



Wyre Forest Study Group

THE WIG HEADS OF WYRE

Christopher Bradley

The PERRUQUE or PERUKE head is extremely rare in fallow deer. The name is derived from the French word perruque, meaning a wig, especially of a type worn by men in the 17th and 18th centuries, and from the Italian perrucca or head of hair. This particular abnormality is caused either by damage to the scrotum, a buck may castrate himself while jumping over a barbed wire fence, or because the testes themselves have not developed fully, or are absent altogether. If such an accident should occur when the antlers are still in velvet, then further growth will not take place, the antlers would never be cast and neither the velvet shed. If a buck is castrated whilst in hard antler he will cast prematurely, often within a week or two, and a new pair of antlers will commence growing immediately, however, they will not develop normally and never harden properly, remaining permanently in velvet or some such state. So far as I am aware, only four perruque heads have been recorded in the Wyre Forest in the last 30 years.

Ed's note – Phil Rudlin kindly supplied the image below which shows a domesticated Fallow Deer called "Fergus". He was castrated by the vet, however the effect of abnormal growth of the antlers is clearly seen.

My first encounter with this rare beast was in September 1975, under a stand of larch and pine just above Furnace Mill. On this occasion he was running with several other bucks, and what really caught my attention was that while all his companions were now in hard antler, in readiness for the rut, this young black buck was still in full summer velvet. His antlers were only about 30 centimetres long, and I felt that he could not have been more than a sore (third head), and, under normal circumstances, should have been clean by the end of August at the very latest.

Almost exactly a year elapsed before I obtained a further sighting of this buck, again at Sturt Common, even in the same block of woodland where I had first encountered him. Following this, he was observed on a regular basis, almost exclusively in the Brand Wood area. It was soon established that not only was he a true perruque head, but that his home range was equally strange for a fallow buck, with little or no seasonal movements. Indeed, on only one occasion, in November 1979, did I see the perruque head outside this general area, when, faced with a heavy snowfall, he ventured as far as the bottom of Wimperhill, seeking shelter in a thickly wooded stream valley.

The perruque head did not always choose the company of other male deer, and, during the winter and spring, was just as likely to be found with the doe herds. However, on May 5th 1979, when I secured one of my most memorable sightings of

this beast, he was grazing along with three younger bucks, on a meadow at Kingswood. I was able to sketch his antlers in some detail, unhindered by woodland cover. The years had seen a marked reduction in their length, though both were of considerable girth, the right antler in particular was now only about 12 centimetres long, presumably at some stage the top of both had broken off. I never managed a photograph of this bizarre head-gear, although others were more successful in this respect. In November 1973, John Bingham, an accomplished photographer, with more than a passing interest in deer, obtained a black and white snapshot of what he believed was a good pricket, still in velvet, running off in Brand Wood. Only the time of year persuaded him that there was something very odd about this deer. It was at a much later date, when he showed me his photograph, that I was able to confirm that he had indeed captured on film the perruque buck.

It should be noted that during the rut he often displayed some interest in the does, and, in October 1981, I was able to approach within 20 metres of the perruque, as he paid particular attention to one common doe and fawn. Apparently, while subdued, the urge to mate was not entirely absent. Yet, significantly, he exhibited none of the usual physical characteristics associated with a rutting buck, his neck for instance was not swollen but remained slender in girth throughout the mating season. Naturally a perruque buck is quite incapable of breeding, and therefore serves no useful purpose within the herd. In view of this, it is perhaps somewhat ironic that he should live for so long, when so many first class heads perish prematurely or in their prime. For it was not until February 1983 that Forestry Commission Wildlife Ranger, Edwin George, finally caught up with this beast, ending in the most humane fashion, the life of a unique fallow deer. Edwin estimated his age at about 12 years, and on reflection he may not have lasted much longer. A post-mortem revealed a complete absence of the normal male organs, suggesting that, either he was born in this state, or else injured at a very early age. He weighed only 100lbs clean, little more than a pricket, and well below the 150lbs expected of a beast of this age. Because of the rarity of such heads, the perruque was quickly despatched to the taxidermist for treatment, and, while the result leaves much to be desired, it can now be seen in the Deer Museum at Button Oak. By no means is it the most impressive head on display, but interesting nonetheless, the texture of the antlers is more reminiscent of papier-mache than bone.

It was more than a decade before another perruque head appeared in the Forest, when a young common buck, possibly in his 3rd year, was seen in Chamberline Wood on several occasions during the



Wyre Forest Study Group

winter months. However, unlike his predecessor this particular animal did not survive for long and hereafter was not seen again. He may have been shot on neighbouring land or else became a road casualty on the busy B 4194, which dissects the Forest in this area.

Another long wait ensued before my next sighting of a perruque head. It was October 28th 2002, when, in the fading light of a dull afternoon, I encountered what at first glance I took to be a black pricket with a very poor head, under a stand of mature Sessile Oak at Cold Harbour Coppice. On closer inspection he seemed to possess an exceptionally big body for a deer only 16 months of age. Even more perplexing was that I could not detect even a semblance of antlers, he looked for the entire world like a recently cast buck, only the time of year led me initially to dismiss this possibility. Then I noticed a possible clue to his true identity, a small split in his right ear. Whilst in itself not a unique characteristic, as several bucks in anyone year may well exhibit such minor damage, I was immediately reminded of Hookey. He was a five year old buck, so named because of a prominent hooked trey tine on his left antler which he had borne for three successive seasons. For much of his life he had favoured the woods and meadows around St Johns Lane, except of course during the autumn rutting season when he would wander much further afield in search of does. In September 2002 he moved into Oxbind Coppice, to compete with other bucks for the favours of the numerous does in this locality, and towards the end of the month was seen sparring, in fairly friendly fashion, with a black sored. However, he could not aspire to become master buck, as there were several older dominant bucks in this area. Indeed, during the peak of the rut he was not seen at all, and I automatically assumed that a higher-ranking male had displaced him.

I was now convinced that this was Hookey, but why had he cast his antlers prematurely? The obvious answer was that he had suffered serious damage to his testes, possibly during a fight with a rival buck, resulting in a massive loss of the male hormone testosterone. If so, then he would soon develop into a genuine perruque head. There was further evidence of this only 10 days later, on November 7th, when he was seen again at Cold Harbour, his new antlers now clearly showing early anvil growth. His sizeable antlers, cast in October 2002, have never been found. On November 20th, Hookey was seen yet again, this time in company with Plain Palms, a common coloured buck also carrying his sixth head of antlers, but perfectly normal in every respect. My next encounter with Hookey was on February 20th, 2003, this time south of the A 456 in Rock Coppice, a favourite winter

quarters for mature bucks. His antlers were now fully developed, although stunted and mishapen, and a far cry from his previous elegant pair. The right antler was much longer with a very narrow palmation and two very short brow tines, the left palm was also long and narrow, but this antler had produced a single long brow tine. Of course these antlers were grown during the winter months, when not only were calcium rich grasses lacking, but when severe frosts, which can distort antler growth, were commonplace. On March 17th I observed Hookey once again in Rock Coppice, this time running with the Long Bank Buck, a mature black beast carrying his seventh head of antlers. As far as I can tell Hookey remained in Rock Coppice throughout the autumn rut, his urge to associate with the doe herds now presumably completely dormant. This was in marked contrast with the Long Bank Buck, who as usual, crossed the main A 456 in September, to search for potential mates in New Parks and Shelf Held Coppice. This however proved to be his last rut, for on his return journey to Rock Coppice in November, he was fatally injured when in collision with a motor vehicle near the Running Horse, a notable accident blackspot.

Having observed Hookey as a perruque head on November 20th, near the bottom of St Johns Lane, I was surprised when only a month or so later, on December 27th, a black buck with fully developed antlers in velvet, was seen in Chamberline Wood, just above Dowles Brook, together with a common doe, common fawn, and black fawn. It was late in the day and I could barely distinguish his antlers, but they displayed the general configuration of a 2 or 3 year old, with long narrow palmation, the right with a cleft in the top, a rather narrow spread, and fairly good brow tines both leaning inwards. There was no doubt that this was yet another perruque head, a somewhat younger beast than Hookey, and once again a buck I had not seen during the rutting season. On January 7th, 2003, an early morning foray in Withybed Wood led to another encounter with this buck, feeding alongside a black bare buck, common fawn, 2 black does, and 2 black fawns. Quite by chance he seemed to frequent the same area as the perruque head seen during the 1990's, although of course this buck was common coloured. Some time later in March, Edwin 'Titch' Carter came across the young black perruque over on Longdon Orchard, in company with a common bare buck. There appears to have been no further sightings of this deer.

These are the only authenticated records of perruque heads in Wyre Forest over a thirty year period, and it is surprising therefore that there should be two examples of this rare antler abnormality roaming the Forest at the same time, and only a couple of miles apart.



'Fergus' a domesticated perruque head fallow buck, castrated by a vet. Photo Phil Rudlin