

John Bright's Poacher: Poaching, politics and the illicit trade in live game in early Victorian England

by Harvey Osborne

Abstract

This article takes as its subject the life and career of Frederick Gowing, once described as 'the greatest poacher in England'. Gowing's reputation as a professional poacher brought him to national attention during the Anti-Corn Law League's populist campaign against the Game Laws of the 1840s, when he provided evidence damaging to the landed interest at the 1845 Select Committee on the Game Laws. His unusually well-documented career reveals otherwise concealed and unknown features of commercial poaching in late Georgian and early Victorian England. Although in some ways an archetypal 'Victorian poacher' and 'social criminal', Gowing's experiences in the illegal trade in game, which included poaching breeding-stock on behalf of game-preservers themselves as well as supplying urban markets with dead game, illustrates the complexity of the poaching industry of the nineteenth century as well as the liminal and often ambiguous position of the poacher in society. Gowing's later transition from convicted poacher to respectable employment as a gamekeeper on a large estate in the English midlands further underlines the ambivalent and sometimes paradoxical relationship between poaching and gamekeeping in nineteenth-century England.

Poaching is still largely understood as the 'epitome of social and rural crime' predominantly committed by poverty-stricken agricultural labourers seeking to 'rehabilitate' their dire economic position.¹ This remains a powerful and representative portrayal, particularly for those areas of the agrarian south and east where extensive game preservation by agricultural landlords coalesced with the structural poverty of rural labouring communities to generate prolonged conflict between poachers and preservers, which intensified during the late Georgian period and only declined in the later decades of Victoria's reign.² In this context historians have been able to identify the commonplace nature of both offending and offenders. As studies by Alun Howkins,

¹ J. E. Archer, "A reckless spirit of enterprise": Game preserving and poaching in nineteenth-century Lancashire', in D. W. Howell and K. O. Morgan (eds), *Crime, protest and police in modern British society* (1999), p. 149. J. L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer, 1760-1832* (1911), p. 186.

² P. B. Munsche, *Gentlemen and poachers. The*

English Game Laws, 1671-1831 (1981). H. Hopkins, 'The long affray: The poaching wars in Britain, 1760-1914' (1986). J. E. Archer, 'Poachers abroad', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The unquiet countryside* (1989), pp. 52-64. H. Osborne and M. Winstanley, 'Rural and urban poaching in Victorian England', *Rural Hist.* 7 (2006), pp. 187-212.

Tim Shakesheff and John Archer have demonstrated, those prosecuted for offences against the game laws in agricultural areas were typically local men in working-class occupations, often farm labourers, ostensibly seeking to support household economies.³ Relatively few were involved in other forms of criminality. Joseph Arch's observation that 'every other man you met was a poacher' underlines both the ordinary nature of most offenders and the lack of stigma associated with this form of crime.⁴ The proximity to nature afforded by rural work from its earliest stages provided a ready apprenticeship in the ways of taking game and rabbits. Opposition to the game laws, widespread across all classes, allied to the closely bound nature of the communities that typically produced offenders, meant that poachers generally enjoyed at least the tacit support of their neighbours and often more active forms of assistance.

This understanding of offending and offenders has been subject to marginal revision in recent decades, beginning with a highly nuanced study by David Jones and more particularly through the work of John Archer.⁵ Although Jones's contribution continued to underline the prosaic nature of the poacher, it also succeeded in highlighting both the diverse motives of offenders and the shadowy world of commercial poaching and professional poachers. The enormous scale of the illegal trade in game, with over 100,000 dozen pheasant and partridge eggs being carried to London in a typical season, required some reconciliation with an understanding of offenders that was largely dominated by the image of the village labourer 'poaching for the pot'.⁶ Archer's later work, particularly that focused on early Victorian Lancashire, sought to develop our understanding of commercial poaching further. His findings also suggested other possible incongruities with the traditional image of the poacher as an otherwise law-abiding rural worker whose periodic offending was driven by subsistence concerns. In the Lancashire countryside, the poachers who most troubled the authorities were drawn from urban backgrounds and industrial occupations and were often organized into established gangs with a reputation for wider lawlessness and violence. Furthermore, these offenders were highly market-oriented, they were 'not poaching for their own immediate needs ... they were in it for the money'.⁷ The commercial nature of much Lancastrian poaching, allied to the character of offenders, appeared to Archer to suggest 'a divergence' from the established picture of the crime in the rural south and east and raised wider questions. Was it the case that, in their assessment of poaching and poachers, 'certain subtleties, nuances and complexities (had) been overlooked or underplayed by historians?'.⁸

³ A. Howkins, 'Economic crime and class law: Poaching and the Game Laws, 1840–1880', in S. B. Burman and B. E. Harrell-Bond (eds), *The imposition of law* (1979), pp. 273–88. J. E. Archer, *"By a flash and a scare": Incendiarism, animal maiming and poaching in East Anglia, 1815–1870* (1990). T. Shakesheff, *Rural conflict, crime and protest, Herefordshire, 1800–1860* (2003).

⁴ J. Arch, *The story of his life, told by himself* (1898), p. 13.

⁵ D. J. V. Jones, 'The poacher: A study in Victorian crime and protest', *Historical J.* 22 (1979), pp. 825–60. Archer, "A reckless spirit of enterprise", p. 163; id., 'Poaching gangs and violence: The urban-rural divide

in nineteenth-century Lancashire', *British J. of Criminology* 39 (1999), p. 32. See also, Osborne and Winstanley, 'Rural and urban poaching' and H. Osborne, "'Unwomanly practices": Poaching, crime, gender and the female offender in nineteenth-century Britain', *Rural Hist.* 27 (2016), pp. 149–68.

⁶ Hopkins, *The Long Affray*, p. 88. BPP, VIII, 1828, *Report from House of Lords Select Committee on the Laws relating to Game* (Evidence of Mr L. M.), pp. 42–3. Archer, "A reckless spirit of enterprise", p. 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

This examination of the life and career of Frederick Gowing, a professional poacher from East Anglia, is sympathetic to Archer's suggestion that established understandings of poaching and poachers have in some respects obscured the inevitable complexity of offending and individual offenders. While in some ways Gowing's experiences reinforce some traditional interpretations of poaching crime, his particularly well-documented career also highlights lesser-known aspects of the poaching industry of the nineteenth century. These include indications not only of the sheer scale and profitability of commercial poaching, particularly in the game heartlands of eastern England, but also the way in which poaching for the market was often outwardly concealed, not least from the later historian. Gowing's career in the illegal trade in game also encompassed the supply of live birds and animals and this aspect of his activity highlights the participation of gamekeepers and game-preservers in a criminal trade that they were ostensibly committed to quashing. It was this facet of poaching crime that brought Gowing momentarily into the public spotlight after his recruitment to the Anti-Corn Law League's campaign against the game laws during the 1840s and his participation as a witness to the 1845 Select Committee into the Game Laws. As Gowing's evidence to the Committee highlighted, as a rural supplier of dead and live game to urban middle-class consumers and landed proprietors respectively, poachers not only often operated on the margins of several different worlds, but across the more ambiguous boundaries of the game conflict. Considering the life history of such individuals, rather than compartmentalizing them based on a single event or life stage, also highlights the potential fluidity and elasticity of the boundaries between poacher and preserver. Gowing, like many others of his kind, defied easy categorization and embodied the popular idiom, 'poacher turned gamekeeper'.

I

Frederick Gowing, the man later described by John Bright as 'the greatest poacher in England', was born in March 1804, in the coastal parish of Aldringham cum Thorpe, close to the town of Aldeburgh in East Suffolk.⁹ His father Thomas died at the age of 30 in 1809 when Frederick was just five, leaving the boy with his mother Mary and younger sister Sheba. Sometime before Thomas Gowing's death, or more likely just after, the family moved to the hamlet of Iken, about nine miles distant by road, a parish adjacent to the tidal River Alde, again close to the Suffolk coast. This much is known because in 1814 the widowed Mary Gowing and her children were subject to a Poor Law removal order from Iken back to their home parish of Aldringham cum Thorpe.¹⁰ In the years before the removal, however, as a small boy, Frederick Gowing was employed as an assistant 'rabbit-killer' to the gamekeepers of the Sudbourne Estate, which encompassed the parish of Iken.¹¹ This experience proved formative for Gowing's subsequent life and employment. Gowing later claimed that in such surroundings, where game was 'so

⁹ G. M. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright* (1913), pp. 92–7.

¹⁰ Suffolk Record Office (hereafter SRO), FC161/G12/31, Poor Law removal order: Mary Gowing, widow, with Frederick and Sheba her children, Iken to Thorpe, 18 Nov. 1814.

¹¹ As well as Iken, the estate encompassed numerous other parishes including Chillesford, Sudbourne, parts of Snape, Butley, Tunstall, and crucially the pocket borough of Orford, which up until 1832 returned two parliamentary representatives.

thick that instead of getting out of they [*sic*] way you had to get out of theirs ... boys would begin to get game as naturally as they would begin to play marbles, without being able to say exactly how they learnt'.¹² As autobiographical evidence from the nineteenth century attests, experiences of work and play for young boys particularly, allied to the influence of older family members and neighbours, provided an early introduction to the natural world and to hunting as a rite of passage.¹³ As a prison inspector observed in 1845, 'there is a natural impulse in boys to take birds and hares, particularly when so good an opportunity is afforded them when out crow-scaring or stone-picking in the fields'.¹⁴

Even after Gowing left Iken, he returned to the Sudbourne Estate to hunt wildfowl and game, by now armed with airgun or flintlock. It was at this this point, in his late teens, that his 'employment' as a poacher began.¹⁵ The surviving sources do not allow an exact explanation of how he made the connection, or perhaps how someone made it for him, but Gowing sold what he shot to a merchant in Ipswich with contacts in Colchester, Chelmsford and ultimately London.¹⁶ At about this time Gowing also took up another career, at sea. By his own account, from about 1817 until 1827 Gowing worked as a sailor in the coastal trade, chiefly moving coal down the east coast between 'London and the north', and through other east coast ports.¹⁷ He still described himself as a sailor to the census enumerators in 1841.¹⁸ Archer has highlighted the connection that sometimes existed between seasonal seafaring trades and poaching in East Anglia, but Gowing's commitment to poaching was more consistent. Equally there was possibly more to his career as a sailor than the census record reveals.¹⁹ Some later observers insinuated that Gowing had in fact been a smuggler; an accusation that he refuted, although not altogether convincingly. Gowing himself acknowledged that for a time he had worked in what he described as the 'Holland trade', at times a euphemism for the illegal importation of duty-free Dutch gin.²⁰

Snape, the village and minor port on the river Alde in East Suffolk where Gowing was based from the 1820s, certainly had a deserved reputation for smuggling.²¹ It was also an archetypal open parish. Although a small port of growing importance and surrounded by the estates of

¹² 'An interview with the King of the Poachers', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 4 May 1873. BPP, 1846, IX, *Report from the Select Committee on the Game Laws*, Part I, Session 1845, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 628.

¹³ J. Holcombe, *The autobiography of an Exmoor poacher*, edited by Caractacus (F. Snell) (1901). L. R. Haggard, *I walked by night, being the life and history of the king of the Norfolk Poachers* (1935).

¹⁴ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of W. J. Williams, p. 317.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 634.

¹⁶ SRO, 47515, John Glyde (ed.), 'Autobiography of a Suffolk labourer', *Suffolk Times and Mercury*, 2 Nov. 1894 to 16 Aug. 1895. Glyde identified this person as Tom Micklefield, a 'dealer' based in New Street, Ipswich, but in his account in *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 4 May 1873, Gowing identifies only a Mr B, a merchant with places in Ipswich, Colchester and Chelmsford. Of Micklefield I can find no trace, but Gowing was likely

referring to Henry and George Bales, game-dealers and gun-makers of the Cornhill, Ipswich, who were originally from London and had offices in Colchester as well as servants in their Ipswich household from parishes close to Snape. *Whites Directory of Suffolk, 1844* (repr. 1970), pp. 105–12.

¹⁷ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, pp. 628, 633.

¹⁸ Census and BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, pp. 628, 633.

¹⁹ Archer, "By a flash and a scare", p. 236.

²⁰ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 633.

²¹ Both of Gowing's former parishes of residence were also associated with smuggling. Iken neighboured Snape on the estuarine river Alde and Aldringham cum Thorpe was a coastal parish encompassing the notorious smuggling route at Sizewell Gap.

peers, it was a liminal place, geographically and administratively. Much of the parish consisted of common heathland, marsh and tidal saltings. Landholding was subdivided between small occupiers and there was no dominant landlord. In the early nineteenth century it lacked much in the way of supervision or authority from the centre. It was a community redolent of Thomas Hardy's fictional creation 'Mixer Lane', 'the hiding-place of those who were in distress, and in debt, and trouble of every kind'.²² In 1835 Assistant Poor Law Commissioner James Kay described it as the 'most disorganised and unruly parish' inhabited by a 'lawless population of paupers, disbanded smugglers and poachers'.²³ Kay was not alone among contemporaries in identifying the relationship between open parishes and poaching. As one Suffolk farmer observed, poachers often originated in 'parishes where the freeholds are divided ... where they can be located without being removed from their habitation by some large landowner ... and they reside in the vicinity of large game preserves; not on, but in the vicinity of large game preserves'.²⁴

It is no surprise perhaps that Snape was one of several Suffolk parishes identified by Nicholas Edsall and others as at the forefront of resistance to the New Poor Law in 1835–36.²⁵ The circumstances of one such incident convey a sense of the place. On 19 December 1835 County magistrates afforded the parish overseer and relieving officer the protection of three parish and two special constables after they had laid information against a group of paupers following allegations of assault and maltreatment. After escorting the officers back into the parish and safely to their residences, the party of constables took up overnight lodgings in the Crown Inn, Snape's principal hostelry, whose landlord was John Fairweather. Constable Robert Barnes later described how shortly after their arrival the Inn was filled with paupers 'summoned by the discharge of a gun, which signal we heard on our entrance to the village'. Barnes went on to describe a disturbed overnight stay, punctuated by the retort of 'firearms, apparently fowling pieces ... discharged under the windows of the Inn'. Barnes also later testified to being warned by Robert Cook, a spokesman for the Snape paupers, 'that if I wanted to go away with a whole skin, then I had better not take one man away, as they did not intend that one man be taken away from the parish'. Barnes later described Snape as 'chiefly inhabited by poachers' and went on, 'I am deliberately of (the) opinion that there are eighty or a hundred guns in this parish including air guns, the wildfowl shooting and poaching on gentlemen's premises is more common in this parish than in any other part of the County'.²⁶ Efforts to locate a police station in the village following the establishment of the East Suffolk Constabulary in 1840 also met with determined resistance. John Hatton, the Chief Constable, later recalled how the 'poachers indirectly sent a message to me ... that if I sent a policeman there, they would shoot him'.²⁷ Hatton proceeded regardless and placed two policemen at Snape, although at one stage they were temporarily withdrawn following allegations of physical intimidation, and, 'while the policemen were out on night duty the doors and windows of their residence were ... smashed'.²⁸

²² T. Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Jones, 'Poacher', p. 840.

²³ *Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales* (1836), App. B, 'Reports to Central Board from Assistant Commissioners', p. 148.

²⁴ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of J. W. Cooper, p. 475.

²⁵ N. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor law movement, 1834–44* (1971), p. 36. Archer, "'By A flash and a scare'", p. 104.

²⁶ *Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners*, p. 149.

²⁷ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of John Hatton, p. 498.

²⁸ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 641.

It is apparent from a variety of sources that Frederick Gowing was at the forefront of parochial resistance to outside interference as well as closely associated with some of those named by Constable Barnes. Alongside regular confrontations with the new police, Gowing played a leading role, for which he was charged and arrested, when the villagers of Snape riotously defended the parochial common against an outside party determined to claim its soil, adding credence to Jones's suggestion that poachers were often 'amongst the leaders of popular protests against the New Poor Law, enclosures, evictions and gleaning rights'.²⁹ Gowing had at least one conviction for poaching alongside Robert Cook.³⁰ His co-defendant in 1841, when charged with assaulting a policeman, was John Fairweather, the landlord of the Crown Inn, and a man who, after his marriage to Fairweather's daughter Elizabeth in 1848, was also Gowing's father-in-law.³¹ It is also apparent from the testimony of Chief Constable Hatton that the decision to locate a police station at Snape in the first place was partly informed by concern about the influence there of what Hatton described as 'a very notorious poacher'.³² This was, there is no doubt, a reference to Gowing. Although the early rural constabularies often purposefully resisted involvement in the game conflict for fear of antagonizing middle-class ratepayers, the existence of poaching gangs and the conflation of night poaching with other types of crime often provided the spur for intervention and allowed police to publicly reconcile the pursuit of poachers with their responsibilities to the community at large. Hatton acknowledged that in Suffolk, following the introduction of the constabulary in 1840, he had 'at first strictly prohibited the rural police from interfering in the game laws in any way', but subsequently moved 'to interfere' with Gowing's operation in Snape, determining that 'it would be desirable to check night-poaching as much as possible ... and perfectly reconciled many of the ratepayers to it'.³³ There are direct parallels here with 1840s Lancashire, where Archer has argued that the real and rhetorical threat of the organized poaching gang served 'a useful function for the policing authorities' in providing a justification for the otherwise controversial involvement of thinly dispersed rural constables in the game conflict.³⁴ The menace posed by the 'armed' gang, operating at night, would be mobilized again decades later to support the passage of the 1862 Poaching Prevention Act and thereafter the more routine involvement of the police in the 'poaching wars'.³⁵

From about 1827 Gowing pursued poaching as his 'chief employment' and as a dedicated commercial enterprise.³⁶ Adjacent to his base in Snape in Suffolk lay some of the best shooting estates in England at that time. Chief among them was the vast Sudbourne estate, over 11,000 acres with Sudbourne Hall at its heart. Although cultivated in part, Sudbourne was primarily a sporting estate teeming with rabbits, hares, pheasants, partridges and wildfowl. It was said

²⁹ *Ipswich J.*, 29 May 1841. BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, pp. 641–2.

³⁰ *Ipswich J.*, 27 Jan. 1841.

³¹ *Ipswich J.*, 29 May 1841. TNA, HO 27/65, 30 June 1841, p. 175. *Ipswich J.*, 22 July 1848, reports that Frederick Gowing had married Elizabeth ('Eliza') Fairweather on 19 July 1848 at Framlingham, Suffolk.

³² BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of John Hatton, p. 498.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 497–8.

³⁴ Archer, 'Poaching Gangs and Violence', p. 32.

Archer, "A reckless spirit of enterprise", pp. 164–5.

³⁵ BPP, XLV, 1862, *Memorial to Secretary of State, December 1861, by Chief Constables of counties in England and Wales, on Game Laws*. R. Muge, 'Poverty, protest and sport: Poaching in the East Midlands, c.1820–1900' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2017), pp. 107, 182–92.

³⁶ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 634.

that 1400 rabbits had once been killed within its environs on a single day. On another occasion, 3000 hares were killed in less than a week and yet, despite this, 'two hundred and forty more, alive and hungry' were reportedly counted in one field in the aftermath of the slaughter.³⁷ In Gowing's time, the second Marquis of Hertford, Francis Ingram-Seymour-Conway, and more particularly, after 1822, the third Marquis, Francis Charles Seymour-Conway, used the estate to host shooting parties a handful of times each season. 'No money was spared in preserving' game for these occasions and, under the third Marquis, Sudbourne regularly welcomed George IV, Prince Frederick Duke of York and Albany, and the Duke of Wellington.³⁸ The Marquis, was not, by Gowing's account, a frequent participant in battues, preferring to hunt on the estate alone, often bagging unconventional prey: on one occasion a tenant's domestic donkey and on another a cow.³⁹ Adjoining the Sudbourne estate was the 17,000-acre estate of the Thelluson family centred on Rendlesham Hall. In Gowing's time the estate was owned by John, William, and latterly Frederick, Thelluson, second, third and fourth Barons Rendlesham respectively. Like Sudbourne, the sporting attractions of the Rendlesham estate ensured patronage, 'not only by many of the first nobility, but by several branches of the Royal Family'.⁴⁰ Even in the early 1800s Rendlesham was an estate where over 1000 head of game could be killed in a week.⁴¹ To the west of these two major East Suffolk sporting estates were others including the 7000 acre Campsea Ashe estate of the Shepperd family and the 5000 Suffolk acres of the Duke of Hamilton. A few miles north-east of Gowing's base the Reverend Lancelot Brown at Kelsale preserved 1000 acres and beyond that lay the lands of the Earl of Stradbroke. All were known to Gowing, although by his own account he concentrated his efforts on Sudbourne and Rendlesham.

Gowing normally poached alone, or with one or two regular partners, including the aforementioned John Fairweather, the landlord of the Crown Inn in Snape, as well as fellow parishioners Edgar and Robert Whyte. However, in addition, Gowing also operated at the head of a large, loosely incorporated poaching organization. During the autumn and winter months he employed, effectively as sub-contractors, considerable numbers of local labourers as poachers to help fulfil 'orders' for game. Gowing claimed that 'depending on the season' he could find 'perhaps 50 to 60' labourers within Snape and its surrounding parishes willing to work for him, potentially 'after harvest 100 poor men'. Gowing sometimes supplied them with equipment, occasionally even guns, but chiefly he guaranteed to buy the game they brought

³⁷ Glyde, 'Autobiography of a Suffolk labourer'. W. Morfey, *Painting the day: Thomas Churchyard of Woodbridge* (1986), p. 30

³⁸ Morfey, *Painting the day*, p. 30. Under the third Marquis of Hertford, Francis Charles Seymour-Conway, Sudbourne Hall was the location for Tory party intrigues. Seymour-Conway was allegedly the model for Lord Monmouth in Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) and Lord Steyne in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847–8). He was said to have lived his later life with a retinue of prostitutes. Charles Greville commented that as 'there has been, so far as I know, no such example of undisguised debauchery displayed to the world as Lord Hertford'.

E. Pearce (ed.), *The diaries of Charles Greville* (2005), p. 210.

³⁹ *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 4 May 1873. Here Gowing attributed these habits to the 'old Marquis' in adding 'I was in his service as a boy'. Chronologically this would suggest Francis Ingram-Seymour-Conway, 2nd Marquis of Hertford, but the likelihood remains that he was in fact referring to the third Marquis.

⁴⁰ Morfey, *Painting the day*, p. 30.

⁴¹ Lord Walsingham and Sir R. Payne-Gallwey, *Shooting, field and covert* (1895), p. 16. 1000 game birds and hares were killed on the estate during the last week of the shooting season in January 1807.

back, paying by the 'head or brace for what they poached', the amount varying by the quarry and 'whether the orders were for dead or alive'.⁴² To outsiders there was no discernible link between Gowing and these men, even though they were said to enjoy the protection of a 'mutual assurance society ... to fee counsel in case any of them were apprehended'.⁴³ This highlights the difficulty that historians often have in attempting to differentiate between those offenders driven to poaching by poverty and those involved in commercial poaching. Although Archer has argued that 'the dividing line between the casual opportunist and the professional was often blurred', at times even this division was illusory and impossible to determine from the kind of court room evidence typically left to historians.⁴⁴ Most of those who poached on Gowing's behalf were 'poor men out of employment' motivated by the need to make ends meet and determined to avoid the workhouse.⁴⁵ In the event of capture and prosecution, they, perhaps like offenders everywhere, were more likely to emphasize this to magistrates than reveal their participation in an organized criminal conspiracy. The rewards for all concerned were potentially lucrative. Gowing's own largest haul of pheasants in a single night was reportedly 150 birds. Evidence from Leadenhall Market in London from the late 1820s and 1840s confirms that a single pheasant could retail for between 2s. and 5s., depending on the season and condition.⁴⁶ It was quite possible, as Gowing claimed, for any man 'that knows his business' to 'earn a sovereign in half an hour'.⁴⁷ In the context of wage levels for rural labourers in this part of England, which were unlikely to exceed £26 to £35 annually, the potential allure of the game coverts is plain. Gowing certainly earned a significant income from poaching, to the extent that, by his late thirties, he was described as 'pretty well to do'.⁴⁸ He owned four cottages in Snape by the 1830s, one of which he occupied; the others he rented out.⁴⁹

Gowing was however successfully prosecuted on many occasions and by his own account served six to seven short prison sentences.⁵⁰ Yet, for the most part, he avoided gaol. There are several explanations for this. Gowing poached by day and night, although he averred a preference for daytime offending, arguing, justifiably, that the penalties if captured were considerably lighter, declaring that 'by day we did not so much mind being taken, because we could pay for that'.⁵¹ He also claimed to avoid confrontation with gamekeepers and 'night-men' and professed to guide those who poached on his behalf similarly, giving them 'directions to go with no bludgeons, and with as small a party as they can, and if they are at all attacked

⁴² BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 629.

⁴³ Hansard, House of Commons, 1845, Third Ser. 78, 27 Feb. 1845, Game Laws, Bright, p. 72.

⁴⁴ Archer, 'Poachers Abroad', p. 58.

⁴⁵ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 629.

⁴⁶ BPP, VIII, 1828, *Report from House of Lords Select Committee on the laws relating to Game*, Evidence of Mr A. B. and Mr C. D., pp. 13–18. BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of George Brooke, pp. 478–9.

⁴⁷ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 629.

⁴⁸ BPP, IX, 1846, Observation of Grantley Berkeley, p. 637.

⁴⁹ SCRO, FC123/F1/1–7, Snape Poor Rate Books, 1838–51. Gowing owned the four cottages throughout the period 1838–51. Unfortunately, the rate books do not survive for 1851–61. By 1862 when the rate book series resumes the properties were no longer in Gowing's ownership. Gowing's tenants sometimes acted as defence witnesses on his behalf: *Ipswich J.*, 7 Dec. 1839.

⁵⁰ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 628. Glyde, 'Autobiography of a Suffolk labourer'.

⁵¹ *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 4 May 1873.

by gamekeepers to escape and get away'.⁵² Such sentiments may have been authentic, but they should not conceal the fact that violence was commonplace and deeply rooted in the game conflict in which Gowing was but one participant. Gowing and his associates had convictions for assaults on gamekeepers and policemen and had also been the victims of violence in encounters with local keepers. On one occasion while night-poaching, Gowing was ambushed by three of the Marquis of Hertford's gamekeepers and beaten unconscious. His dog was shot by the keepers and 'they nailed his skin to the top bar of a stile leading to the woods' as a warning to other intruders onto the estate.⁵³ While Archer has sought to highlight the apparently 'distinctive' levels of violence associated with poaching in northern 'industrial' counties, it is important not to draw too stark a contrast between the experiences of different regions based on rural/urban or north/south dichotomies.⁵⁴ Real and symbolic violence was an embedded feature of the game conflict in every area, even if often publicly eschewed by East Anglian professionals like Gowing.

Gowing did enjoy a more tangible advantage in his efforts to avoid gaol, in that for a long time he retained the services of a lawyer, Thomas Churchyard of Woodbridge, to defend him and his confederates in game cases. Churchyard, more commonly remembered as a landscape artist than for his legal practice, made the Game Laws a specialism and so 'frequently defended in poaching cases that he became known as the 'poacher's lawyer'. Well acquainted with the laws relating to Game, Churchyard was said to be 'dangerous in a bad case and irresistible in a good one ... able to expose the most unexpected defect in an indictment'.⁵⁵ He successfully challenged at least two prosecutions against Gowing and mitigated many others, until at some point in the early 1840s landowners in the area combined to retain him 'over on their side'. One account suggests that the Marquis of Hertford, 'was induced, through his agent, to offer Churchyard a permanent retainer to prosecute all game-cases' that came before local magistrates.⁵⁶ This loss possibly represented a significant setback for Gowing and his associates, although he later adopted a contemplative note when musing 'they paid him (Churchyard) more money perhaps'.⁵⁷ These details are suggestive of the income that Gowing was potentially generating through his poaching enterprise at its peak during the late 1820s, 1830s and early 1840s. By 1845 he claimed to have paid over £250 in fines during the preceding 18 years, while conceding that 'it may be more, I have not kept an account ... I underdo the thing'. Later commentators claimed that by the end of Gowing's poaching career the figure was closer to £300.⁵⁸

There was another reason why Gowing often avoided gaol with a frequency that did not reflect his commitment to commercial poaching. He played the law at its own game. In 1831 the

⁵² BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 632.

⁵³ *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 4 May 1873. TNA, HO 27/65, p. 175. *Ipswich J.*, 24 Mar. 1832.

⁵⁴ Archer, 'Poaching gangs and violence', p. 57.

⁵⁵ Glyde, 'Autobiography of a Suffolk labourer', p. 104.

⁵⁶ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 640. *Ipswich J.*, 7 Dec. 1839. Glyde, 'Autobiography of a Suffolk labourer', p. 104. Morfey, *Painting the day*,

p. 133. Morfey argues that Glyde was mistaken on this minor point, and that it was Lord Rendlesham who was responsible for recruiting Churchyard for the game preservers rather than the 3rd Marquis who died in 1842.

⁵⁷ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 632.

⁵⁸ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 634. Glyde, 'Autobiography of a Suffolk labourer', p. 65.

game laws were reformed. The property qualification at the heart of the game code since 1671 was abolished and replaced instead with a licencing system. The annual cost of the £2 game licence lay beyond the reach of many rural workers, but not Gowing. Every year he bought one. A licence alone did not provide a person with the right to kill game; this was still subject to property rights and the subsidiary restrictions of the game laws on hunting on common land or public roads, but it did otherwise permit an individual to have dead or live game in their possession. Gowing called this potential loophole ‘the greatest opening in the world for any man’.⁵⁹ It allowed an individual to have in their possession, as well as to transport freely, any quantity of dead and live game without fear of prosecution, at least in circumstances where its potentially illegal origin could not be proven. Gowing was often stopped and questioned while transporting game with his pony and cart, but as he highlighted, even if discovered carrying large quantities of partridges, pheasants and hares, a prosecution normally stalled; ‘the certificate authorises me to have game in my possession’, ‘that is my game; who can say it is theirs’.⁶⁰

II

The fact that so much of the detail of Gowing’s poaching career can be traced owes something to the survival of the kind of records typically used to reconstruct past offending. He made occasional court appearances, some reported in the provincial press and some also discernible in the surviving judicial records.⁶¹ Gowing and his associates also appear with some regularity in census returns. Gowing’s notoriety also led to wider recognition within his county and late Victorian writers, casting nostalgically back, celebrated his reputation.⁶² Nonetheless, without one very public intersection with the historical record, Gowing would remain relatively unknown and unknowable. The reason that it is possible to know something of Gowing, or at least a version of him, is that his reputation was cemented by an appearance in June 1845 before a House of Commons Select Committee on the Game Laws. That a criminal, in the eyes of the law at least, should find himself in such venerated surroundings is still in some ways remarkable and quite exactly how it came about is intriguing. However, the origins of the Select Committee itself are transparent enough and derived from the efforts of John Bright, one of the leading parliamentary spokesmen of the Anti-Corn Law League.⁶³

In 1843 Bright joined Richard Cobden as one of the League’s parliamentary representatives following his election as the Member for Durham. Despite this, the prospects for the repeal the Corn Laws had seemingly worsened after the return of an even stronger protectionist majority following the Conservative’s election victory in 1841. In 1842 only 90 Members supported the annual repeal motion of Charles Villiers, Member for Wolverhampton and

⁵⁹ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 637. *Bury and Norwich Post*, 23 Oct. 1833, 29 Oct. 1834, 16 Sept. 1835, 28 Sept. 1836, 8 Nov. 1837 and 24 Oct. 1838.

⁶⁰ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, pp. 634–7. *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, 4 May 1873.

⁶¹ *Ipswich J.*, 3 May, 17 May 1828, 17 Mar., 24 Mar., 20

Oct. 1832, 12 Nov. 1836, 1 Nov. 1845, 29 Dec. 1842. TNA, HO 27/48, p. 222.

⁶² Glyde, ‘Autobiography of a Suffolk labourer’. *Ipswich J.*, 16 Apr. 1870.

⁶³ W. Robertson, *The life and times of John Bright* (1912), p. 114.

veteran Anti-Corn Law campaigner, compared to 177 in 1840. Nevertheless, and partly because of this, Cobden and Bright renewed the extra-parliamentary campaign for repeal, and from 1843 they increasingly focused their efforts on the rural population. Along with other League speakers, both men toured the countryside armed with a critique of the Corn Laws, fashioned by Cobden, which sought to emphasize how tenant farmers lost the benefits of protectionism through higher rents and through the way in which high wheat prices potentially distorted patterns of food consumption in a manner unhelpful to producers.⁶⁴ In Cobden's analysis, protectionism also ultimately acted against the long-term interests of the agricultural sector by inhibiting investment and innovation and thus impeding the efficiency gains that could guarantee the future prosperity of farming in a free-trade environment. By undermining the loyalty of tenant farmers to the Corn Laws, the League's rural mission sought ultimately to mobilize their electoral power against protectionist candidates in County seats; the key battleground if repeal was to be won.⁶⁵

From early 1844, and with support of the League, Bright began to focus on the Game Laws, not only because they offered a potential opportunity to discredit the landed interest, but also as part of the intellectual attack on the Corn Laws.⁶⁶ It was Bright's contention that agricultural productivity was significantly undermined by extensive game preservation and he spent months in 1844 and early 1845 collecting evidence to prove it. During this period, he interviewed farmers, poulterers, game-dealers and all associated with the 'game nuisance' and was said to have received and answered, 'from thirty to sixty letters a day on the subject of the Game Laws'. He had experiments conducted to demonstrate that 'four and half rabbits consumed as much food as a sheep' and claimed, based on such calculations, that during the period 1839–42 game had devoured 'as large a quantity of the produce of the soil of England as the whole amount that was imported from abroad'.⁶⁷

On 27 February 1845, over the course of a two-hour speech, preceded by the presentation of petitions from tenant farmers across the country, Bright called for the establishment of a Select Committee into the Game Laws. In moving for the Committee, Bright presented many examples of the damage caused to tenants' crops by the game preserved by their landlords. He also suggested that since that many members of the House were landed proprietors, they should have 'a very strong sympathy with those cultivators of the soil' and there should 'be no objection to examining this part of the question'. Bright also highlighted the other social evils stemming from extensive game preservation and the game laws, arguing that

Hundreds and thousands of poor people had been fined and imprisoned ... there had been the most violent outrages, the most fearful and ferocious encounters between gamekeepers and poachers, ending not unfrequently [*sic*] in the death of one party or the other.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838–1846* (1968), p. 143. K. Robbins, *John Bright* (1979), pp. 53–5. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, pp. 92–7. E. Newman, 'The Anti-Corn Law League and the Wiltshire labourer', in B. A. Holderness and M. Turner (eds), *Land, labour and agriculture, 1700–1920* (1991), p. 92. M. Turner, 'The "Bonaparte of Free Trade" and the Anti-Corn Law League', *Historical J.* 41 (1998), p. 1017.

⁶⁵ H. Jordan, 'The political methods of the Anti-Corn Law League', *Political Science Q.* 42 (1927), pp. 58–76.

⁶⁶ C. Kirby, 'The attack on the English Game Laws in the Forties', *J. Modern Hist.* 4 (1932), p. 24.

⁶⁷ Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, pp. 125–6.

⁶⁸ Hansard, House of Commons, 1845, Third Ser. 78, 27 Feb. 1845, Game Laws, Bright, p. 55.

Bright's measured and detailed speech attracted much praise, even from political adversaries. The Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, in responding to the motion, declared that 'I have not any fault to find with either the tone or the temper of his speech'. The Prime Minister, Robert Peel, followed in similar fashion, confessing that he 'did not anticipate ... so temperate a speech from the Hon. Member for Durham as that which he had made'. Edmond Wodehouse, Member for East Norfolk also admitted that the 'moderation which had been exhibited formed a strong contrast with the temper he (Bright) had displayed on previous occasions'. Wodehouse added that 'he and his friends had no objection to this inquiry' and that 'Nothing ... would prove to be more groundless than the statements which were daily made by some Hon. Gentlemen opposite, that the landlords were a selfish set, caring only for themselves, and not for their tenants'.⁶⁹ Cobden later reflected that

Bright did his job admirably and won golden opinions from all men. His speech took the squires quite aback. It has put Bright in a right position, shows he has power and it will draw the sympathy of the farmers to the League. The latter conviction seemed to weigh heavily on the Squires.⁷⁰

Peel sidestepped Bright's principal justification for the Committee arguing that 'evidence of increasing poaching, and the apparent connexion of crime with the game laws, constituted a justifiable reason' for its establishment. At the same time, he advised that it would be 'unwise to entertain ... expectations ... of any alteration' in the game laws, and further argued that 'prejudices against the game laws arose from the excessive preservation of game in certain districts'. Where 'game existed to a moderate extent' Peel continued, there was 'no great amount of crime, and the existing game laws worked well'. The Prime Minister also rebutted Richard Cobden's contention that it was because of the 'feeling created out of doors' by the League's campaign to bring the question before the house, that 'the Government were reluctantly compelled to grant this Committee'. Peel had, he reported to the Commons, taken the 'opportunity of conferring that very day with a very large portion of agricultural Members and others sitting on the Ministerial side of the House, and there was a unanimous feeling that the inquiry ought not to be resisted'.⁷¹ This was not quite the same thing as support, but elements of Peel's response to Bright's motion were potentially consistent with both his recurrent concern for 'provident precautions against explosions of public feelings' and his unswerving determination not to publicly concede a role to outside pressure, in this case specifically the League, in shaping the parliamentary agenda.⁷²

Bright waived the normal privilege of chairing the Select Committee in favour of a member of the government, John Manners-Sutton, under-secretary at the Home Office. Otherwise the 15-man committee was divided fairly evenly between supporters and opponents of game preservation.⁷³ Critics of its composition accused Bright of nominating 'six influential and active Anti-Corn-Law Members'; but technically Bright's allies on the Committee

⁶⁹ Ibid., Graham, p. 80; Wodehouse, p. 116 and Peel, pp. 116-17.

⁷⁰ Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, p. 127.

⁷¹ Hansard, House of Commons, 1845, Third Ser., 78, 27 Feb. 1845, Game Laws, Cobden, p. 115. Peel,

pp. 116-17. *The Times*, 11 Dec. 1858.

⁷² E. Cardwell and Earl Stanhope (eds.), *Memoirs by the Right Honourable Sir Robert Peel, Part I* (1857),

p. 116.

⁷³ Hopkins, 'The Long Affray', p. 217.

also included Radicals and Free-trade Whigs alongside League MPs.⁷⁴ For example, John Trelawney, Member for Tavistock and opponent of church rates, Ralph Etwall, gentleman radical and Member for Andover, George Cavendish, Member for North Derbyshire and Edward Pleydell-Bouverie, Member for Kilmarnock. Charles Pelham Villiers, the veteran Anti-Corn Law, campaigner was also included. So, too, was another prominent 'Leaguer', Thomas Milner-Gibson, who, alongside the cotton manufacturer Mark Philips, served as one of the two Members for Manchester. Game-preservers on the Committee included Grantley Berkeley, Member for Gloucestershire and heir presumptive to Berkeley Castle, and in due course the most vocal and combative member of the preservers team. Berkeley was a colourful character even by the standards of the Conservative party of the day. He had a reputation for 'coarse and rakish manners', not to say a fractious and occasionally violent personality. In 1836 Berkeley had been convicted of savagely beating James Fraser, the publisher and proprietor of *Fraser's Magazine* after a critical review of his historical romance, *Berkeley Castle*. A few days after the attack on Fraser, Berkeley fought a duel with the reviewer himself, Dr William Maginn, also the editor of *Fraser's Magazine*, in a secluded meadow near the Harrow Road. These were not isolated incidents. Berkeley was later prosecuted for an assault on a neighbour in a hunting dispute and on another occasion appeared before magistrates charged with cockfighting.⁷⁵ He represented quite a contrast with his Quaker adversary. Other defenders of the game laws on the Committee included the Conservative Members Lord George Bentinck, William Forbes Mackenzie, William Cripps, Henry Burroughes, and the peer Lord Clive.⁷⁶

The Committee began hearing evidence on 16 April 1845 and for the following three months heard testimony from over 30 witnesses, the majority tenant farmers called by John Bright and Thomas Milner-Gibson. The Committee heard a litany of complaints about constraints on cropping patterns, restrictive tenancy agreements, the impact of surveillance by gamekeepers, and the loss of valued employees following minor infractions of the game laws. However, the chief concern that emerged from farmers' evidence was the damage caused by game and rabbits to crops and grazing. George Hayward of Maresfield in Sussex, tenant of a 200-acre farm, for which he paid £150 per year, spoke of damage to his crops in 1844 independently assessed at £128 and of entire fields of root crops devastated by hares and rabbits.⁷⁷ John Bell of Salisbury estimated annual damage at £416 on the farm he rented for £620 from the Countess and Earl Nelson, the latter a supporter of the protectionist cause in the Lords.⁷⁸ James Nowlson, a tenant farmer and agricultural assessor from Hertfordshire, reported damage running at a cost of between £2 and £6 per acre and spoke of whole fields of wheat destroyed by game.⁷⁹ Some farmers admitted turning a blind eye to poaching. Others confessed to providing practical encouragement to poachers to reduce the populations of

⁷⁴ Hansard, House of Commons, 1845, Third Ser. 78, 10 Mar. 1845, Game Laws, C. Berkeley, p. 625.

⁷⁵ ODNB, 'Berkeley, (George Charles) Grantley Fitzhardinge (1800–81)'.
⁷⁶ Clive, who succeeded to the earldom of Powis in 1839 died in 1848 following a shooting accident on his Powis Castle Estate. ODNB, 'Herbert, Edward, second

earl of Powis (1785–1848)'.
⁷⁷ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of George Hayward, pp. 105–28.

⁷⁸ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of John Bell, p. 169.

⁷⁹ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 628.

winged and furred game predated on their crops. As William Blatch, a tenant farmer and land-valuer from Hampshire put it, the poacher 'is the only friend he (the farmer) has as to getting rid of game'.⁸⁰

III

This was the background to the appearance of Frederick Gowing before the Committee on 25 June 1845. The participation of a convicted poacher in the proceedings caused a minor sensation, although Gowing was no surprise to Bright. The pair had met approximately six months prior as Bright prepared his case for the establishment of the Committee.⁸¹ Some aspects of Gowing's appearance at the House of Commons were unusual though. Unlike most witnesses he claimed no expenses for his travel, nor for the overnight stay in London that his attendance presumably required. That said, Gowing was no stranger to the city. He had been a regular visitor to the capital since at least the early 1830s and, as already acknowledged, had visited London some time prior to February 1845 for an initial meeting with Bright. Gowing's evidence to the Committee was wide-ranging, detailed and in part biographic. Defenders of the game laws on the Committee, particularly Grantley Berkeley, sought to undermine his credibility as a witness, highlighting both suspicions about the true nature of Gowing's early career at sea and his later clashes with the police, but even these exchanges were tempered by discussions which revealed the shared interests of poacher and preserver in rearing and shooting game.⁸²

Gowing's testimony reinforced that already provided to the Committee regarding the damage that game caused to crops and the complicity that existed between tenant farmers and poachers; 'the farmer's friends'. In other responses Gowing highlighted a range of perspectives on offending which have become familiar to historians. He cited the low expectations that poachers had of the justice system, when cases at petty sessions were usually heard by game-preserving magistrates. He highlighted the community support that poachers normally enjoyed and provided a determined argument that poaching was not, in any case, a crime; 'a poacher is not a thief ... a thief is not a poacher and poaching is not thieving'. Gowing also testified to the role of low wages and unemployment in motivating farmworkers to offend, and in a related point argued that the New Poor Law, and particularly the rigorous implementation of the workhouse test, had increased the willingness of married labourers to resort to seasonal poaching as families sought to avoid admission to the 'Bastille'. In this context Gowing highlighted a potentially interesting gender dynamic to offending, or at least revealed his own gendered assumptions, arguing that while labouring men were potentially more inured to periods of temporary incarceration within a workhouse or prison, the admission and separation of entire families within the workhouse was often intolerable for wives and mothers. Gowing claimed that when an admission order was issued it was common that 'the wife would refuse to go' and husbands would turn to poaching to avert the distress and humiliation of family separation within the workhouse.⁸³

⁸⁰ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of William Blatch, p. 193.

Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 637.

⁸¹ Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, p. 126.

⁸³ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing,

⁸² Hopkins, 'The Long Affray', p. 223. BPP, IX, 1846, pp. 629-30.

Some of these insights and perspectives were possibly familiar to contemporaries. They also serve to reinforce some of the existing understandings that historians have of poaching. However, other sections of Gowing's testimony were unusual and potentially explosive given the political context for the 1845 Committee. They also to extend our understanding of offending, particularly in respect of the multi-faceted nature of the black market in game and the ambiguous and contradictory relationship that sometimes existed between poachers and preservers. In evidence about the trade in dead game, killed in season for consumption, there was little that earlier Select Committees had not highlighted about how poached game flowed into urban centres in the south and east of England.⁸⁴ Gowing described a mature black-market industry which efficiently distributed vast numbers of dead pheasants, partridges, hares and rabbits, frequently utilizing an existing network of pig-, poultry- and game-dealers, through to provincial markets and the principal London market of Leadenhall. However, the testimony that Gowing provided about the black market in live game was altogether new and potentially embarrassing for the landed interest. What he described was an illicit trade in live birds, leverets and eggs in which gamekeepers and game-preserving landowners were often highly complicit.

Shortly after the shooting season ended in late winter, landowners set their minds to enhancing the stock of game on their estates and according to Gowing, despite the normal enmity that existed between preservers and poachers, it was to the poaching community that game-preservers routinely turned for their supply. As Gowing put it, 'directly the season goes out for dead game I have my orders in for live'.⁸⁵ Other witnesses to the Committee substantiated Gowing's description of the contradictory and ambiguous relationship that often existed between poaching and game preservation, reporting that keepers routinely bought 'eggs or game from poachers for the purpose of stocking preserves'.⁸⁶ In written evidence to the Committee, the Chaplain of Norwich Gaol claimed that, 'there is reason to believe that some of our gamekeepers are in the habit of giving encouragement to poachers'. Captain William Williams, a prison inspector, testified that poachers were 'frequently applied to by keepers for eggs and for birds for stocking their preserves whenever there is a falling off of game'.⁸⁷ Some of this business was arranged locally, but the illegal trade in live game, mirroring that in dead, was also conducted on a regional and national basis. Game dealers questioned by the Committee reported how live pheasants and partridges along with eggs and leverets came up to London for the 'purpose of supplying gentlemen's manors'. This trade, in which there was a 'great deal done', was said to be, with 'hardly any exception', supplied by poachers. Live game travelled by the same distribution networks as dead, often conveyed by those 'who regularly deal in live fowls', with significant business conducted in the London markets of Leadenhall and Newgate. The trade in live game was apparently even more clandestine than that in dead with one dealer reporting that 'there is a secrecy about it and in every way that it comes; you see but little of it'. Most of the live game and eggs entering London was said to originate in East Anglia, with an 'immense quantity' supplied from Suffolk.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ BPP, VIII, 1828, (Evidence of Mr A. B. and Mr C. D.), pp. 17–22.

⁸⁵ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, p. 630.

⁸⁶ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of William Blatch, p. 234.

⁸⁷ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of W. J. Williams, pp. 308–19.

⁸⁸ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of George Brooke, p. 481.

This testimony reinforced Gowing's claims about the scale of a trade that foreshadowed the emergence of commercial game farming. Birds and eggs were often poached directly from one preserved estate to supply the requirements of another, although Gowing also reared stocks of live game birds in purpose-built sheds at his Suffolk base.⁸⁹ On at least one occasion, after a local magistrate witnessed him loading a hamper of live pheasants and partridges onto a coach bound for London, Gowing successfully escaped prosecution for the illegal possession of game after producing witnesses who testified that pheasants and partridges had been kept at his premises in a state of 'domestication' for many years. Gowing potentially had access to several sites for keeping and rearing game in his immediate neighbourhood beyond the limited space afforded by his cottage garden. More importantly perhaps, in winning the case, resolved only after local magistrates sought guidance from an eminent Kings Counsel who pointed out that convicting Gowing would potentially leave any 'nobleman removing tame pheasants from one country seat to another ... liable to the penalty', Gowing established a precedent for defence whenever caught in possession of live game.⁹⁰ In combining poaching and game-rearing Gowing was pioneering, but not unique.⁹¹ The scale of Gowing's operation was however seemingly notable. He claimed to have stocked 'a great deal of Essex myself' and to have dispatched 'poached' live game to estates throughout Britain, as far as Ireland and Scotland.⁹²

The drivers behind the trade in live game were ultimately those that contributed to the game conflict itself. Game, for landowners, was a cultural obsession. The sport it provided and the status it conveyed were of mutually reinforcing significance. Game was not only, as Cobbett once observed, 'the great business in the countryside', but was also the 'basis of a common culture binding the aristocracy to the landed gentry'.⁹³ Moreover, the decades 1820–50 witnessed a series of interrelated changes in game shooting and preservation, coincident with Gowing's poaching career, which undoubtedly stimulated the trade in live game and eggs; the spread of the battue system of shooting, a growing mania for larger bags and the increasing adoption of the pheasant, which was beginning to supplant the native partridge as the ubiquitous 'British' game bird.⁹⁴ The numbers of game killed on sporting estates increased significantly between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the 1840s, a decade later identified by late Victorian sporting writers as the period when 'the days of heavy bags' became more commonplace, even outside trend-setting East Anglian estates such as Rendlesham, Sudbourne or Holkham.⁹⁵ Witnesses before the 1845 Select Committee spoke of provincial estates where 350 head were killed daily.⁹⁶ Bigger bags naturally required larger populations of game and such an expansion necessitated that more birds were reared to augment rigorously nurtured

⁸⁹ *Ipswich J.*, 7 Dec. 1839. See also *Ipswich J.*, 3, 17 May 1828. BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of John Hatton, p. 498.

⁹⁰ *Ipswich J.*, 7 Dec. 1839, ruling of Fitzroy Edward Kelly KC. SRO, IR 29/33/358, Tithe apportionment of Snape, Suffolk, holdings of Frederick Gowing and John Fairweather. BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of William Storey, p. 634.

⁹¹ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of William Storey, pp. 380–1.

⁹² BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, pp. 630–1.

⁹³ Hopkins, *The Long Affray*, pp. 94, 163.

⁹⁴ Walsingham and Payne-Gallwey, *Shooting*, pp. 17–18.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12–17.

⁹⁶ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of John Blatch and Robert Richardson, pp. 101, 733.

wild breeding populations. Booming populations of ruthlessly preserved pheasants, partridges and hares attracted commercial poachers to the coverts, but the maintenance of artificially high populations of game also placed increasing pressure on that oft-maligned rural worker, the gamekeeper. Although the occupation of gamekeeper was relatively 'privileged' and well remunerated, particularly following the 'advent of strict game preservation', it was also highly precarious if sufficient birds were not produced for the guns.⁹⁷ In these circumstances it is unsurprising that gamekeepers seeking to maintain increasingly populous game stocks were drawn into clandestine dealings with the poaching fraternity. As one witness to the Select Committee reported, 'where there is an obvious decrease of game ... and the keeper is under a master who holds him responsible for keeping up the quantity of game ... the keeper, rather than subject himself to reproof or dismissal, would resort to those means to supply the deficiency'.⁹⁸

For John Bright, who had organized Frederick Gowing's appearance before the 1845 Select Committee, the most important element in the Suffolk poacher's revelations about the clandestine dealings in live game was the identity of those ultimately driving this criminal trade. Chief among his clientele, Gowing claimed, were 'noblemen, Members of Parliament, Clergymen, Magistrates and other gentlemen of property'. Gowing reported sometimes dealing directly with such 'gentlemen', although more commonly delivery arrangements and payment were made through gamekeepers, valets and other servants. Gowing testified that 'pretty well all' live game went to noblemen and other landed gentlemen since 'poor men cannot afford to buy them'.⁹⁹ These claims were echoed by a Leadenhall game dealer who asserted that, 'I am afraid that it is very generally the gentry themselves who are the cause of the law being broken, for if they did not buy live game and game eggs, certainly poaching would not be carried on to the extent that it is'.¹⁰⁰ During the Committee proceedings Gowing was challenged by Berkeley to name some of the noblemen with whom he had dealt with directly in the business of live game. In response, he named two peers, both deceased, whose names were redacted from the Select Committee minutes. Under further questioning he identified another 'gentleman', also deceased, whose manor Gowing claimed to have entirely stocked, there being 'no game upon it when I (first) went'. Those still living he refused to name publicly, although he did offer to identify some of his landed clients to 'one of the gentlemen of the Committee, in confidence and in private'. At this point in the proceedings Gowing was directed to withdraw from the Committee room and after a short period was recalled. Berkeley restated the Committee's request to 'know the names of the parties ... noblemen, Members of Parliament, magistrates and clergymen' to which Gowing had referred. For a second time Gowing refused, arguing that

suppose you were one of the parties for instance, or any gentleman in the Committee here, they would not like me to expose them ... and in consequence of that I should not think I was right in doing so; and therefore, I beg to say that I should not tell.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ P. B. Munsche, 'The gamekeeper and English rural society', *J. British Studies* 20 (1981), pp. 101–03. p. 638.

¹⁰⁰ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of George Brooke, p. 486.

⁹⁸ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of W. J. Williams, p. 309.

¹⁰¹ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing,

⁹⁹ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, pp. 631–8.

Bright's Select Committee into the Game Laws heard a further ten witnesses before the end of the parliamentary session of 1845 and further hearings followed between February and May 1846, when thirty more individuals were questioned. The Committee finally published its recommendations and report in August 1846, with two volumes of accompanying evidence. Despite confirmation of both the damage caused to agriculture by game and the social consequences of the game conflict, there was to be no significant change in the law, just as Peel had predicted eighteen months previously. Minor recommendations aside, including the abolition of cumulative penalties for poaching offences, the Report restated the status quo or simply stated the obvious. Rabbits and hares were adjudged to cause more damage to agricultural crops than winged game. The Report also concluded that 'great facilities still exist for the disposal of stolen game'. Stretching credulity in the opposite direction the Committee found that 'the tenant (farmer) has at all times the right to restrict game to himself', or alternatively, 'to reject the tenancy if the proprietor of the lands insists on a reservation being made of the game'.¹⁰² The first point ignored the fact that most landlords expressly reserved 'rights to game' in tenancy agreements. The second just told farming tenants what they could do if they did not like it. The wider impact of the Select Committee on the immediate fortunes of the Anti-Corn Law League was also minimal, although it has been argued that the League's agitation against the game laws kept 'the aristocracy on the defensive at a critical moment' and thus contributed to the wider agitation against protectionism. It has also been suggested that Bright's 'campaign over the game nuisance made tenant farmers more likely to listen to his advocacy of free trade', although to Bright's own frustration the natural affiliation between farmers and landlords proved difficult to erode.¹⁰³ A few years later, in March 1848, Bright attempted to introduce a Private Member's Bill to abolish the game laws but it came to nothing. Tenant farmers would have to await the 1882 Ground Game Act before limited rights to control the game predating on their crops were granted in law.¹⁰⁴ Although he continued to speak for the total abolition of the game laws for the remainder of his parliamentary career, Bright, exasperated by what he perceived as the political timidity of tenant farmers in the aftermath of the Committee, turned his 'attention to other questions ... leaving ... game law abolition, to some time of calamity'.¹⁰⁵

IV

Following his appearance before the Select Committee into the game laws, Fredrick Gowing returned home to Suffolk and, as several court appearances attest, to the business of

¹⁰² BPP, IX, 1846, *Report from the Select Committee on the Game Laws*, Part II, pp. iii-v.

¹⁰³ Kirby, 'Attack on the English Game Laws', p. 36.

¹⁰⁴ J. H. Porter, 'Tenant right: Devonshire and the 1880 Ground Game Act', *AgHR* 34 (1986), pp. 188-97. J. Fisher, 'Property rights in pheasants: Landlords, farmers and the Game Laws, 1860-1880', *Rural Hist.*, 11 (2000), pp. 165-80.

¹⁰⁵ Bright went so far as to fund the publication of

an abstract of the Committee's findings for public consumption. R. G. Welford, *The influences of the Game Laws, being classified abstracts of the evidence taken by the Committee of the Game Laws, with observations and notes* (1846). H. J. Leech (ed.), *The public letters of the Rt. Hon. John Bright* (1895), p. 200.

¹⁰⁶ *Ipswich J.*, 2 Jan., 20 Jan. 1847. Following the conviction of Edgar Whyte for night poaching on the Sudbourne Estate, Frederick Gowing appeared before

poaching.¹⁰⁶ However, what ultimately happened to Gowing years after his brief appearance in the national spotlight in 1845 is illuminating. Information derived from census returns confirms that Gowing remained in the Suffolk village of Snape for a further decade. In 1849, for example, his wife Elizabeth, bore a second child, a son named Thomas, born in Snape. In 1851 a further son followed, Frederick, also born in Snape. Three years later, another son Charles followed, born in late 1854, again in Snape. Charles was baptized in Snape the following year, on 1 April 1855, simultaneously with his two elder brothers and sister Elizabeth.¹⁰⁷ However, these collective baptisms heralded the family's departure from Snape. Immediately afterwards they moved away from Suffolk, and no small distance either, north-westward to Warwickshire.¹⁰⁸ The timing and direction of this migration can be identified with confidence. In 1857 Frederick and Elizabeth Gowing had another son, John. This time the birthplace was the parish of Snitterfield in Warwickshire. By 1859 the family included a further son, George, also born in Snitterfield. Furthermore, Frederick Gowing, once described as the 'greatest poacher in England', was now a gamekeeper. The Gowing's immediate neighbours in Snitterfield were also, quite literally, familiar. They were Henry Fairweather, also now a gamekeeper, and his wife Lydia, both formerly of Snape in Suffolk.¹⁰⁹ Henry Fairweather was the son of John Fairweather, previously the landlord of the Crown Inn in Snape and Gowing's father-in-law and former poaching confederate. Indeed, John Fairweather himself also later joined his son and old poaching partner in Snitterfield for a short period prior to his death in November 1879.¹¹⁰ From April 1855 onwards Frederick Gowing was a gamekeeper in Warwickshire working and living alongside his brother-in-law, also now a gamekeeper. Gowing had changed sides in the game conflict and Henry Fairweather had made a similar transition.¹¹¹

Poachers who turned gamekeeper were not uncommon. As Munsche has observed, 'the line between gamekeeper and poacher was indeed thin'.¹¹² Game-preservers often knowingly recruited individuals with a background in offending based on assumptions that such men had useful knowledge of the habits of poachers and thus 'set a thief to catch a thief'.¹¹³ Gowing had himself highlighted this phenomenon in his evidence before the Select Committee in 1845

magistrates to claim that Whyte had been wrongfully convicted and that it was he (rather than Whyte) who had been seen by gamekeepers on the night in question. Thomas Churchyard represented the Marquis of Hertford. SCRO, A609/11, Ipswich Gaol Book, p. 19. Gowing was imprisoned for 3 months in November 1850 after being convicted of night poaching.

¹⁰⁷ C. D. Rogers, *The family tree detective: A manual for analysing and solving genealogical problems in England and Wales, 1538 to the Present Day* (1983), p. 66. Collective baptisms commonly occurred when a family moved parish.

¹⁰⁸ SCRO, FC 123/D1/6, Snape Parish Register of Baptisms 1813–93.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Fairweather was born in Wacton, Norfolk in 1830 and moved to Snape in Suffolk with his family shortly thereafter. Lydia Fairweather (née Taylor) was

born in Snape in 1828.

¹¹⁰ Warwickshire County Record Office (WCRO), DR 264/7, Snitterfield Parish Register of Burials, 1868–1930, p. 21. John Fairweather appears to have remained in Snape in Suffolk until the death of his wife Maria in the early part of 1879. He died in Snitterfield in Warwickshire in Nov. 1879.

¹¹¹ Prior to moving to Warwickshire, Henry Fairweather was described as a 'dealer' in the 1851 census. He married Lydia (née Taylor) in Suffolk in 1856 which might suggest that he and his new wife followed rather than accompanied the Gowing family to Snitterfield, or that he returned temporarily to Suffolk to marry.

¹¹² Munsche, 'Gamekeeper', p. 101.

¹¹³ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of George Brooke, p. 485. Munsche, 'Gamekeeper', p. 102.

when responding to questions about collusion between the two groups.¹¹⁴ Other witnesses had also acknowledged the fluidity and correlation between the professions of poacher and gamekeeper. John Houghton, a farmer and land agent, with properties in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Middlesex, as well as Donegal in Ireland, argued that, ‘generally speaking, gamekeepers are persons who have been poachers’.¹¹⁵ John Blatch, a Hampshire farmer and land-valuer, reflected that ‘because the best poachers make the best keepers; they are generally employed as keepers’. He went on to report that his own farmland was currently kept by ‘a most notorious poacher, who has been so for years’.¹¹⁶ The frequency with which poachers moved into employment as gamekeepers highlights the degree to which the two groups shared the same necessary skills and insights into the habits and management of game. Furthermore, as well as ‘similarities between the activities of keepers and poachers’, there were other, cultural parallels between the two occupations. Both gamekeepers and professional poachers operated on the margins of society, often both physically and figuratively apart from the wider community and outside the regular diurnal rhythms of labouring work.

Gowing’s transition to gamekeeper was therefore more representative than it might seem. However, the identity of the individual who employed him is both noteworthy and revealing. Snitterfield was the nucleus of the expanding Warwickshire estate, soon to be centred on Welcombe House, of Mark Philips, cotton merchant and manufacturer. He was one of the first two Members of Parliament for Manchester after the 1832 Reform Act and a prominent supporter of the Anti-Corn Law League.¹¹⁷ Philips’s counterpart in Manchester for much of this time, both as parliamentary representative and fellow ‘free-trader’ was Thomas Milner-Gibson, who represented the City alongside Philips after 1841. Milner-Gibson had also served alongside John Bright on the Select Committee into the game laws in 1845–46. The close association between Philips, Bright and Milner-Gibson continued long after Corn Law repeal had been achieved. When Mark Philips stood down as one of Manchester’s ‘free-trade’ Members in 1847 and retired to his Warwickshire estate, it was Bright who was selected to replace him. Shortly afterwards Bright and Milner-Gibson were both elected, re-elected in the case of the latter, for the City unopposed. Furthermore, as the surviving diaries of Mark Philips confirm, in the decade following his retirement from the Commons, he continued to regularly meet both Bright and Milner Gibson, often as dining companions in Manchester or London.¹¹⁸

Frederick Gowing met Mark Philips at Snitterfield on 7 March 1855 and agreed to serve as his gamekeeper for the relatively generous sum of 30s. a week. A month later, on 9 April 1855, Gowing returned to the Philips estate with his family and assumed his new role.¹¹⁹ It is almost certain that this appointment had its origins in connections forged a decade earlier.¹²⁰ Philips,

¹¹⁴ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of Frederick Gowing, pp. 631–2.

¹¹⁵ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of John Houghton, p. 95.

¹¹⁶ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of William Blatch, p. 222.

¹¹⁷ J. R. Hodges, *Welcombe House: The story of a Victorian calendar house* (2016), p. 56. The Philips family acquired the Snitterfield estate in 1815. Mark Philips inherited this property on the death of his father in 1845 and purchased the adjoining Welcombe estate in the same year. Philips resided at Park House, Snitterfield

until the completion of Welcombe House on the adjoining estate in 1870.

¹¹⁸ Manchester Central Library (MCL), M571/2–3, Diaries of Mark Philips, 1846–63.

¹¹⁹ MCL, M571/2, Diary of Mark Philips 1855, March–April.

¹²⁰ WCRO, QS12, Occupational and Quarter Sessions records; Warwickshire Gamekeepers’ Deputations, 2 May 1855.

as one of Bright and Milner-Gibson's fellow parliamentary 'leaguers', would have certainly been aware of Gowing through his appearance before the 1845 Committee and might have had direct dealings with him at the time. It is not possible to determine exactly who initiated Gowing's meeting with Philips a decade later and the resultant move to Warwickshire. It might have followed an appeal from Gowing or an invitation from Philips. It might also have involved the subvention of Bright or Milner-Gibson.¹²¹ There are certainly any number of reasons why the Suffolk poacher, just after his fiftieth year, with a wife and four young children, might have wanted away from his old life ten years after his appearance before the Select Committee, although an absence of precise evidence means that they remain speculative. Snape was certainly changing significantly by the 1850s following a sizeable investment in the village by the Garrett family resulting in the development of the port and the construction of new associated quayside granaries. These enterprises soon 'dominated the life of the village' and 'most of the men and boys' were employed there.¹²² There are indications too that the rural police were not only increasingly well established, but that they had enjoyed some success in disrupting parts of Gowing's wider network.¹²³ John Fairweather, landlord of the Crown Inn, was subject to two prosecutions during the early 1840s for 'suffering persons of notoriously bad character ... well known to be poachers' to 'assemble and meet ... during the hours of morning divine service'.¹²⁴ By 1843 Fairbrother had relinquished his tenancy of the Inn following the payment of fines and sureties amounting to £16 and a subsequent sheriff's judgement, which appears to have prompted the sale of most of his household effects.¹²⁵ Fairweather's misfortune seems to have had little short-term impact on Gowing's poaching activity, but the more general point that Snape, like other notorious poaching villages of the 1830s and 1840s, was probably becoming more ordered and orderly by the beginning of the mid-Victorian period as consequence of economic, cultural and generational change as well as more effective policing is germane.¹²⁶ Nonetheless, whatever personal or circumstantial factors prompted Gowing to change course and move away from Snape and Suffolk, one thing is certain. He was not forgotten by those Manchester free-traders whom he had served as a witness in Bright's enquiry into the game laws a decade earlier. Indeed, it is entirely possible that Gowing's later employment on the Philips estate in Warwickshire represented the fulfilment of an undertaking to this effect given by prominent Leaguers in 1845.

¹²¹ Thomas Milner Gibson may well have been the original and principal link between Gowing and the Anti-Corn Law League. Although associated with the parliamentary constituency of Manchester between 1841 and 1856, Milner Gibson was a 'Suffolk Squire', also a magistrate and later Lord Lieutenant for the County. His family seat, Theberton Hall in Suffolk was in a parish virtually adjacent to those which Gowing inhabited. The probability that Milner Gibson knew of Gowing, even prior to 1845, is strengthened by the relationship which had developed during the early 1840s between Milner Gibson and John Hatton, the Chief Constable of the Eastern Division of Suffolk in the 1840s. ODNB, 'Gibson, Thomas Milner (1806–84)', BPP,

IX, 1846 (Evidence of John Hatton), p. 498.

¹²² R. A. Irving, *Snape: The short history of a Suffolk village* (1966), p. 31.

¹²³ BPP, IX, 1846, Evidence of John Hatton, p. 503.

¹²⁴ *Ipswich J.*, 20 Feb., 22 May 1841.

¹²⁵ *Ipswich J.*, 28 Aug. 1841. SCRO, FC123/F1/1–7, Snape Poor Rate Books, 1838–51. Fairweather remained the landlord of the Crown Inn until at least April 1842. The records are interrupted until June 1843 by which time Fairweather had been replaced as the occupant by Robert Rouse, the freehold owner of the Inn, also a neighbour of Gowing and Fairweather.

¹²⁶ Jones, 'Poacher', p. 860.

Frederick Gowing died at the age of 86 in January 1891, less than a year after the death of Robert Needham Philips, who had inherited the Welcombe estate from his younger brother Mark in 1873.¹²⁷ On the eve of Gowing's death 'the vast estates' centred on Welcombe House were producing 'about 6,000 rabbits ... annually, in addition to a large quantity of other game', although it was said that 'not a single head was ever sold; the entire produce of the guns being appropriated to Mr Philips' own domestic requirements and those of his friends and tenants'.¹²⁸ In 1890 control of the estate passed to Robert Needham Philips's eldest daughter Caroline and her husband Sir George Otto Trevelyan, their second son Robert being named as heir.¹²⁹ By this point the estate encompassed approximately 3800 acres, comprising 21 farms and 400 acres of woodland.¹³⁰ Henry Fairweather remained in the employment of the Trevelyan family until his death in 1898, although he was described from 1891 not as a gamekeeper but as 'Lady Trevelyan's land agent'.¹³¹ His wife Lydia remained in Snitterfield until her own death in 1911, as did Frederick Gowing's widow, Elizabeth, who died shortly afterwards in 1912. Both women were recorded in late age as living on 'private means'. Certainly, Henry Fairweather left his wife and several of Gowing's children generously endowed from an estate valued at over £3800 at his death.¹³² Two of Frederick and Elizabeth Gowing's surviving sons followed their father's later career path, working as gamekeepers in Cheshire, Leicestershire and Surrey.¹³³

V

The later life of Frederick Gowing – and the destiny of his immediate and wider family – was ultimately shaped by his appearance before the Select Committee into the game laws in 1845 and his subsequent transition from poacher to gamekeeper. More significantly, the testimony that Gowing supplied to the Committee is important to the historian of poaching crime for several reasons. It provides further evidence of just how far reaching the illegal trade in game was in the late Georgian and early Victorian period. It also highlights how a good deal of poaching crime was ultimately commercial in one form or another. This was a trade in which most of the population, encompassing all classes, were in some way complicit. A minority like Gowing, were suppliers, but many more were consumers or tacitly acknowledged it as part of everyday life. Gowing's experience also reveals how commercial poaching enterprises were potentially structured and organized, encompassing often both full-time or regular professionals, and part-time offenders, who were often poor labourers operating effectively as sub-contractors. This is not to suggest that Gowing was a typical example of a poacher. He

¹²⁷ WCRO, DR 264/7, Snitterfield Parish Register of Burials, 1868–1930, p. 42.

¹²⁸ *Cornwall Gazette*, 13 Mar. 1890.

¹²⁹ *The Times*, 1 Mar. 1890, 27 Jan. 1928 and 23 Oct. 1928. The couple's third son, the historian G. M. Trevelyan and author of *The Life of John Bright* (1913) was born at Welcombe House in 1876.

¹³⁰ WCRO, CR1596/Box 82/48, Welcombe Hotel Sale Particulars, Nov. 1929.

¹³¹ Census, 1891. WCRO, DR 264/7, Snitterfield Parish Register of Burials, 1868–1930, p. 55.

¹³² WCRO, CR2028/25/2, Documents relating to probate and estate of Henry Coling Fairweather, land steward of Snitterfield, 1879–1911. National Probate Index, Will of Henry Coling Fairweather of Snitterfield, Warwickshire, land steward, died 5 July 1898, Probate Birmingham, 19 Nov. 1898.

¹³³ John Gowing became gamekeeper to the Bromley-Davenport family at Capesthorpe Hall, Cheshire. Thomas Gowing was a gamekeeper initially at Gumley in Leicestershire and then Kingswood in Surrey.

was not, even though much of the evidence he provided to the Committee reinforces what historians already understand about poaching crime, particularly in terms of the economic basis to much offending as well as popular attitudes to both the game laws and offenders.

One original dimension to Gowing's testimony was the evidence he provided, alongside other witnesses before the 1845 Select Committee, about the trade in live game. This sector of the black-market in game was ultimately driven by demand from game-preserving landowners and seemingly developed apace in the decades after 1820 in response to the vogue among sportsmen for ever larger populations and bags of game. Gowing's specialist trade in the provision of eggs and live game anticipated the innovations and investment in the artificial rearing of game subsequently pioneered on East Anglian estates such as Euston and Elveden and the later emergence of a legitimate game-rearing industry that eventually emerged to supply British sporting estates.¹³⁴ Gowing's experience also highlights the liminal world often inhabited by both poachers and gamekeepers and the paradoxical relationship that sometimes existed between the two participant groups in the 'long affray'. Although this relationship was primarily adversarial and often characterized by great bitterness, there were examples of collaboration and complicity, particularly in relation to the trade in live game, and boundaries between the two occupations were sometimes fluid and frequently crossed. A longitudinal approach can help highlight such intrinsic complexity. Gowing's career provides one of the more striking examples of the frequently interchangeable status of gamekeeper and poacher, but his change of 'calling' was not, by the standards of the time, extraordinary.¹³⁵

Finally, Gowing's experience also provides an original perspective on a frequently overlooked facet of the wider campaign to repeal the Corn Laws. Bright's attack on the game laws further highlights how the campaign against the Corn Laws intersected the boundaries of town and country, industry and agriculture, around which popular perceptions of the struggle for repeal are often framed and imagined. Agitation over the game question was on one level a tactical expedient to embarrass the landed interest and to maintain campaigning momentum at a time when support for repeal in parliament was weak, but it nonetheless embodied a coherent critique of the economic and moral rationale for protectionism. It was central to the League's campaign to weaken support for the Corn Laws within rural constituencies and sought specifically to undermine the electoral loyalty of tenant farmers to landlord candidates. Understandably perhaps, the 'game nuisance' often seemed an issue with a greater potential to unify tenant farmer opinion and to divide agricultural from landed interests than that of repeal itself.

¹³⁴ A. Durie, 'Game shooting: An elite sport, c.1870–1980', *Sport in History* 28 (2008), pp. 431–44. J. Martin, 'British game shooting in transition, 1900–1945', *Agricultural Hist.* 85 (2011), pp. 209 and 215; id., 'The transformation of lowland game shooting in England and

Wales since the Second World War: The supply side revolution', *Rural Hist.* 22 (2011), pp. 207–26.

¹³⁵ Munsche, 'Gamekeeper', p. 102. See also the experiences recounted by Holcombe, *Exmoor poacher* (chs 7–9) and Haggard (ed.), *I walked by night* (chs 12–13).