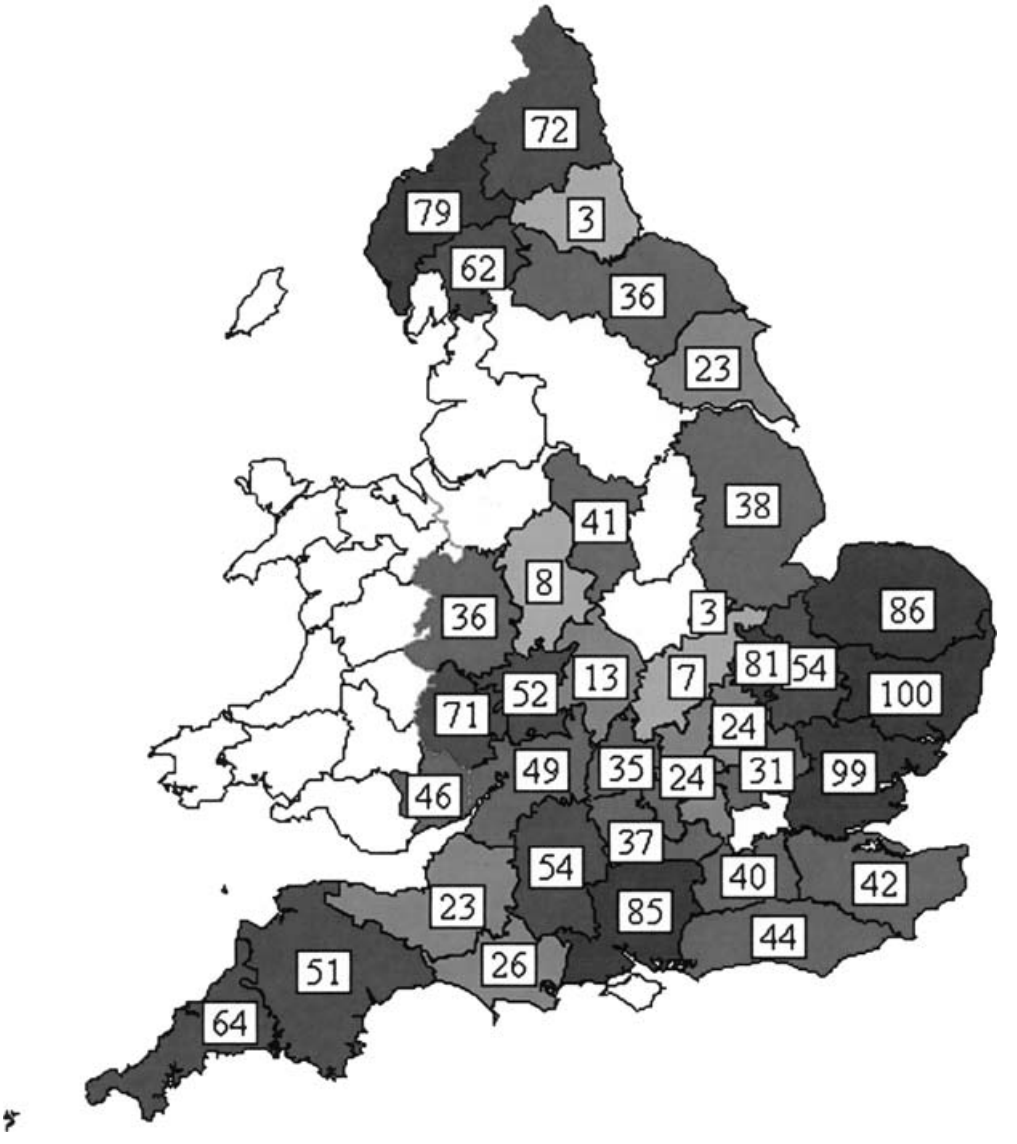


Figure 8. Percentage change in gamekeepers, 1871–1911 (white area = decline).

The appeal of poaching for some was doubtlessly akin to that which attracted those legitimately entitled to kill it. They enjoyed the thrill and excitement of the 'sport' and the accompanying interaction and involvement with the countryside and natural world.[46] Such attitudes were not restricted to rural inhabitants or to southern and eastern England. Many of the urban poachers that Archer identified in Lancashire during the early to mid-nineteenth century still had country skills and familial links with the countryside.[47] Miners and other northern industrial workers had a long tradition of celebrating poaching in songs and oral tradition in much the same way as the shoemakers of Beccles or the

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rabbiting craftsmen and sailors of Ipswich.[48] Poaching was also integrally linked to other sports such as coursing and dog-racing which were both particularly popular in mining communities.[49]

'Legitimate' field sports of many kinds, including the following of hounds, continued to attract a dedicated following of industrial workers late into the century, particularly in the North East and parts of the Lake Counties, while whippet keeping remained popular among northern miners.[50] But the development of a distinctive, urban working-class culture in the closing years of the century undoubtedly undermined the traditional appeal of the 'great game' for those born and bred in an urban environment.[51] The commercial cultures of spectator and participatory sports, mass leisure activities such as the seaside holiday, and domestically-oriented hobbies in the last quarter of the century are well documented. The culture of mining villages, too, was transformed by co-operative societies, working men's halls, clubs, institutes, reading rooms and chapels which served to transform the image of the collier from the fun-loving 'Bob Cranky' into the sober respectable stereotype of 'Jack Spring'.[52]

Two activities in particular arguably stand out as providing the most direct competition to the 'sporting' or recreational appeal of poaching. First, there was the growth of alternative outdoor activities, team and individual sports, which offered contact with the natural world and countryside: rambling, cycling, running, dog-racing, angling and competitive shooting clubs. Significantly, one of the few occasions when James Hawker abandoned poaching was when 'Riding . . . was all the go' and his 'attention was drawn to cycling'.[53] During the 1880s huge crowds attended 'park' or 'enclosed' hare-coursing meetings run by commercial companies on estates like Haydock, Kempton, and Gosforth (Newcastle) before they were converted into racecourses. In the mid-1880s 'rabbit coursing, with a peculiar little breed of whippet' was also common in the Potteries and around Manchester.[54] Competitive 'harrier' running clubs with large working-class memberships emerged from the 1870s, particularly in the poaching strongholds of the West Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire.[55] Equally significant were the competitive mass angling clubs that developed in industrial areas, particularly around Sheffield.[56]

Second, the late nineteenth century witnessed the growth of 'domestic game keeping': the selective breeding and rearing of 'fancy' fowl (poultry), rabbits, cage-birds and racing pigeons. Encouraged by the availability of surplus income and cheap grain, these became an integral part of working-class life in northern and midland industrial towns and colliery villages, pursued in sheds, back yards, gardens and allotments.[57] Such hobbies not only provided opportunities for continuing involvement with 'wild' creatures, they could be fiercely competitive activities, with individuals displaying their prized possessions at regular shows, or, in the case of pigeons, entering them in long-distance homing races. They also gave individuals pride and status within their communities, a sense of control over their lives and a chance to develop associations and shared interests.[58] Popular magazines emerged to cater for their interests, several of them, including *Fur and Feather* (1890), *The British Fancier, or Kennel, Poultry, Pigeon & Pet Stock Review* (1892) and *Pigeons* (1904), published not in London, but in Bradford and Manchester. The growth of such pursuits reflected a wider urban cultural transformation in attitudes towards the

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natural world, which manifested itself in organisations devoted to the conservation of wild life, and the keeping of domesticated birds and small mammals as pets.[59]

The growing contrast between commercial northern-urban and traditional southern-rural cultural experiences was never absolute, but such new pursuits appear to be far less evident in agricultural districts where work and leisure were still fundamentally bound up with the seasonal calendar, and a 'hedgerow leisure' culture undoubtedly endured longer. Rural values were far more complex, and probably underwent less susceptible change, than those portrayed by Arch, Ashby and Thompson, themselves tangible, and possibly atypical, manifestations of late Victorian rural respectability. Even if some in the cereal heartlands gravitated toward established religion and practical forms of self-improvement, or were incorporated into the social welfare programmes of benevolent landowners and employers, there is no evidence of a lessening of hostility to the game laws.[60] Indeed, sober, religious and regularly-employed sections of rural society, trade unionists and Methodist preachers, remained among their fiercest critics even if they were the least likely to actually participate in poaching themselves. Howkins also has shown just how far differentiation among southern labourers has been underestimated and how distinctions between rough and respectable remained valid.[61] Despite the introduction of compulsory schooling, the formative experiences of the young in such areas were only marginally different from those of earlier generations.[62] The working and recreational experiences of childhood continued to serve as an apprenticeship, not just to the ways of the country in general, but to the specific skills of poaching.

The low incomes in agricultural districts allowed for little of the non-essential spending which underpinned the commercialisation of leisure elsewhere. East Anglian biographies of the time, as well as the later oral histories collected by Ewart Evans, suggest that commercial entertainments, outside the travelling circus or fair, penetrated into rural areas relatively late.[63] Club sports were rare. Informal recreations involving the natural world continued to dominate. Baldry (Norfolk) and Hawker (Northamptonshire) both suggest that poaching remained a major source of amusement in agricultural areas, in which the young indulged almost as a rite of passage.[64] The fact that there was not a significant fall in prosecutions in many rural areas, particularly East Anglia, may suggest that a hard core of offenders in these areas were unmoved by moral reformation about them, or that, equally, there were other factors which continued to sustain the rural population's propensity to poach.

The economics of poaching

The relationship between poaching and living standards provides another compelling explanation both of the high level of poaching in industrial areas and of its dramatic decline. Archer, Hopkins and Thompson have followed some contemporary observers in rejecting the view that urban poaching was a response to poverty, and maintained that it was driven by a thriving commercial market for game which was at its height during times of prosperity rather than depression.[65] This view of poachers as market-conscious criminals, however, runs counter to the accepted interpretation of other nineteenth-century property crimes and to interpretations of poaching in the South, which stress

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that the poor resorted to poaching to counter the effects of low working-class standards of living, depressed wages, and poor employment prospects.[66]

There is much to support Jones's impressionistic view, derived from literary evidence, that 'poaching was a popular response of the urban peasantry to changes in living standards'.[67] Although we lack reliable data on both wages and prosecutions before the 1860s, it is significant that the years when concerns about poaching were at their height – the immediate post-war years after 1815, the mid-1820s, early 1840s and early 1860s – were all years of severe depression in textile and mining districts.

The relationship between poaching activity and fluctuations in the industrial labour market is most clearly evident during and after the 1870s. The early years of the decade witnessed a speculative boom in manufacturing and unparalleled investment in mining resulting in an unprecedented period of prosperity for workers. Miners' wages rose by as much as fifty per cent in just three years.[68] Witnesses before the Select Committee on the Game Laws in 1872–3 credited this prosperity with the marked decline in poaching during the period. Thomas Muirhead, a Manchester game dealer, observed that, 'In our district colliers used to go in gangs 10 to 12 miles around Manchester, but you never hear of them now ... They can get much more from raising coals than what they can get in taking game, I should think.' 'Increased employment' meant that 'game is no temptation to them now.' Captain Congreve, Chief Constable of Staffordshire, also remarked that, 'there are very few men who are in regular work who poach much; there may be a few who occasionally work as colliers who poach, but only a few'.[69]

From 1874, however, the British industrial economy experienced what was possibly its worst depression of the century. Demand collapsed and prices plummeted, resulting in massive layoffs, short-time working, cuts in piece rates and widespread, unsuccessful industrial unrest. Mining was particularly badly hit. All the advances of the early 1870s were lost as real earnings fell to levels not seen since the 1840s and the bulk of the colliers taken on during the speculative boom were sacked.[70] In the Black Country, real incomes fell to almost a quarter of their level in the 1850s. A severe, protracted depression also hit the textile districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire with bankruptcies, lay-offs and wage cuts peaking in 1877–9.[71] *The Economist* described 1879 as a year of 'general difficulty, depression and disaster' in the wool textile industry, the worst 'that this generation has seen'.[72] Here, too, there were lay-offs, unsuccessful strikes, and dramatic declines in union membership. It was the industrial counties affected by this collapse which experienced the unprecedented and rapid increase in the number of poaching prosecutions, particularly the coalfields of North-East England, Lancashire, Staffordshire, the East Midlands.[73] Conversely, the marked decline in the 1880s coincided with rapid increases in money wages in these areas.

The problems of low money wages and irregularity of industrial employment before the 1880s had been exacerbated by high meat prices.[74] For most of the century, beef and mutton were considered to be too expensive to form part of the workers' basic diet. Ground game – rabbit and hare – was consequently widely reported as being viewed as an economical alternative by workers and artisans.[75] The police themselves recognised this. 'There is nothing that poor people prize more than rabbits; it is the only change of diet they have', while a hare was 'as heavy as a leg of mutton and half the money;' and

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there was also money back on the skin.[76] This demand meant that there was a thriving urban market for such game, legal or illegal. The Chief Constable of Newcastle, whose previous experience was in Norfolk, felt that it was much easier to dispose of ground game in northern centres.[77] Not surprisingly, chief constables also maintained that most poaching in the North was related to the taking of ground game, usually with dogs or nets, rather than the more complicated business of taking and disposing of winged game. 'Rabbits and hares are in greater abundance and easily caught; another reason ground game is so much sought for is, that they can sell them without a game licence; there is an enormous consumption of them'.[78] 'To take feathered game requires a much higher degree of skill and organisation, and better materials altogether; it is more dangerous to go out night poaching because men must have guns if they do not have a very extensive system of nets'.[79] The slump of the mid-1870s, therefore, can also be viewed as the last major food crisis since beef and mutton prices were still high while rabbit and hare prices were also rising significantly, reflecting a shortage of supply in some districts.[80]

From the mid-1880s, however, the price of alternative meats began to fall in response to the influx of cheap chilled and frozen imports, sold through specialist multiples and cooperative stores. These both boosted consumption and undermined working-class demand for cheaper ground game.[81] Significantly, this import penetration had a strong regional dimension. It was particularly evident in London, and throughout the industrial North and Midlands, but was largely absent in rural areas.[82] At the same time, the market for game, ground and winged, also became more specialised and structured, possibly reducing the opportunities for small-scale commercial poachers to dispose of their hauls on the open market. Substantial wholesalers emerged, importing rabbits in large quantities from Ireland, Europe and from Australia, or buying directly from landlords who increasingly sold winged and ground game to dealers.[83] Furthermore, the 1880s witnessed the rapid expansion of alternative supplies of domestic and market-bred poultry, especially in Lancashire and the West Riding, facilitated by the importation of cheap grain.[84] These economic developments clearly undermined much of the industrial workers' previous incentives to poach, whether for subsistence or for commercial gain. Unsurprisingly, prosecutions for poaching plummeted precisely in areas of the country where the late nineteenth-century revolution in food supply and diet was most evident.

There were no sustained rises in wages or improved employment prospects for agricultural workers in the crisis-ridden, low-wage, corn growing regions. During the 1870s, labourers' real earnings remained relatively buoyant after the successes of 1870–72, and prosecution levels here failed to reflect the national peak of the mid-1870s. As the farming depression deepened in the 1880s, however, and agricultural wages declined, particularly in the eastern arable counties, prosecutions rose, in some cases quite dramatically and to levels similar to, or some cases (Essex, Berkshire, Norfolk and Suffolk) in excess of, levels recorded twenty years earlier. Continuing high prices for basic foodstuffs in a less competitive retail environment, and farmers' reluctance to allow labourers to keep poultry for fear that they would steal grain to feed them, also served to sustain the need to poach ground and winged game to supplement a limited diet. Only at the very end of the century, when agricultural workers' incomes in these counties again

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matched or exceeded those that they had enjoyed in the 1870s, did poaching prosecutions show evidence of sustained decline.[85]

Conclusion

It is clear, therefore, that current explanations of the incidence and decline of poaching in the nineteenth century that focus on largely agricultural districts need to be revised in the light of these marked regional discrepancies in experience. The crime was much more common in industrial, urban counties of the North and Midlands than has been previously acknowledged. Indeed, it was these counties which both precipitated the peak in the 1870s and account for the dramatic subsequent decline in prosecutions. Changes in the industrial labour market were clearly a major determinant of these trends, but it has also been suggested here that the illegitimate pursuit of game fulfilled deeper needs for 'sport' or engagement with nature and the countryside, a need which first and second generation industrial workers could fulfil as long as game estates continued to operate close to centres of population and poaching skills and cultures endured. The development of a recognisably urban working-class culture in the last quarter of the century, therefore, may well have contributed to the declining appeal of poaching.

It was not just poachers' activities, however, that were transformed over the century. The changing regional geography of the crime mirrored a revolution in the nature, extent and location of game preservation. As with poaching, game preservation cannot be considered entirely within the confines of rural society. Much of the investment in game preserves, and demand for shooting, came not from owners of agricultural estates, but from the *nouveaux riches*. The market for consumption of game was also not just rural but urban, and was not confined to food. The capital required to develop and exploit game estates, the employment of gamekeepers, the methods of production and the growth of suppliers offering specialist equipment and feedstuffs meant that game itself took on the form of an industry.

The nature and significance of this transformation have been little appreciated or explored and would merit further investigation. For the poacher it clearly affected access to game, while the expansion of artificial rearing of pheasants and partridges meant that it was increasingly difficult for both offenders and the wider community to claim that these birds were wild and consequently 'fair game'. Strict preservation also heralded a revolution in attitudes to game on the part of the estate owners and sportsmen, which in turn increased the number of gamekeepers employed for operating and policing the sporting estates. The expansion in the supply of game also influenced its value for both poacher and preserver, whether this is construed as a market price for meat, fur or feather, or its importance as a potential source of food. This in turn raises issues related to the extent to which the period witnessed a shift between subsistence and market-oriented poaching, how the nature of the illegal urban market operated, and ways in which these were affected by the availability of alternative sources of meat and fur.

As Archer noted, historians should 'be wary of overdrawing distinctions between urban and rural crime and criminals'.[86] Popular perceptions of the poacher, whether as a villain or as a romantic curiosity, whose rural 'art' could be safely incorporated as a novelty into a 'Sports and Pastimes' exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1893, largely date from the end

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of the century and were part of the period's construction of 'the rural', the alternative 'other' to urban industrialism.[87] It was a process whose legacy has largely determined historians' assumptions and approaches to the study of the crime which has led to it being primarily associated with agricultural districts in the South and East. This was clearly not the case. Challenging these assumptions about poaching, however, also raises broader issues about the way in which studies of the 'rural' and 'urban' have developed along separate lines, rather than concentrating on the porous nature of the urban-rural divide that persisted in many parts of the country.

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