

Mole catching in the Fens

The recorded history of mole catching starts in Roman times. They used earthenware pots which were filled with water and placed into the tunnels. These pots became clay barrel traps as techniques were refined and by the middle ages wooden traps replaced the clay traps.

In the middle ages some mole catchers were itinerant but many parishes had local professional mole catchers. As well as being paid by landowners to clear their fields of moles there was money to be made by selling the moleskins. At one time America was importing more than four million moleskins from England every year. Mole catchers were secretive about their techniques and it was a well paid occupation

The industrial revolution brought the use of steel traps and also strychnine. The poison was easy to use and more effective than traps but the moles would die underground so the catcher didn't get the skins. and couldn't prove the effectiveness of their efforts by showing the farmer the dead moles. If they couldn't see the dead moles they didn't want to pay. Strychnine was banned for use in 2006.

In the 1861 Census for Little Downham John Nicholas, age 75, was listed as a mole catcher and in 1891, 22 year old William Nightingale was a mole catcher. In 1904 John Missen, a mole catcher and dealer of First Drove was up in court for not paying for carrots.

During the First War people could apply for exemption from military service if they were deemed to be in an important role at home. In January 1917 Mr George Theobold, chief engineer for the Littleport and Downham Commissioners, applied for exemption for Charles E Soar (31), married, mole catcher. Mr Theobold informed the tribunal that Soar caught moles over an area of 13,000 acres. He was asked how many have been caught since October and replied 4,500 but he didn't know how many remained to be caught. Conditional exemption was granted.

After the war there was a shortage of men to work on the land and the Food Production department had requests for women to work as mole catchers and bee keepers.

The following report is from the newspapers in January 1924:

Moles are reported to be very numerous in various parts of the country, whilst in some districts in the Eastern Counties the land in certain localities is overrun with them.

High prices are being paid for mole skins (12/6 per dozen, as compared with 2/6 a few years ago), and the mole catcher

also receives payment for all moles destroyed, so that he has a double inducement to kill as many as possible.

The present is the best time for trapping, the mole now being in full winter fur, and the skins being of the greatest value. Furriers are advertising all over the country for skins, there being a keen demand for the fur, which is used not only for making motor garments, but also for ladies' muffs and furs, hats, trimmings for dresses, linings for winter garments etc.

TO MOLE CATCHERS.—Wanted, to Purchase, MOLE SKINS.—Apply, stating quantity and price, Mr J. CLARK, Messrs Robert Sayle and Co., Cambridge.



10,000 mole skins, in bundles packed and ready for the furrier

BARDOLPH FEN.

Mole Catching.

PERSONS wishing to apply for the situation of MOLE CATCHER for this district can attend with Testimonials of Character at a Meeting of the Committee of the Bardolph Fen Drainage Commissioners, to be held at the Swan Inn, in OUTWELL, in the county of Norfolk, on FRIDAY, the first day of September next, at ten o'clock in the forenoon.

EDWD. JACKSON,

Clerk to the Commissioners.

Wisbech, August 5th, 1854.

In the fens Mole Catching was the responsibility of local drainage boards and when landowners paid drainage rates they were also paying for moles to be caught. Following the banning of strychnine mole catching is on the increase once again.

Robin Pearl