

THE NUMBERS OF DUCKS CAUGHT IN BOROUGH FEN DECOY, 1776-1959

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IN the years since Borough Fen has been operated as a Trust ringing station detailed notes have been made on the numbers of ducks caught. These notes are of immediate value in a number of ways, such as showing which pipes and which methods of catching are most successful at different times, but their greatest general interest lies in the picture they give of seasonal fluctuations in the catch. I have recently been able to examine the books kept by members of the Williams family, who worked the Decoy from about 1670 to 1958, and to compile from them graphs showing the numbers of ducks caught annually during most of the last 180 years. It is intended to make a full study of the records in relation to other decoy catches, shooting bags, and factors such as weather and land drainage which are likely to have affected the numbers of ducks caught. This study will take a long time, but there are a number of obvious features about the annual catch graphs which made their preliminary publication worthwhile.

From 1776 to 1840 the Williams' books show the total catches in 53 seasons, there being a break from autumn 1780 to spring 1787 and no records for 1797-98, 1800-01 or 1818-19. No records for 1841 to 1888 can be found. The five seasons 1888-89 to 1893-4 are chronicled and then the seven 1896-97 to 1902-3. A ten year break follows, but the series is complete from 1913-14 until the present time.

Since 1888 the species have been listed separately, but the records for 1776 to 1840 are unfortunately complicated by the fact that the units used consist of 'dozens' and that in making up a 'dozen' for the market species other than Mallard were counted as half-ducks (24 Teal or Wigeon=12 Mallard=1 dozen ducks). There is no means of discovering the proportions of different species caught during the early period and so we do not know exactly how many ducks were taken in the various seasons. Each recorded figure is obviously a minimum (as if only Mallard were caught) with a total twice as big as the listed one representing a possible maximum (all half-ducks, no Mallard). For the purpose of long-term comparison it seems simplest to treat recent catches in the same way and to plot them all in 'dozens' (Figure 1).

The catch of 450 dozen and 8 in 1804-05 is the largest recorded, followed by 422 dozen in 1919-20, 404 dozen and 9 in 1776-77 and 400 dozen and 9 in 1916-17. The lowest catch noted, 25 dozen, was in 1837, with those of 1955-56 and 1956-57 and the years 1838 to 1840 very little better. The best period for sustained high yield seems to have been 1913 to 1920.

It is remarkable that the general level of catches in the earlier years for which records are available is no greater than that in recent times, despite the great changes in land use which have occurred in the Fens, and in many other parts of the range of the ducks visiting Peakirk.

During the last seventy years at least, Mallard and Teal have made up most of the catch. Figure 2 shows the variations in seasonal catch of these two species (in ducks, not dozens). It makes very clear that the harvest of

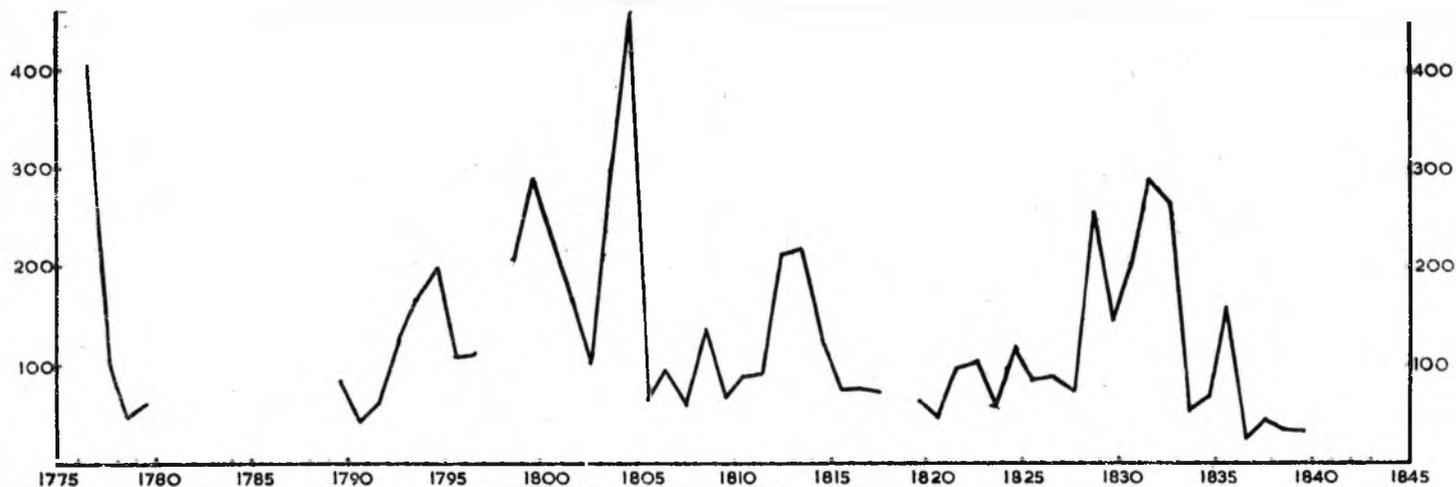


FIGURE 1 (part 1). Number of ducks taken in Borough Fen Decoy, in 'dozens,' 1776-1840.

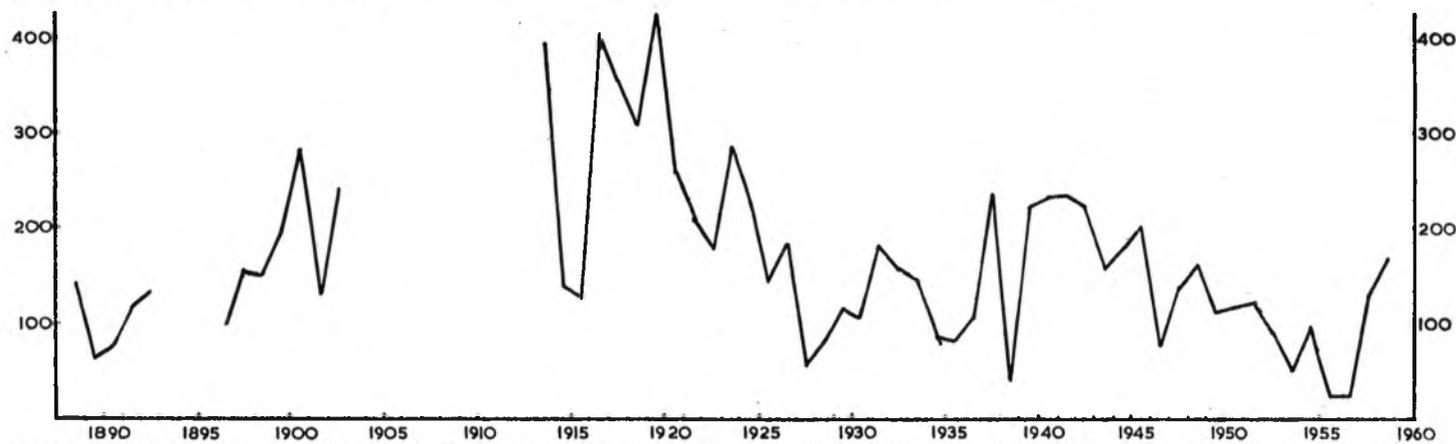


FIGURE 1 (part 2). Number of ducks taken in Borough Fen Decoy, in 'dozens,' 1888-1959.

the bumper years 1913-20 consisted largely of Mallard and that only in two seasons (1937-38 and 1939-40) were Teal greatly in excess. It is encouraging to note the recent rise in Mallard numbers after a 15-year period of decrease, especially since these birds are being returned to the population after ringing instead of being killed. The Teal graph is less reassuring, though it could be that catches will again increase greatly as they did after the low period around 1915.

The only other ducks that have been taken in significant quantities at Borough Fen are Wigeon, Pintail and Shoveler. The largest catches of Wigeon were 436 in 1939-40, 420 in 1948-49 and 410 in 1900-01. In 1888-93 the average annual catch was 94; in 1896-1903 it rose to 150 (60 in the worst season, 1896-97); from 1913 to 1920 it was about 134 (range 25-280); from 1920 to 1930 the average catch was 45 (the range 2 to 268; from 1930 to 1940 the average was 107, range 0 (1930-31) to 436; from 1940 to 1950 average 112. Since the high of 420 in 1948-49 the catch has fallen right away, only sixteen having been caught in ten seasons. This is probably a reflection of the reduced flooding which now takes place in Cowbit Wash.

Recent catches of Pintail and Shoveler have also been negligibly small but there have been periods in which each was relatively common, though there is no information prior to 1913. The highest known season's catch of Pintail was 286 in 1942-43, followed by 132 in 1943-44. The war period 1939-45 was very much the best. 60 in 1926-27 was the only catch of more than fifty outside that period and in most seasons the number was nearer ten.

The record catch of Shoveler was 267 in 1917-18, with 157 in 1945-46 second and 114 in 1948-49 third. For most of the period from 1918 to 1945 the annual catches were less than 10 birds and since 1949 this has again been the case. It seems unlikely that we can discover why these species are occasionally catchable in numbers until a good season again occurs. (At Slimbridge too hardly any are caught although Pintail winter in hundreds and Shoveler are resident. Pintail ignore the Decoy pool. Shovelers use the pool but cannot be baited or dogged into the pipes).

The Decoy books occasionally give some information on prices realised in the past. In 1793 ducks were sold for 1/8d each; in 1799 2/6d; in 1806 3/2d; in 1810 4/9½d; in 1818 3/4d; in 1826 3/2d; in 1835 1/5d; in 1917-19 8/- (compared with 4/9d to 5/- at the present day). It is of some interest to compare these prices with others for different places and periods during the last 250 years. Figure 3 records graphically some changes in the market price of a Mallard from 1713 to 1959. The prices other than those for Borough Fen ducks have been found by superficial search of published sources. They represent the sum paid to the decoymen, not the retail price.

There are large gaps in the record, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but the available figures suggest several points. During much of the 18th century the price ranged between 7d and 2/- each. From 1794 to 1810 the apparent value of a Mallard rose by nearly four times. This large change was probably due to inflation at the time of the Napoleonic wars. The subsequent slump in price during the 1830's was not only a result of the changing value of money but because ducks became easier to obtain.

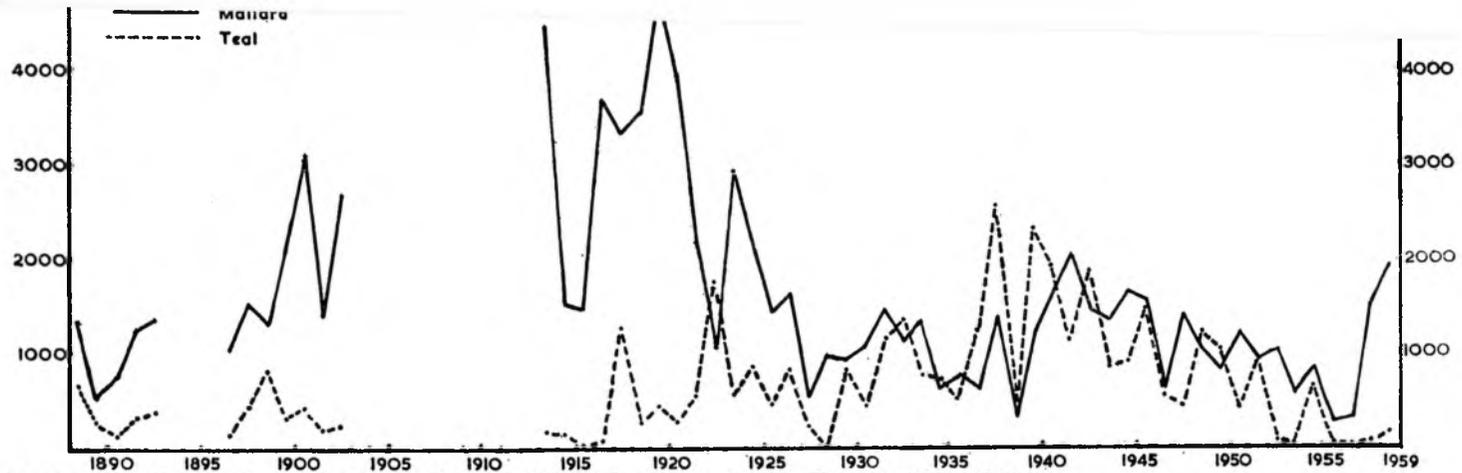


FIGURE 2. Seasonal catches of Mallard and Teal in Borough Fen Decoy, 1888-1959.

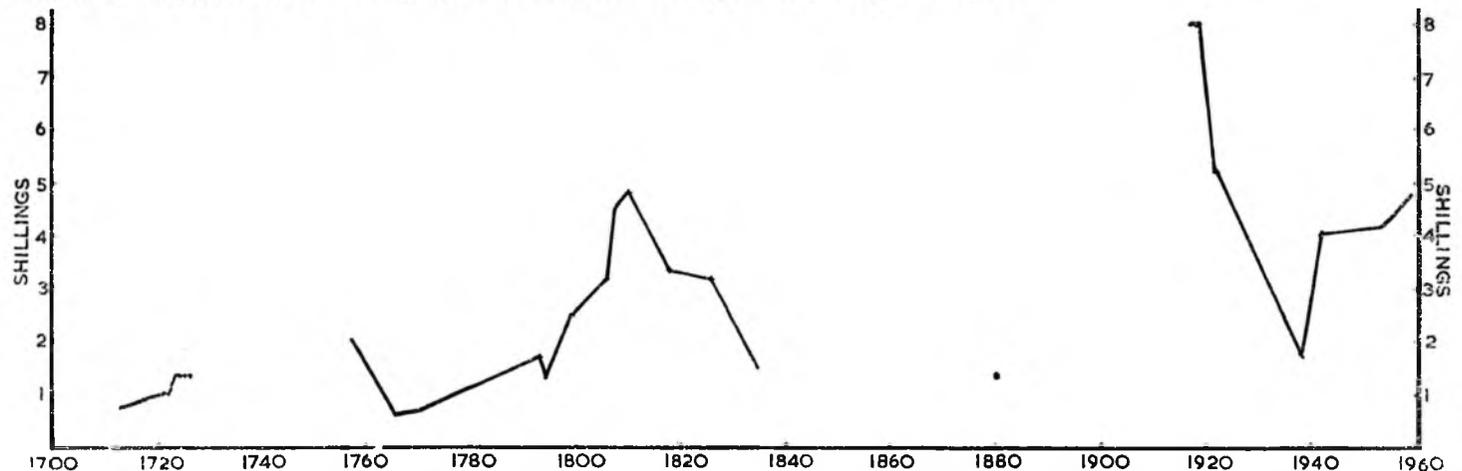


FIGURE 3. Prices obtained by decoymen for Mallard at various times between 1713 and 1959. Figures on the abscissa show price of a single bird, in shillings, though ducks are normally sold in dozens.

It was at this period that reliable guns suitable for wildfowling came into use and also that the importing of ducks from Holland began on a large scale. The British decoys had formerly provided the majority of ducks offered for sale. Now serious competition arose from two directions—the British gunners and the Dutch decoys. Thus it came about that though many decoys were built in the middle of the 19th century few of them, if any, proved profitable and most were soon abandoned.

In the 20th century the two World Wars caused temporary booms, especially remarkable in 1917-19, but the profitable operation of a decoy has become increasingly difficult. Captain H. A. Gilbert, writing in 1938, considered that an average seasonal catch of 3500 was required to begin to make a profit. Very few British decoys have consistently yielded catches of that size (Borough Fen did so only in the years 1913-20). At present, with further substantial increases in the costs of labour and material in the last twenty years, even Gilbert's suggested figure would be too low.

The money value of a Mallard is now nearly four times what it was in 1794. Yet at that time the decoyman's price for a duck was equal to a day's earnings of an agricultural labourer. Even the most frugal of modern decoymen would find it hard to exist on 4/10d a day.

