



f) The history of the Bowler hat at Holkham

There are many theories as to why Holkham's gamekeepers first came to wear 'Bowler' or 'Coke' hats, as they were commonly known in Norfolk.

The original story is that in August 1849, William Coke, a nephew of the first Earl of Leicester of the second creation, commissioned his hatter James Lock, to design a close-fitting, low crowned hat.

William stressed that the hat must be extra strong; in order to protect his gamekeepers' heads from low hanging branches, while out horse riding. It was clear that the tall top-hats often worn by the keepers, were easily knocked off and damaged; and a completely new style was called for. It is believed that William also hoped the new hat would protect his keepers from attacks by poachers.

A prototype of the hat was duly made and when William visited Locks to inspect the design, he was presented with a very hard hat with a round, low crown and small brim, covered in a rough finished felt.

As the story goes, William then took the hat outside on to the pavement and promptly jumped up and down on it to determine its durability. Happily, the hat withstood the test and in accordance with Locks' usual practice, was called the 'Coke' hat, after the customer for whom it was made. This is probably why the hat soon became known as the 'Billy Coke' or 'Billycock' hat in Norfolk.

In later years, the hat was more generally known as the Bowler, after the Bowler Brothers, who went on to manufacture it. Although very fashionable in shooting parties of the time, the hat was also adopted by city stockbrokers and barristers and soon became uniform headwear. Nowadays, judges and officials at equestrian shows commonly wear Bowler hats.

However, recent research has cast some doubt over this story. It is now believed that it was Edward Coke, younger brother of the second Earl of Leicester, who actually ordered the hat.

Whatever the hat's true origins, there is no doubt that Holkham's present eight-strong keeping team wear the 'Coke' hat with as much pride today, as the gamekeepers shown below, photographed enjoying their lunch on a shoot day in 1909!

