

A Gamekeeper's Life: John Bartram retires

One of the great characters of Richmond Park, John Bartram, retired in October after thirty years as the Park's gamekeeper, looking after the deer herds and other wildlife. It was the end of an era.

When John joined The Royal Parks in 1986 there were 1,500 deer in the Park, far more than it could support. Deer starved to death, especially in winter. John and his team steadily reduced that to the present 600 red and fallow deer. Today the Deer Society rates the Park's red deer as the finest captive herd in the country in terms of animal welfare. John is justifiably proud of the achievement.

John grew up in Ham, one of nine children. The family kept chickens, rabbits, his father's racing pigeons and a pet seagull. He also learned to shoot.

When still a teenager, John met the head groom for Richmond Park. When he worked as a gamekeeper at Kew, managing the ornate pheasants/peafowl and waterfowl, he also helped out with the cull in Richmond Park at weekends for the experience. The job of the Park's gamekeeper came up and he jumped at it.

"It was the ideal job for me and I was so happy," says John. "The Park was very quiet – maybe only a million visitors a year – you could spend half a day working at Pen Ponds and see no-one else."



The main part of the job is managing the deer herd, monitoring their health, dealing with deer killed or injured by cars, feeding them in winter and, of course, the two culls in November and February. There's also pest control of rabbits, squirrels and crows and incidents with swans, badgers and other wildlife.

"The biggest threat to the deer," says John, "is dogs – deer are terrified of them". Then there's litter "which goes in but doesn't come out; it calcifies in their stomachs, turns to grey concrete-like stuff". And people getting too close: "they forget these are wild animals – surprising I know when you're facing an eight foot stag."

John will miss living at Kingston Gate Lodge. "I get badgers coming up to my window while I'm watching TV, but it's noisy with cars and cyclists and families shouting". Walton, where he's moved already, is much quieter for the coarse fishing and bird-watching he loves.

We wish him a long and very happy retirement.