

Fair Game - An Arts and Humanities Perspective on Venison.



Why doesn't the British public eat much venison? I've asked this question to lots of people and the replies are similar: venison is expensive; a food of Michelin star restaurants or for those posh people who ride around the landscape shooting deer (and hunting is a cruel blood sport – run Bambi, run!). For years I was of this opinion too and I still struggle with the idea of killing animals, perhaps unsurprisingly as I'm a left-wing vegetarian who is opposed to animal cruelty and social inequality. Strange then, that I now find myself working very closely with deer stalkers to actively promote the consumption of wild venison.¹ So, what caused this monumental U-turn in my beliefs? It occurred gradually as my knowledge of deer management, both past and present, increased.

For over a decade I have been researching the natural and cultural history of the fallow deer, Latin name *Dama dama dama* (or, rather, that spotty one that you see in the deer parks of stately homes). This particular species of deer is interesting because it is not native to Britain or northern Europe – it's from Turkey. During the last few millennia fallow deer been transported around the world by people and our new AHRC-funded research project '*Dama International: fallow deer and European society 6000 BC – AD 1600*' is examining the timing and circumstances of their spread.

We have already proven that fallow deer were first introduced to Britain about two thousand years ago, by the Romans who loved hunting exotic quarry. The collapse of the Roman Empire, however, saw a decline in the Roman's hunting culture and our evidence suggests that fallow deer also became locally extinct. It was not until the Norman invasion of 1066 that fallow deer were re-introduced to Britain (probably from the Norman kingdom of Sicily) and, this time, they were here to stay. Indeed, our genetic studies suggest that all modern fallow deer populations in northern Europe descend from animals brought to Britain by the Normans.

¹ I use the term 'wild' to denote deer that live freely within the landscape. Under this definition I include non-farmed park deer; those are left to their own devices and are not given supplementary feed.

The Normans were probably the most passionate hunters that Britain has ever seen – hunting was the ‘pop culture’ of the time, over-hunting leading to the virtual extinction of the roe deer. Fallow deer helped to plug the venison-gap left by declining roe populations and, by the end of the medieval period thousands of deer parks were established across Britain, each housing hundreds of fallow deer and smaller numbers of red deer. Deer hunting and the consumption of venison were central to medieval society, helping to create community as people came together to help procure and consume the venison from a single animal. As with all popular culture, however, hunting fell out of fashion. People found other mechanisms for socialising and, as the taste for venison dwindled, deer parks fell into disrepair and their inmates escaped. But whilst the hunters went away, the deer did not – in the absence of human and other natural predators (people had successfully exterminated all British bears, wolves and lynx by at least the 13th century) the deer bred, and bred, and bred...

According to recent government documents deer are now more numerous than at any time in the last thousand years.² Burgeoning populations of red, roe and fallow deer have been joined by growing numbers of exotic species (namely the sika, muntjac and Chinese water deer) imported in the 19th and 20th centuries. How lovely to have such a large number and variety of deer in Britain! Well... maybe...



Deer are certainly beautiful things that enhance the look of the landscape and, in moderate numbers, have a positive effect on the environment. However, in large numbers, they have the potential to do a lot of environmental damage – ravaging crops, retarding woodland regeneration and impacting negatively on biodiversity. Nor are large populations good for the well-being of the deer themselves – too many animals in one area or park will lead to starvation, disease and illness. Then we have road traffic accidents, with an estimated 40-70 thousand deer killed on the roads each year. Collisions with deer also bring human casualties: over 1750 traffic collisions involving deer have been reported causing human injuries in the ten years 2001-2010, including 42 accidents leading to human.³ In sum, in the

² See <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/post/postpn325.pdf>

³ For more information on road traffic accidents with deer see <http://deercollisions.co.uk/pages/latest.html>

absence of human control modern UK deer populations are unsustainable environmentally and, arguably, unethical in terms of animal welfare. So what is to be done?

Our research indicates that modern deer management problems are a legacy of the medieval period, so perhaps we need to look for medieval solutions. We believe that rather than being a 'problem' deer are a wonderful resource, if only we could reconnect with the concept of venison. At a time when locally sourced, seasonal, healthy and ethical foods are at the top of consumers' wish-lists, wild venison ticks every box – wild deer, or those that have not been supplementary fed, provide exceptionally lean venison⁴ and, most importantly, you don't get a more free-range and 'happy' meat than wild venison!

Unfortunately the message is not getting through - the public's abhorrence of animal killing, and 'hunting' in particular, is too strong. Of course, public attitudes don't stop deer culling, it just means that the majority of venison produced in Britain is exported. As if that wasn't bad enough, the little venison available in British supermarkets is from farmed deer, much of which is IMPORTED – it's a crazy world out there!

This is where our arts and humanities research is becoming important – we have the ability to serve up this difficult issue in more engaging and palatable way. To do this, we have launched the **Fair Game Initiative**, an educational campaign staffed by archaeologists and deer stalkers, to explain the history of Britain's fallow deer and the benefits of eating their venison.



Our approach is hands on. After an introductory lecture we work as a group, following the instructions written in medieval hunting manuals, to 'unmake' (skin and butcher) a complete fallow deer.

⁴ Details of the nutritional benefits of venison can be found here http://www.thedeerinitiative.co.uk/what_we_do/promoting_venison.php

Everyone gets involved in the process, learning a variety of important lessons encompassing archaeology, anatomy, animal welfare, environmental ethics, food security, healthy eating and history.



Our aim is to democratise venison and make it available to all, such as these inner-city school children who spent the day working with us to create a tasty meal for their parents.



Contrary to popular belief, venison is far cheaper than any other meat, if obtained direct from the stalker. It is also healthier – what better product for our children's school dinners? And what better way to help manage Britain's deer populations?



The Fair Game Initiative aims to roll-out across the country, linking deer stalkers to educational establishments, and getting local venison onto school menus. To get involved visit our website www.fallow-deer-project.net

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