



The Disappearance of Wolves in Britain

In medieval times the range of the wolf covered a large part of Europe. Since then human settlement together with constant hunting has resulted in complete extermination of the wolf in most areas.

Records of wolves can be found in many places, for example, in the British Isles. Records many centuries old are still extant.

Probably one of the earliest references is contained in a manuscript at the British Museum. A genealogy of Anglo-Saxon dynasties records the East Anglian founder of a dynasty called "Wuffa" and his tribe, who were known as "Wuffings" (Wolf people). These genealogies were written in A.D. 800 and Wuffa is thought to have ruled about 575 A.D.

In the famous ship burial at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, a purse was discovered; the lid was decorated with gold and garnets and decorations showing wolves confronting a human figure. The 37 coins contained in the purse date the burial as being circa 620 A.D. and not later than 640 A.D. No body was discovered in the ship burial though some archaeologists feel the depiction of wolves on the purse reveals a connection with the Wuffingas. The Wuffingas themselves were said to originate in Scandinavia, where ship burial was practiced. It is interesting to note a later descendant of the Wuffingas is thought to have become "Bretwalda" or overlord, of Britain and it is possible that the ship burial at Sutton Hoo commemorates this descendant.

It is impossible to say how widespread the distribution of wolves was in Anglo-Saxon times. Wolf bones have been reported in many excavations and Anglo Saxon charters frequently mention such items as "Wolf-pits". Woolpit, again in Suffolk, is said to derive its name from a corruption of the word "Wolfpit" and this village is recorded in the Domesday book of 1087 A.D. as "Wolfpeta".

Many Anglo-Saxon names also incorporate the word "wulf". Wulfnoth, Wulfgar, Wulfhere, Wulfstan and Wulfhelm are but a few names of real persons. Ethelwulf was a common name and the famous Scandinavian saga "Beowulf" has the same suffix.

Another Anglo-Saxon reference to wolves concerns Constantine of Wales, who is said to have paid tribute to King Edgar in the form of 300 wolf skins annually. William of Malmesbury recorded a similar tale noting that King Edgar of England demanded 300 wolf skins a year from King Idwal of Wales (circa 985 A.D.) as tribute. However, these numbers may be regarded as a little suspect; there would probably have not been enough wolves available to fulfil the demand and at least one researcher states the first record of the tribute demand was not written until approximately 140 years after these events.

The various Norman kings (reigning from 1066 to 1152 A.D.) employed servants as wolf hunters and many held lands granted on condition they fulfilled this duty. It is possible that both the "wolfpits" and the land grants lasted longer than the wolves in England and such grants became almost sinecures or the service was rendered by other means. However, in 1212 a bounty of 5 shillings was paid to a person in Fremantle Hampshire, Nr. Kingsclere, for a wolf caught in that neighbourhood. In medieval times 5 shillings would represent an enormous sum to a villager and would be a welcome addition to his income – a real bounty.

Mentions of wolves continue for a number of years after 1212 but in 1281, Edward I (reigned 1272-1307) ordered the extermination of all wolves in England. He personally employed one Peter Corbet, with instructions to "take and destroy all the wolves he could find" in the counties of "Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Staffordshire" rather a large area to cover by horse transport especially in the areas near Welsh Marches (the border country between England and Wales) where wolves were more common than in the southern areas of England.

Coppicing by landholders was encouraged as it was said to deter "wolves and other malefactors". The people living in the area of the Forest of Dean were particularly involved in this activity.

The campaign against wolves by Edward I was largely successful and references to them became fewer. At Abbey Dore, near Hay in Herefordshire, an iron wolf head is supposedly a memorial to Edward's campaign.

A report that in 1290 a wolf or wolves had destroyed some deer in a park – location unknown – seems to be the last reference. By 1300 a certain Reverend William, reputed to be a doctor of some kind, found him self in trouble with the then English Customs Officers when he tried to import the bodies of "four putrid wolves" which he said were required for medical purposes and which could not be obtained in England.

A further odd reference appears circa 1394-1396, when the monks of Whitby paid 10 shillings and 9 pence for the "tawing of 14 wolf skins". Possibly wolves did survive in the wilder parts of north-east Yorkshire until late in the 14th century but no other evidence is noted.

The term "wolf" was still used as a derogatory nickname in the 14th century. The term was, and still is, applied to one English queen. Isabella of France, the wife of Edward II (reigned 1307-1327) is referred to as "the She-Wolf of France" and has come down in history as such, though her actual behaviour would not resemble the behaviour of a female wolf as the animal is now understood. Isabella being held, at least partly responsible, for the horrendous death of her husband, King Edward II, at Berkeley Castle.

However, people continued to hold land and commissions dependent on the destruction of

wolves. One Thomas Engaine held a grant at Pitchley in the time of Edward III (reigned 1327-1377) on the understanding he kept dogs at his own cost in order to destroy both wolves and foxes. As late as the reign of Henry VI (1422-1460) there is a record of Robert Plumpton who held a portion of land in Nottingham with the duty of "winding of a horn and chasing wolves in Sherwood Forest". It would seem that at that time the authorities in England were not absolutely sure that the wolves were totally exterminated but by the time of Henry VII (1485-1509) wolves were definitely extinct in England.

Wolves in Wales appear to have vanished in the early medieval period. The last reference to them is the A.D. 1166 when a so-called "mad wolf" was reported to have killed 22 people. This seems a highly exaggerated story and it could be argued that the animal was incorrectly identified or the killings were not perpetrated by any animal at all.

In Scotland, a wilder, more mountainous, sparsely populated country, wolves survived until the 17th century. This respite was not due to lack of persecution. As early as 1283 an allowance was paid to "one hunter of wolves" in Stirling and in 1427 under James I of Scotland, an act was passed requiring all lairds to seek out and destroy wolves. In 1491 a bounty was paid for the taking of two wolves in Linlithgow in the lowlands.

The Earl of Athol in 1528 organized a hunt for James V of Scotland which had "woulff, fox and wild cattis" as the quarry and a later Earl of Athol in 1563 provided a hunt for Mary, Queen of Scots, which reported the kill included 5 wolves.

Further Acts ordering the destruction of wolves were passed in 1457, 1527 and 1577. In 1527, one Hector Boece wrote "The wolf is richt noisom in all parts of Scotland except ane part thereof named Glenmores". The reason for the 1577 Act may have been that wolves had found refuge in the great highland forests which existed at the time and their population had increased. The wolves were reported to be preying on flocks of sheep. The author Camden, whose book "Britannia" was published in 1586, comments that wolves were common in Scotland at the time particularly in the Strathnavern area. An enormous bounty of 6 pounds was paid in 1621 for the killing of a wolf in Sutherlandshire. Even in the early 17th century this amount represents an extraordinary windfall for the recipient.

There are stories of woods being burned and cleared to deny cover to wolves and, as time goes by, sightings are scarcer. Various people are claimed to have slain the last wolf in Scotland at many different places; Skye, Perthshire and Argyll are all mentioned.

A tale, which may be no more than a garbled account of an actual occurrence in 1743, is not mentioned until many years later, when an old man named McQueen said a "large black beast", said to be a wolf, was killed in the Findhorn Valley of Morayshire. Doubt does remain as to the accuracy of this story, even if the animal was believed to have killed two children. A different source states that the man McQueen killed this animal himself and he was a stalker to the Laird of Mackintosh. This same source believes that this wolf was the last one in Scotland.

The naturalist, Thomas Pennant, writing in 1769, says that after extensive inquiries and searches he was of the opinion that wolves in Scotland were extinct.

The word "wolf" in Gaelic is "Lub" and also "Madadh Alluidh". At times the wolf is referred to as "Mac Tire", meaning "Earth's son". The name is retained in many Scottish places such as Mullinavaddie (The mill of the Wolf), Lochmaddy, Armaddy and many others.

An interesting side note is a comment by the chronicler Holinshed writing in "Scotland till 1571" stating that wolves were so dangerous in Highland areas that refuges for travellers were erected in some places and these were known as "Spitals". Even today a part of the road from Blaigowrie to Braemar is known as the Spittal of Glenshee – a relic of older, wilder times in the Highlands.

The last stronghold of the wolves in the British Isles was Ireland. Wolves were regarded as being fairly common in the country and legislation was passed promoting their destruction in 1652, 1653 and again in 1662.

The Irish Council offered high rewards for the killing of wolves, 6 pounds for a female wolf, 5 pounds for a male and 40 shilling for each cub. These bounties must have spurred on the hunters. There are reports of wolves being killed in County Cork in 1709 and 1710 and the last reports came from County Wicklow in the mid-1700s.

So after a stand of several centuries against insurmountable odds, the entire wolf population of the British Isles was exterminated by about 1760.

A late pathetic item appears in an auction catalogue of the London Museum dated 1818, which refers to "Wolf – a noble animal in a large glass case. The last wolf in Scotland killed by Sir Ewan Cameron".

It is interesting to note that our modern attitude to animals would be incomprehensible. The medieval mind took literally the Biblical idea that man had dominion over animals. Animals were held to be one of three classes, which is they were useful for food, labour or sport. Wolves were considered useless and dangerous; therefore they ought to be exterminated. In addition, wolves, and other predators, which approached settled areas were a threat, to the local population, and to their precious livestock, their very livelihood. Such creatures had to be removed. Their removal was considered beneficial to all in the neighbourhood. The idea of keeping an animal alive just because it existed and was part of the natural world would not have occurred to any person living in medieval times.