



# Birdwatching Notes

## 1882 ~ 6



John Weld (1813-1888) became Squire of Leagram on the death of his father in 1866. He was a talented artist, historian and naturalist. A collection of his paintings and beautifully illustrated notebooks, are preserved at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery at Preston, and at the Lancashire Record Office Preston.

He made detailed descriptions of the local countryside, and one of the last notebooks he kept was a local birdwatching diary.\* Good use was made of information provided by local people such as his gamekeeper, Marsden, and tenants / employees Wilson and Blezard. He also had reports from neighbouring keepers and landowners, from Hareden and Browsholme, Bleasdale and Claughton.

In those days wild birds were frequently shot or trapped, partly to clear birds considered to be pests, partly for identification and partly for sport. Dead birds were often taken to John Weld for identification. The deaths of some uncommon birds were noted. A pair of great shrikes had a nest with young at the Folly below Bleasdale's iron foundry in Apr.1883, but the nest was robbed, and the old birds were shot by Bleasdale himself. Weld's keeper shot sparrow hawks at their nest in a tree in the Buckbanks, June 1883, and a long eared owl at Inkling Green Jan.1884. The Hareden keeper, Shepherd, trapped and shot sparrow hawks and merlins in summer 1882, shot a raven over 3lbs weight, Apr.1883, and trapped a peregrine falcon July 1883. Woodcocks were targets for guns. One was shot by the keeper on George Slater's farm near Moss Lane in Dec.1882, another in the Moss Wood in Jan.1883. A buzzard was caught at Fair Oak in Jan.1885. Son-in-law, F.Berkley, shot a jacksnipe Dec.1883.

Some birds had lucky escapes! Howson, the carpenter, spotted a little grebe on his pond (near Startifants) Oct.1882, but it flew away before he could get his gun to shoot it. The keeper in Fair Oak woods in 1884 would have shot the pair of great spotted woodpeckers living there all winter, but he thought they might have a brood later. However a male great spotted woodpecker, shot at Fair Oak, was delivered to John Weld in March 1885.

Other interesting sightings --- Wilson saw stonechats while draining in Lower Greystonely. Pied flycatchers were seen in May 1884 in the Bottoms. Kingfishers were quite common along the brooks, eg Windy Hills Clough; water rail were seen in Buckbanks. Ring ouzels were numerous in the Wolfhouse Clough, and higher up on Wolfhouse Fell stockdoves nested in the rock holes. Flocks of snow buntings were reported on the fells, and a yellow bunting picked up dead on Parlick.

There were some curiosities. Dr Patchett brought a pair of jackdaws to Chipping and these became very tame. Albino birds aroused local interest. A white thrush had been seen in the district, by Dr Patchett, and a white starling was shot by Preston of Peacock Hey in Aug.1885.

Arrivals of summer visitors were meticulously recorded every year. Blezard noted unusually large flocks of lapwings on high ground Mar.1884. There were swallows at the (Kirk) Mill dam opposite Atkinson's house in Apr.20 1883, and martins at Townley Farm Apr.25. In 1884 the swifts arrived on May 5 in Chipping village; the cuckoo, as today, was heard first towards the fells, about Apr.24 in 1885.

Most descriptions were of common birds near Leagram Hall --- including some seen by staff working in the gardens and farmyard; also observations by his daughter Matilda who shared his interest in nature. Robins and wrens nested in the stove house, pied wagtails flitted about the courtyard. There were bullfinches in the orchard, goldcrests in a tree near Leagram chapel, and jackdaws perched on its cross.

\*Lancs.R.O. DDX 138/3