

Swan Upping at Wallingford 2010

Where can you get involved in an ancient ceremonial royal tradition, right on your doorstep, which doesn't cost you anything? The ceremony of Swan Upping comes to Wallingford once a year, and is well worth seeing.

Swan Upping dates back to the twelfth century, when The Crown claimed ownership of all mute swans which were considered an important food source for banquets and feasts.

This ownership of the swans is shared with the Vintners' and Dyers' Livery Companies who were granted rights of ownership by The Crown back in the fifteenth century. Today the swans are counted but thankfully are no longer eaten!

The Queen's Swan Marker and the accompanying Swan Uppers of the Vintners' and Dyers' Livery Companies use six traditional Thames rowing skiffs on their five-day journey upstream to Abingdon.

As Wallingford is close to the end of the Swan Uppers journey from London, they always go through Wallingford on Friday, often early in the morning.

So on Friday 23rd July 2010 just before ten o'clock, a band of eager onlookers clustered by the bridge in Wallingford, trying to catch a glimpse of the swan uppers skiffs as they approached. Soon we saw the traditional wooden boats flying their appropriate flags and pennants, making their way towards a family of swans and cygnets just downstream.

We could see the Swan Uppers traditional clothing – although slight drizzle meant they were wearing scarlet wet weather gear with the traditional scarlet costume underneath being kept dry for later in the day!

We all made our way down to the swans, and saw the swan uppers expertly corner the swans by positioning their skiffs to prevent their escape. The Swan Uppers then carefully caught the swans and ensured that they could not escape by gently restraining their legs and wings. The family was placed gently on the bank before being weighed and measured, and checked for any sign of injury. The cygnets were then ringed with individual identification numbers by The Queen's Swan Warden, whose role is scientific and non-ceremonial. The swans - who had been ringed a previous year - were also recorded and checked for any injuries commonly caused by fishing hook and line.

When all the recording had taken place, the family were gently placed back in the river all together, able to swim off presumably oblivious that they had just taken place in a ceremony that has been going on for over 800 years.

The Swan Uppers then rowed off in the Abingdon direction, ready to perform the same spectacle at the next group of swans they encountered.

Next year why don't you come along and see what it's all about?

Further information can be found at
<http://www.royal.gov.uk/RoyalEventsandCeremonies/SwanUpping/SwanUpping.aspx>