

folkonwight

Island Folk History

Adapted from *Cock & Bull Stories: Animals in Isle of Wight Folklore, Dialect and Cultural History* (2008), by Alan R Phillips

FOXES



In 1790 John Hassell wrote that a parliamentary bill promoted by 'the gentlemen of the Island', secured "the farmers from the depredations of foxes, badgers, polecats, and other noxious animals, [and] the Island is kept very free from them. Even to let one of them loose is an offence punishable with transportation". Despite these strictures, there is more than one account of the curious habit of keeping a fox as a pet; Hassell himself goes on to say that a fox reared from a cub at Newchurch broke his chain and made his escape to the cliffs at Shanklin, laying concealed by day and committing his depredations by night. Eventually the fox was shot carrying off poultry from Shanklin Farm.

It was in fact a pet fox that led to the first recorded foxhunt on the Island. In 1830 Parson Fenwick of Brook "kep' a darg vox [dog fox] on a chain i' his yard at the rear"; inevitably the creature broke loose from its kennel and started causing havoc to chicken houses and lambing areas. Squire Thatcher was called in to help, though mindful that his hounds were trained to hunt only hare. The chase took place from Brook Down, via Pitt Place, Barnes High, Troopers,

Presford Farm, Kingston Copse, The Wilderness, Ramsdown, Chillerton Down, Larden's, Haslett Farm, and Bucks Farm, and was finally caught at Dungewood - a total of some fifteen miles in all. The story is told at some length in "How They Ran The First Fox In The Wight", one of Percy Stone's collection of Isle of Wight dialect poems *Songs of the Soil*, published in 1933.

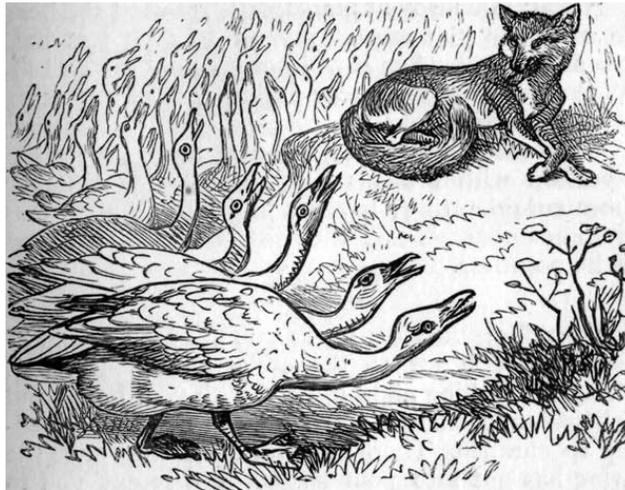


Despite the Squire's opposition to introducing foxes to the Island, it was his son William who in 1843 furtively brought eight more of them over to the Island, via the Portsmouth to Ryde ferry, and let them loose. When the Squire realised that they had been introduced, "his vile temper knew no bounds, swearing that if he could find the rascal who had introduced the foxes, he would lay his hunting whip across his shoulders!" Percy Stone again relates the tale in his dialect poem "How They Introduced Foxes To Wight", in which our beloved Squire once more takes the lead in the hunt, believing he is chasing a hare, but on this occasion the fox gets away. Squire William Thatcher is described as "a small man with a big voice and red face, and when angry or excited in the field he would frequently break into somewhat forcible, though unparliamentary, language...".

Benjamin Cotton of Afton and Henry Nunn imported foxes in 1845, the same year in which the Isle of Wight Foxhounds were established. Presumably these were the same foxes which, according to *A History of Newport Old and New* by Brian Greening and Bill Shepard, were one of the earliest cargoes to be brought to the Island by the Croucher boats at Town Quay, Newport; and the boats were all named after a hunting theme: the 'Tantivy', 'Tallyho', 'Fox',

'Vixen', 'Huntsman' and 'Whip'. Whatever the case, the species has continued to thrive on the Island to this day.

The Isle of Wight Hunt was also directly responsible for introducing the badger to the Island – though the latter may have been a *reintroduction*. A dozen badgers were imported by the Hunt in the 1920s to drive foxes away from their diseased earths and clean them, thereby rescuing the foxes from the mange that was endangering them and forcing them to open fresh earths.



The story is told of a milk-white dog fox which had been run into the open by the hounds, but as they approached him, doubtless in consequence of his unusual appearance, not one of them would touch him. He was conveyed to the stables of the master of the hounds and a suitable 'earth' set up for him, where he gradually overcame his natural timidity and would sit sunning himself on top of it. It was thought that he owed his colour to the paternity of an Arctic fox, yet another one which had escaped captivity; alternatively, he might have been an albino.

During January and February 1940 something of a scare took hold in the area between Ryde and Osborne House concerning reports of a monstrous wild animal roaming the area, leading to press and radio announcements. The beast was reported to have a head like a lion and the body of a dog, whilst its large footprints were tracked in the snow. Eventually it was shot at Bembridge and found to be a fox in an advanced state of mange: the poor creature must have been in a most pitiable state.

In folk belief, Reynard the fox (or Renyard as he was known on the Island) had a sinister reputation and was often seen as the symbol of the devil.