

The Swans of Wells

The majestic swans on the Palace Moat are a source of pride and identity to Wells but according to the archives of the Wells Journal their lives, under the watchful eye of the Bishop, have not always been of peaceful tranquillity.

The first mention of the swans in the archives goes back to June 1858.

Wells Journal

“Complaints are continually being made by attendants at the Bishop’s Palace at the annoyances practised by wanton boys upon the water fowl on the moat. One of the swans was killed and another had its leg broken to say nothing of the daily torture inflicted upon them by idle boys. It is to be regretted that the privileges afforded the public by the delightful summer retreat of the Moat Walk should be abused. We trust they will for the future consider themselves legitimate protectors of what is intended for public enjoyment and take active measures to bring any of these delinquents to justice.”

Later in the year another instance of cruelty upon the swans is recorded by the paper.

Wells Journal November 1858

“Last week some evil-disposed person or persons cruelly beat one of the swans on the moat and the bird has since died.

What could have actuated the perpetration of such a wicked act? It is too difficult to conceive.

A reward of 2 guineas is offered by the Lord Bishop, the owner of the birds for the apprehension and conviction of the offender and we sincerely trust the scoundrel or scoundrels will not long evade detection as this is not the first act of cruelty that has been committed upon the swans on the moat which surrounds the palace.”

November 1860 saw another report in the paper:

“A very cruel practice prevails in this city of the throwing of “baits” with strings attached to the swans in the Palace Moat. After the poor creatures have swallowed the food it is drawn out of their throats which causes them much pain. This is an abominable practice which ought to be put a stop to by the authorities.”

In coverage of the proceedings of the Wells Police Court of November 17 1860 it seems that the city police are taking action.

“Herbert Bendall, William Cardwell and Martin King were summoned for cruelly treating a swan on the Palace Moat by throwing stones at it.

The defendants first said they had only thrown bread at the swan but afterwards admitted that they then threw stones at it.

Sergeant Boug proved the charge. He was on duty in the “Eye” at about half past twelve when he saw the defendants dig up stones from the path and deliberately throw them at the swan. One stone went within an inch of it. On seeing the sergeant all three took to their heels.

The Mayor addressing the defendants said perhaps they were not aware of the extent of the injury they might have done. He knew “boys would be boys” but he wished to make them understand that they were not to be cruel to poor creatures that had not the power of speech or retaliation.

It seems that the punishment for such an offence was either a fine, imprisonment or both.

They were fined 5s but made to understand that any future offence would mean prison.

The Mayor added “You are disgracing your parents and taking money out of their pockets and I hope that this is a warning to you.”

In an editorial reflecting upon the case the editor of the Journal writes:

We last week called the attention of the authorities to practice prevails among some malicious youths of ill-treating the beautiful swans and cygnets on the moat

As will be seen in our police report of Monday, three boys were summoned for wilfully injuring the swan, and the evidence showed their vileness and heartlessness. Aware that the poor feathery creatures in the Moat were frequently being injured juvenile scoundrels resorting thither, our indefatigable police-sergeant determined to put a stop thereto; he therefore “kept watch,” and

quickly espied the three boys picking up stones and throwing at a cygnet; whereupon he informed his lordship, who requested him to institute legal proceedings. The boys appeared the police court, on Monday, and admitted the offence, but the Bench very mercifully dismissed the charges against them, upon paying the fine. Their Worships assured them that again guilty of a similar offence, they would be imprisoned; and they wished it to be stated through the press that any persons brought before them on any future occasion on such a charge, would, upon conviction, committed to jail. This is only right. Our Sergeant writes : It cannot be too generally known that any person found injuring the swans or other birds kept in the Moat, either throwing stones or otherwise, are liable to a fine and in default of a fine being inflicted, may be sent to jail, and there kept to hard labour for two calendar months."

In June 1891 "wanton cruelty" is again reported on;

"One of the swans belonging to the Bishop often seen on the moat died on Thursday about 7 pm. A few days before some horrible person out of wanton mischief threw an object at it breaking its wing. It was necessary to amputate the wing and the swan was seen constantly on the water for days after the operation but it appeared to be in immense pain. It gave up feeding and passed away."

The swans sometimes got their own back;

Wells Journal December 19 1913

"The two old swans on the Palace Moat have resented the appearance of two new ones which have recently been added to the collection and on Tuesday an effort was made to capture the old birds. One gentleman, prominent in the building trade in this city sallied forth with a hay fork with the object of securing a swan around the neck but the bird, which was in the water, was too wary, with the result that the unfortunate gentleman instead of catching the swan received a ducking in the water which was icy cold."

The advent of telephone technology in its earliest days proved a hazard to the swans;

Wells Journal October 27 1916

Many have noticed one of the four cygnets on the moat flying about of late and on Wednesday it came to grief in the telephone wires near the town hall. It flew with considerable force into the wires and was picked up dead in the gaol yard."

Wells Journal January 20 1933

SUNDAY MORNING SPORT I hear that some excitement was caused in the backyard of some High-street premises on Sunday morning when one of the swans on the Moat took to flight and crashed into the telephone wires, landing in the yard, then the trouble commenced. Several attempts to catch the bird, which was of the Petersen class, were made but all efforts failed, and a message was sent to an employee at the Palace, who succeeded in catching the bird and taking it back to the water.

A small piece appears in the Journal of March 1945 which demonstrates the importance of the swans not only to Wells but of their importance internationally.

"On the day of the great German counter offensive Reuters sent out a despatch reporting that one of the famous swans at Wells in Somerset had died."

Clare Blackmore