



DEER HUNTING

The spectacle of hunting and its association with military prowess and horsemanship were key to the establishment of power by Norman kings in England. A medieval Royal Forest was a tract of land subject to the Forest Law which was designed to protect the interests of the King especially relating to hunting, timber trees and other rights.

No one was allowed to hunt protected wild animals unless they had express permission from the King. The four beasts of the forest protected were red, roe and fallow deer and the wild boar.

Royal Forests were often very extensive and about a quarter of the whole of England was under forest law in the early 12th century. The increase in the area of forests was the cause of deep disputes with landowners, which came to a head in the reign of King John, and which brought about the Forest Charter of 1217. This reduced the power of the King but the struggle between royal power, landowners and local people continued for many centuries.

In practice, the main animals hunted from the 13th century onwards were the red deer, native to Britain, and the fallow deer, probably introduced by the Normans via Italy. The larger red deer were chased across open country and were ideal for the scale and terrain of Royal Forests. The smaller fallow deer

were often kept as herds within deer parks owned and managed by the gentry.

The ‘vert’ of the forest, including trees, shrubs and grassland forming the woodland pastures, was protected by law.

Local people could use these pastures for their livestock but grazing was restricted when the female deer were ‘fawning’.

The pastures were closed off during 'fence month' centred on Midsummer

Day to allow
the successful
establishment
of the new
generation
of deer.

Inventory of
deer in Sherwood
Forest; 1708. *Papers
of the Holles Family in
the Portland (Welbeck)
Collection, Pw 2/617*

