

John Reid Gillies : 1858 – 1949

Reminiscences

Veteran Keepers Reminiscences

Stoned by Dundee Poachers 30th June 1936

After having spent a lifetime frustrating the activities of poachers, Mr John Gillies, Gamekeeper on the Fotheringham Estate, retires this weekend.

He has completed this month 41 years service on the Fotheringham Estate, most of it in the Lumley Den area.

For 30 years he lived in Lumley Den House until that portion of the estate was sold by the late Colonel Fotheringham. His early training was got in the Carse of Gowrie. He was for 12 years keeper at Inchmartine, Inchtute, before coming into Angus.

Mr Gillies had just finished putting a hive over a swarm of bees when I visited him at his cottage at Todhills, to which he moved 11 years ago after the sale of Lumley Den. His beekeepers bonnet with its valance of muslin was still on his head.

“Poachers” he said “I have never had any encounters with them. They didn’t meddle with me if I didn’t meddle them. And it was bad enough taking them at all, without meddling them.”

“Oh yes, I’ve taken plenty of them” he added with a chuckle. “I’ve taken as many as three lots in one night. That was a great night’s work. The first lot – four of them – had about 60 rabbits on them. We took the rabbits and let the men go because the policeman knew them.”

“Another keeper took the rabbits away for safety, and we arranged to meet him at a particular place after he had done that. We hadn’t been lying ten minutes waiting for him when we heard footsteps on the road, and presently a couple of strange dogs came in about us.”

Dogs Give the Alarm

“As soon as they scented us the dogs turned and ran back to their masters to give the alarm. The men halted them began to run for it. We were pretty close on them this time. The Policeman blew his whistle and that warned the other keeper who was coming to meet us. He sat down on the road and when the men – there were three of them – came running past him he knocked the feet from two and captured the third.”

“That was the only time there was ever likely to be a row. The poachers were angry at being tripped, and they were for setting about the keeper. The policeman had to go in between them. Hardly had we let them go and a third lot, also three men, walked into the trap. We did not know them and they had to be walked into Dundee to be identified. One of them bolted just as we were getting to Dundee and got clean away. But his pals were know to the Dundee police, and before the Tealing policeman left Dundee they had got the other man too.”

“There were a lot of rabbits for the poachers to get in those days. There are not so many now. Col. Fotheringham would not have farmers complaining about the rabbits and he ordered that they should be killed all year round.”

“It wasn’t so easy doing that, for there was one wood which gave them all the cover they needed. A year or two before I went to the estate 36,000 trees had been blown down in the wood alone during a gale. The trees were lying all over the place, and the wood was ‘moving’ with rabbits.”

“It was a place that could be poached from either side of the wood, and at certain periods of the year I have lain out every night for six weeks keeping watch”

“Where I kept watch was usually determined by the airt of the wind, for the poachers must always choose a field where the wind was blowing towards them, otherwise the rabbits would have smelt and heard them.”

“A favourite place with me for keeping watch was the brig on the Lumley Den road. There I could lie on the sloping bank and see everybody who passed between me and the sky-line. If I saw that they were carrying poaching gear I slipped along and told the policeman, and together we would keep watch for them coming back.”

The laird would not prosecute a poacher. Unless it was a police case the men got off. The police could only take the men on the public road, but, as a matter of fact, most of the poaching was done on a public road. The poachers set up their nets on the roadside and drove the rabbits out of the field onto the roadway.”

Mr Gillies has still in his possession an old poaching net, which gave him an unexpected thrill in the early hours of one morning.

Caught in the Net

“When I was watching,” he added, “I cycled about the country roads without a light. This morning I was on my way home when I saw the figures of three men climb a fence and disappear into a field.”

“I drew into the side of the road to wait and watch. My pedal caught in a net, which I had not seen, and I landed on my face at the roadside. When I could pick myself up I set the bicycle in the corner of a stone depot at the roadside

and began to take down the net. Before I had got to the end of it the poachers had come back, and they began to pelt me with stones from the heap of road metal. I was hit once or twice about the legs, but not seriously, and I managed to take down all the net. I had to go towards them for my bicycle was in the corner of the depot from which they were stoning me, only they had not seen it.”

“However as I walked forward they made off and I got the bicycle and made off home with the net.”

“Gaming is nothing now to what it was when I first came here.” Mr Gillies added. “Two and sometimes three times a week I had to walk six miles from Lumley Den to Fotheringham carrying as many as 50 rabbits. Each rabbit weighed about 2½lbs, so that I was carrying over cwt for the six miles.”

“It was the same in the shooting season . I walked from Lumley Den to Fotheringham and even Kirkbuddo, did a day in the fields with the gun, and then walked home in the evening.”

“After a year or two I got a bicycle to help me along the public road with my load of rabbits. The weight was too much for the bicycle and it broke. At last a van was sent from Fotheringham twice a week to collect the rabbits.”

Beside his other interests Mr Gillies has been, and still is, a keen gardener, rearing his own fruit trees. His house is now protected with plane and beech trees, which he has reared from seed.

Then he has his pets – Nell, his Labrador retriever, who celebrated his retirement by presenting him with four lovely puppies; his ferret, which demands to be handled and stroked when he comes near, a tame goose which lays an egg a day without fail and a cock pheasant which he rescued from death in a fight some months ago, and nursed back to health.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Gamekeeper’s 45 Years of Service

Mr John Gillies, of Todhills, Tealing, who has been gamekeeper on the estates of the late Colonel Steuart-Fotheringham of Fotheringham and Murthly, for forty-five years, is to retire at the end of this month. He is aged seventy-eight.