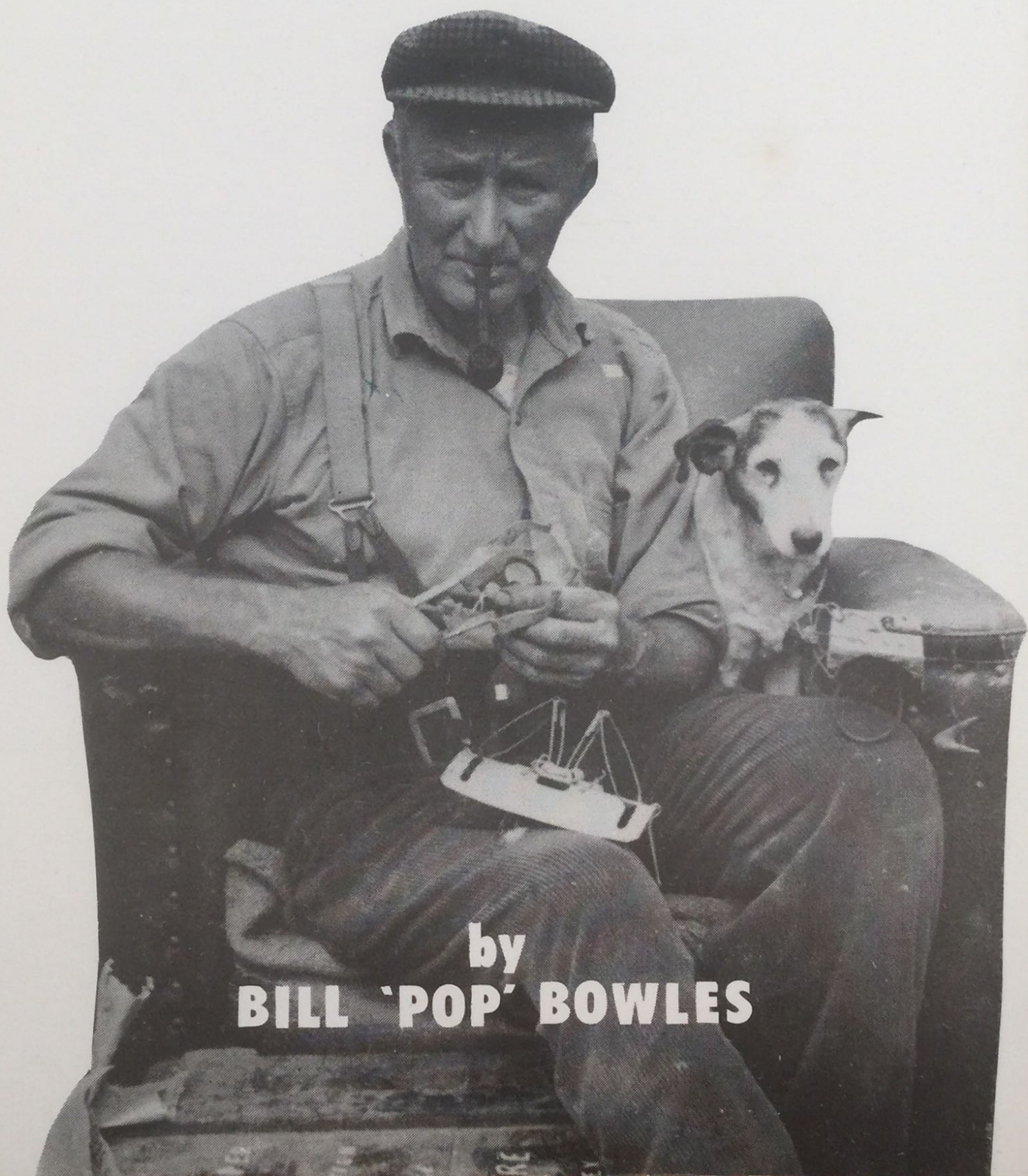


*The Memoirs  
of a  
Fenland Mole Catcher*



by  
**BILL 'POP' BOWLES**

My Father, Bill 'Pop' Bowles is a Fenland countryman whose whole life revolves around nature, the kind of man who retains a delight in a countryside that most of us think has almost vanished. He is a retired farmer and has spent most of his life working in the fields, or sitting on river banks, whilst pursuing his love of fishing, watching and studying wildlife of every kind. He hates chemicals and feels their use has destroyed so much of the flora and fauna, it is sad that in the course of progress so much beauty and simplicity of the countryside has been lost forever.

Dad has such a love of animals and he used to get so attached to any he might have had on the farm. I remember, as a child, when it came time for the pigs to go to market it was always my Mother or Grandfather who was left to see the animals away in the lorry. Dad would be at the furthest most point of the farm, you see he gave all the pigs names and couldn't bear to see them go!

He used horses on the farm for many years, we had two, called Pink and Bet. Pink died at the age of 36 years and Bet was 45 man years old when she died. They were always treated like members of the family, even to the point of having beer and plum pudding every Christmas!

Dad feels sad at having to destroy moles, but despite their cuddly harmless appearance they do cause a great deal of damage and are classed as vermin. He tries to destroy them in the most humane way and would not cause any creature to suffer unnecessarily.

The BBC has made four films about him and these have been shown on television, films not only about his mole catching but his eel fishing as well.

I think, like most of his generation, Dad feels the pace of life is too fast these days. He likes to remember the 'good old days' of the 1930s, even though they were the 'hard old days' in many ways, but life seemed less complicated and pressured compared to life in the 1980s.

Ann Cooper

*I am compiling this book for my Father and dedicating it  
to his dear Wife Ella who died on 30th August 1984.*

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## MOLE CATCHER

### The Beginning of it All

I was born in the year 1911 and I was about eight years old when I first started catching moles. I was useless at school and did not bother to learn anything, but when it came to wild life I wanted to know as much as I could. I would spend all my spare time roaming the fields, watching and studying everything that moved in the countryside around my home.

We lived at Three Holes, in the heart of the Fens, in a little black cottage by the river bank. Grandfather was the local butcher and baker and Father helped him with his rounds, he was also a fruit grower. There was just my brother and I in the family and Mother used to help in the fruit gardens. She was a real 'lady of the land', she would help anybody, especially if they were a bit down on their luck. We never had a lot of money and Dad used to catch vermin - rats and rabbits, to make a bit more.

Dad used to sell the rabbit skins, and it was through this that I first thought of catching moles, you could get 1d for a mole skin, and in those days that was a lot of money. Dad didn't know anything about mole catching but there were a lot of moles about, and professional mole catchers were employed to catch them - that was the only work that they did.

At that time, just after the First World War, the mole catchers were called 'Missen'. They wouldn't tell you any of their secrets, they wouldn't even let you near their traps! However I used to watch them from afar off, and try and copy what they did and gradually I learned a few tricks of my own. When they had gone, I would go and look at their traps, you could tell where they had set them by the marker sticks in the ground near each trap. Sometimes they lost a trap- they wouldn't know where - but I had pinched it ! I examined it carefully and began making my own traps on similar lines.

In the beginning, for my traps, I just used a bit of wood and the tin handles off Dad's strawberry chips, they were real boded up things. I used to put these traps along the high banks and droves just anyhow. Usually they were so bunged up with earth because I hadn't put them in the right places and I hardly ever caught anything - and if I did get a mole it was sheer luck!

The old fashioned traps didn't have steel springs, like they do nowadays. You used sticks, usually willows or hazel nut, that was the best type of wood to use. After a time they would dry out and you would have to soak the sticks in the dyke water to make them springy again. The traps consisted of a piece of wood, there would be a little fork

poor case if you can't teach yourself a bit - so I reckon that I ought to be better than him now oughtn't I?

Anyway I took on the district at £7 per month, it consisted of about 7,000 acres of land. I used to work from November until the end of May mole catching. If you trap the banks, grassfields, dykes and roadsides in the winter you will save yourself a lot of work in the spring. I will explain this more fully later in the book.

I began making a lot of my own traps, like the old fashioned ones the mole catchers I knew in my boyhood had used. I would get on my bike - there were no cars in those days - and bike about six miles to the start of my district. I would get to the Fen by about 7am, and then I would leave my bike and walk the fields - I would cover a good few miles in a day. Often I would have finished my round by dinner time, then I would cycle home and do my farming in the afternoons and evenings. Sometimes the other way around but the two jobs used to work in alright together.

When you walk a field you walk two at the same time. Let me explain. You walk beside the dyke, looking the side you are walking and looking at the other side as well. You are looking for mole runs, you never walk in the middle of the field, a mole always goes from the dyke and returns to the dyke, and that is where you catch them. Never bother about where they are working. Once you have found a run, you look for the main run and that is where you set your trap, never near a mole hill. If you place your trap near the hill it will only bung up with earth as it caves in. I will explain how to locate the main run later. I used to do half my district one day and the other half the following day and so on. That way you could look in your traps every other day, and the mole skins wouldn't get damaged. You used to be able to get more money for the mole skins than from the actual mole catching. Mole catching worked out at about thirty shillings a week, whereas you often got 1 or 2 pence each for the skins and this soon mounted up

As well as walking the fields where your traps were set, you keep a general eye over the rest of your district. You soon learnt if there were any moles about because the farmers would tell you, if they thought you weren't catching THEIR moles they made sure you knew about it! Mole catching came under the Drainage Boards, when you paid your drainage rates you also paid for your moles to be caught. Odd places would be self drained, and then the people would have to pay privately if they wanted you to clear their land. For years I had been clearing the drains of moles for the Manea and Welney District Drainage Commission, but I think I did the job too well and there were few moles left to trap! In June 1976, I received a letter saying that because of ever increasing costs and the withdrawal of the 50% grants that the Drainage Boards used to receive for mole catching services, they felt unable to keep me on. I was not too concerned at losing the job, as my eel fishing business was going well, and I am always available for private mole catching contracts. I

did warn the Authorities though that with a few wet winters the moles would be back in force.

All mole catching is done privately nowadays, and it is getting harder and harder to find mole catchers. The old fashioned ones I knew in my young days have all gone now, and my own generation is having to compete with all the newer methods of extermination and trapping the little animals. There are no young lads coming on who want to learn the trade, my own two sons have their own jobs and interests and will help me out from time to time but they have no desire to become full time mole catchers.

A mole catcher is what I call a 'lone wolf'. He walks the Fen in all weathers, in winter when it can be cold and windy, in snow and rain, but you are at one with nature and it is a good life if you like it. Years ago, when I was trapping, I had my two dogs with me, Lady who was a whippet, and Prince who was a golden labrador, and they were such good company when I was out in the Fens with no one in sight for miles. My dogs were worth their weight in gold, and a well trained dog will catch a lot of moles.



I have been a mole catcher for over 55 years and have enjoyed every minute. Of course I hate having to kill these lovable looking little 'gentlemen in black velvet' but I do feel it is necessary and I do it in the most humane way I can. Do not forget a mole does good as well as harm, they eat a lot of grubs and because of their constant digging of tunnels they must help to drain the land and also aeriate the soil. It must be said, however, that in the wrong place a mole does so much damage, in a beet field or any field where the sown seeds are small it can seriously damage the crop yield.

There are two main methods of destroying moles, either by traps or poison, and I have used both. I have used poison for many years and feel it is a more humane and a quicker death for the mole, but there are obviously very strict rules and the Authorities will only issue it to persons fully conversant with the use of strychnine and for the express purpose of exterminating moles. One has to be so careful in both use and handling of the poison, one little slip could prove fatal for the handler.

I hate the use of all chemicals, therefore I am only setting down in this book my methods of using a trap to catch the mole, all the secrets that I know, so they won't be forgotten.

## The Mole

The mole is a small mammal, its body is covered with thick black velvety fur, and it is usually 5 or 6 inches long. It has a small tail, and a nose that resembles that of a pig. Its eyes and ears are very small, their teeth are incredibly sharp and will give you a nasty bite if you get your finger in the way! Moles have a keen sense of touch, smell and hearing but sight is less important.

Their back feet are small, whereas their front feet are large and very strong, ideal for digging and padding down the soil, and compressing the sides of the run. Sometimes in clay soil you can see marks along the tops of the runs where they have gone down their tunnels upside down. They do not seem to care how they get to their next supply of food, perhaps it is much quicker to go upside down sometimes!

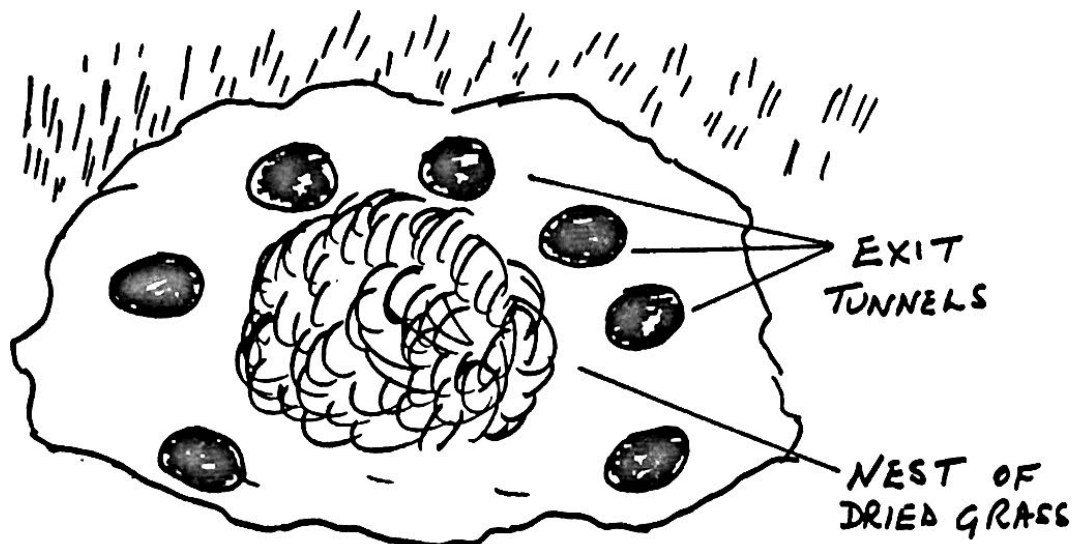


They are very clever little animals and can move very fast, I think a mole can go as fast underground as a rat can on top. In fact moles are clever in many ways. A mole can hear you coming a hundred yards away, if the wind is the right way and he will stop working. If you come to him facing the wind and if it is strong he doesn't get your scent or hear you and he will carry on working, and you will be able to walk right up to him. You have to be quick to catch him though! If you put your heel at the back of his run about a yard or so before you get to the end he was working, he will frantically try to clear away the cave-in you have made, and you stand a good chance of catching him.

As I have already mentioned mole skins were worth money years ago but nowadays it is not worth the trouble. One either throws the animal away, or do as some mole catchers hang the moles along fences so that the farmer can see how many have been caught, and more importantly to him, see how his money is being earned!

The mole is an underground specialist and is seldom seen on the surface. Moles mate during the spring months and make their nests with dried grass about 1½ to 2 feet underground. Their young are born, after about four weeks gestation, at the end of April or early May. When born the young are pink skinned and blind, and

the average litter is 2 to 5 babies. They are fed on their Mothers milk for 4 to 5 weeks and then they go out to work. I would like to think that moles keep the same partners, because in the Spring you always catch a pair. I should think the females make the nest, I don't know, but females usually are the ones that make the home nice and comfortable.



The above drawing shows the larger mole hill, known as the 'fortress', opened up to reveal the nest and adjacent exit tunnels.

When the young go out to work they are so nice to watch. They work in groups with their heads underground and their backs exposed, they are not strong enough to dig down, and they think they are safe! In fact they are so vulnerable to all types of predators at this stage, and they do cause a great deal of damage to small seed crops.

Moles seem to prefer black land or silt land which is a lighter soil, compared to the heavy clay land which is harder for them to work. So you can appreciate how in an easier working soil the amount of damage done to crops is enormous.

The moles make their runs to get their food. Worms drop through the soil into the tunnels, and in the deeper ones where the earth has been compressed so hard the worm is unable to escape. The worms crawl along the tunnels and sometimes there are so many that the mole need look no further for its food. A mole can eat its own weight in worms and insects each day, and as it weighs between 3 to 4ozs it needs a lot of food. Moles will eat grubs, insects, wireworms, in fact any insects in the soil but their main food is earthworms. You can always guarantee to find moles where there is a patch of stinging nettles on a bank or by the roadside. I really don't know whether there are more grubs and worms around the nettle roots, or whether the moles like the roots to eat - I have never been able to work this out. You never catch a 'poor' mole, they are all fat and in good order.



Many years ago when you caught a mole it would be full of fleas, but nowadays hardly a flea is to be seen - maybe all the insecticides and chemicals used in modern day farming have something to do with this.

After rain the worms come to the top of the ground and then the moles work near the surface. However when it is very dry the worms go down deeper, and you may have to dig down three or four feet to find the runs, the mole has to go where his source of food goes. Consequently in a wet season there are not many mole hills to be seen, but when the moles have to dig deep the spare earth is pushed up into the familiar mole hill.

Moles make one main run - like a main road - and all their tunnels go off from that like side roads.



They are very strong little creatures and can dig through any type of soil, they will even dig deep and go under roads you know! The mole is a very active animal and works both day and night with just short periods for rest. You always set your trap in the main run because you can be sure of catching them there. Sometimes a mole will go perhaps two hundred yards down a tunnel to work but always returns to the main thoroughfare. I'm sure they dig their own well for water, because during very dry weather I have found runs going straight into the ground. I remember seeing moles dredged out of the river by drag lines and they have emerged from the soil completely dry, they have been deep under the clay.

I don't know how a mole gets air into its runs as the tunnels are all closed up. Some scientists think that the air is pushed along in front of the working mole, I don't think so, because when a mole gets to the end of its run and starts to dig through clay, for example, its body completely fills the hole. Air must get down somehow for it to breathe, I think a certain amount of air is trapped in the soil.

I do not know if you would say a mole migrates or not, but they do move from the fields to the banks, grassfields and road sides in the winter, about the end of October beginning of November. They move to the dykes and then travel along the dykesides in the same old run every year. The moles dig these tunnels deeper in the winter, this is a good time to catch them. They have all congregated together now and are therefore easier to catch, in the fields they spread all over the place. I have caught as many as 75 moles in one run over a winter period.

Some people think that a mole cannot see, I think even though their eyes are so tiny they act as some form of radar. Moles can travel in a straight line for long distances, even along a wire fence from one end to the other, and you never see them coming out on top to see where they are!

The mole is also a good swimmer, and when the Wash floods they will swim the rivers to dry land.

White moles, albinos, are rare but many years ago a farmer said he had ploughed one out of the ground, he never caught it of course as it moved too fast! I went along and set my trap and I managed to catch it the next day, a field away from where the farmer had seen it. It has now been stuffed and mounted on a board and is used by Schools in their nature studies. I might add I have never come across a white mole since.

Mole skin, which is beautifully soft and silky, was once a popular fur but has now gone out of fashion. Years ago mole catchers would wear mole skin waistcoats, but not any more.

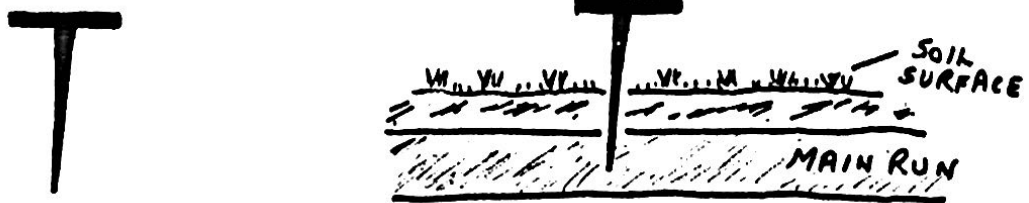
Here is a photograph of me with that white mole on my shoulder!



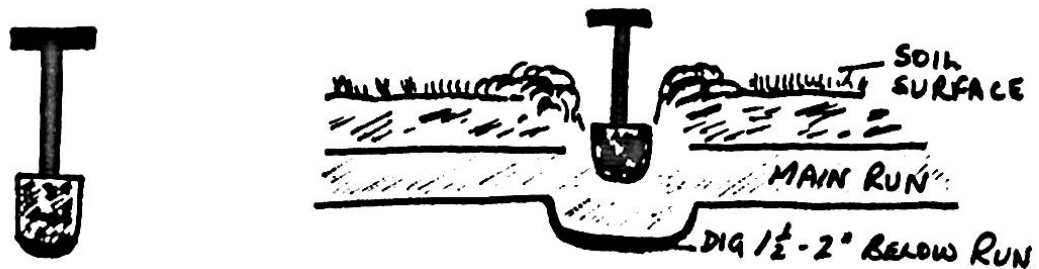
## The Tools of the Trade

I will now explain the equipment you need and with the help of drawings and diagrams share my mole catching skills with you.

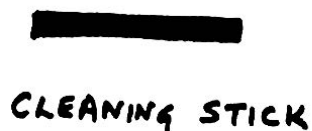
First of all you need a walking stick with a sharp point, this will enable you to locate your main run.



Once you have located the main run, more details of how to achieve this a little later on, you need a little trowel or 'spud' as we call it. You must be careful how you dig down, and go down to a depth of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 inches BELOW the run.



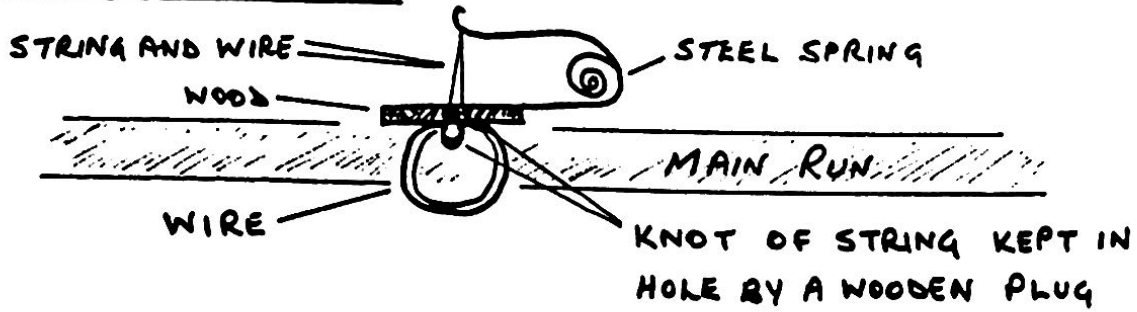
You will appreciate that the sides of the run are really compressed by the mole thus ensuring fast and easy movement down the tunnels, you must therefore try and leave the run as you find it. A small stick is used to clean out the run and then the 'spud' or trowel handle is used to press the bottom of the run hard. Leave about a  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 inch lip each end of the run.



A knee pad is also very handy unless you like having wet knees! The strap on ones are the best.

Then of course your traps and small marker sticks with a coloured flag attached, so that you can easily locate your traps once you have set them. The principle of the traps is much the same nowadays as it was with the old fashioned ones, but instead of using willow or hazlenut twigs steel springs are used.

### OLD FASHIONED TRAP



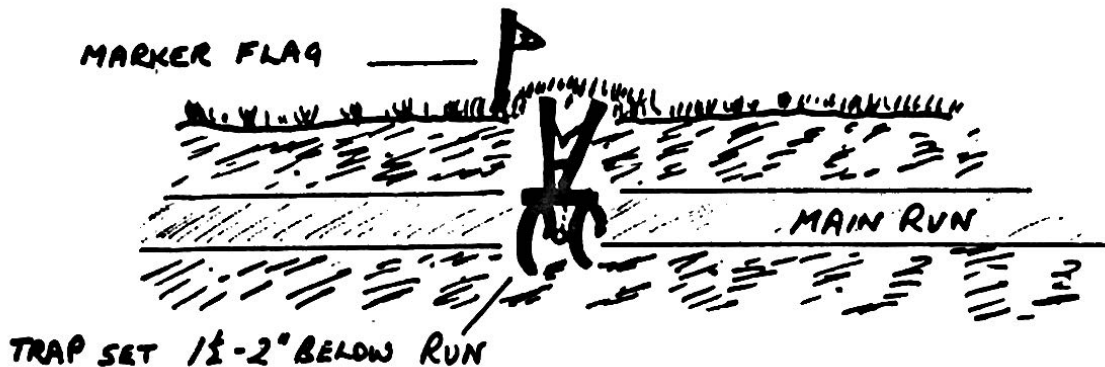
### SPRING OR PINCER TRAP



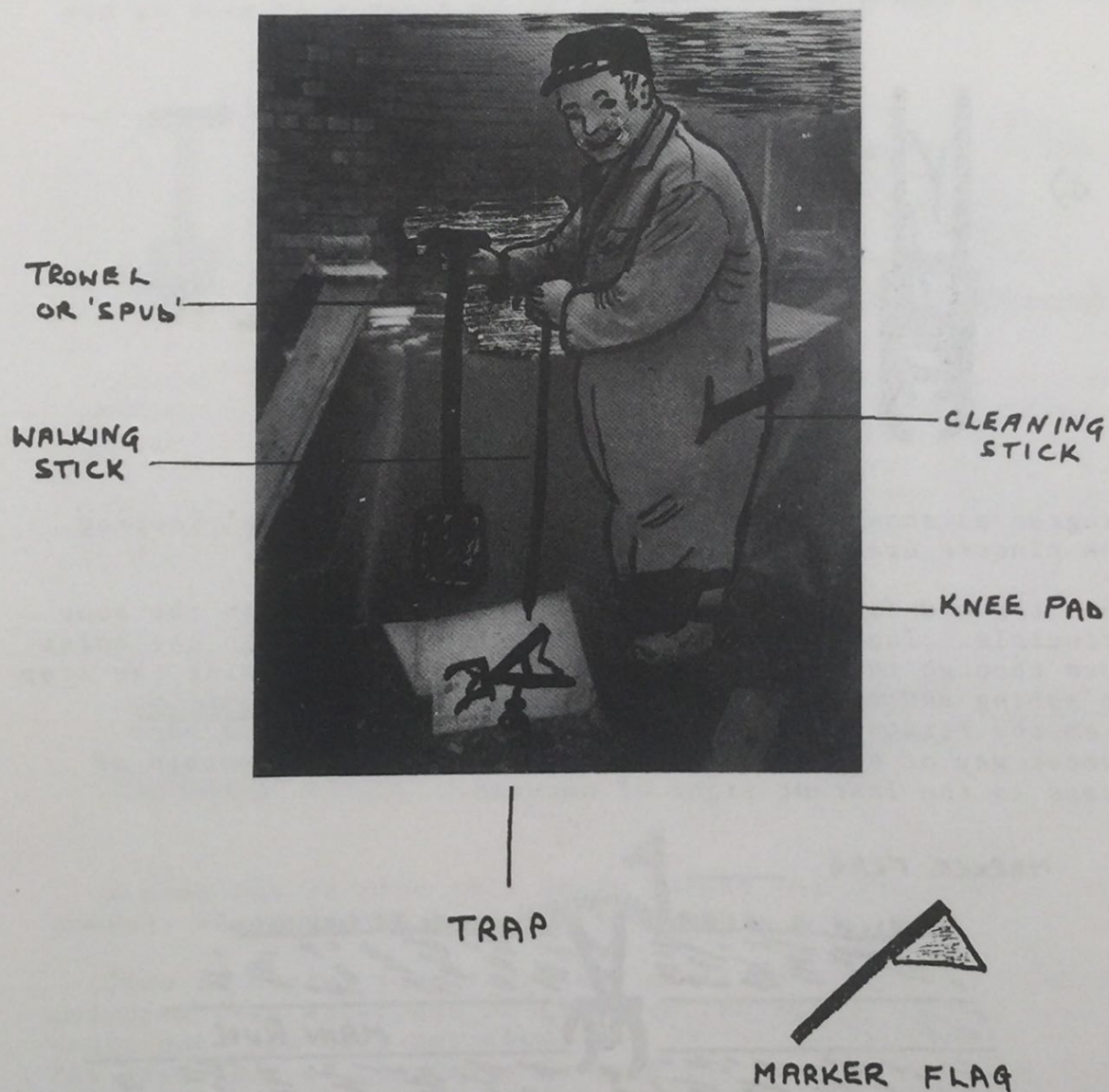
Diagram a) shows the trap set with the metal 'plug' keeping the pincers open, and b) shows the trap sprung.

Both the old fashioned and the pincer traps work on the same principle. The trap is set in such a way that when the moles move through the runs, they touch the 'plug' causing the trap to spring and then the mole is caught.

I am the first to admit that the use of poison is a more humane way of dealing with moles, but the one advantage of traps is the instant sight of success.



This is all the equipment you need, and once you have collected your tools together, and have correctly 'weathered' your traps, you will be all set to catch those unwelcome guests wherever they might be.

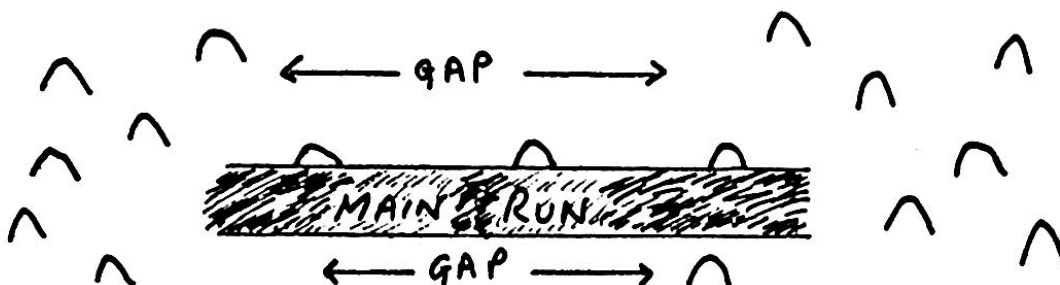


### My Methods

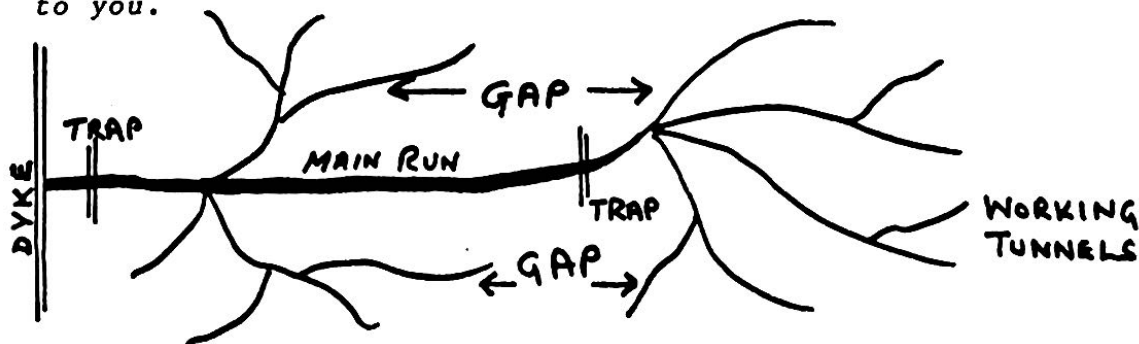
These are my methods and if you follow them carefully they will point you in the right direction for successfully catching moles.

It is most important that you first of all find the MAIN RUN, it may be a bit hard for you at first but it will come with practice. Remember the main run always starts from the bank or dyke, with numerous working tunnels going off from it. Ignore where the moles are working as this could be two or three hundred yards from the main thoroughfare. A mole always sets out from the dyke and will return home to the dyke, and it is in this main run that you will catch them. Setting your traps anywhere else will be a waste of time.

A good tip for a beginner is to tread down all the runs you think are the main ones, do this at night. The next day you will see where the mole has been active overnight, as the earth will have been heaved up into a mole hill, and you can then go ahead and set your traps, and remember not near a hill. I have the years of experience not to have to do this.



If you have a field full of moles look for a straight line of mole hills with a gap either side, as in the diagram above. Feel down with the walking stick to establish where the main run is, dig down and set your traps in the way I have described to you.



In gardens moles start out from the edges of paths, hedges and house walls. Look for a straight line of hills alongside the path or whatever, ignore the scattered hills as they are the working tunnels off the main thoroughfare. If you are unsure of where to set your traps, do as I have advised above, try treading down what you think might be the main run at night, check in the morning and see if you were right!

Before you use your new traps it is a good idea (if you want to become an expert), to weather them well for a few weeks prior to using them. Just dig them into the ground and leave them there.



Make sure you widen your traps to at least 2" to allow the mole through, if it cannot get through easily it will either go round or under the obstacle, and spring the trap anyway with its movement of the soil.

When setting the trap do not be afraid to place it well deep, dig the hole as wide as the trap, see the diagram on page 13, go at least  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 inches below the run, a mole will always go down not up. Another point to remember is before setting your trap rub your hands with damp earth to kill your scent.

The depth of the main run varies, sometimes in a grassfield, your walking stick may go down 10 to 12 inches, in the spring the runs will be nearer the surface, and as I have mentioned earlier in very dry weather the moles go really deep in search of their food.

Try and have your moles caught by the end of February along the banks, dykes and grasslands before they move out into the open fields.

Set your traps in a section along the dyke, for instance, in every main run. Take the moles out every day for 3 or 4 days, then take up your traps and move to another section. Leave the first section alone for 8 or 9 days and then reset your traps there to pick up all the odd ones that are left, and continue repeating this process until the land is clear of the moles.

Should you notice a small hole by your traps you will know you have help in catching the mole, in the form of a stoat or weasel. They are a mole catchers friend so let them go if you catch one alive. In my time I have caught rats, stoats, minks and weasels as well as moles, but I have always released the stoats and weasels if I have caught them alive.

If you have a mole that is 'hard' to catch, set your trap in the usual way, but tread down the run within about 2 feet of the trap on both sides. The mole then has to work harder to re-open the tunnels and it gets very tired, and will go through the trap instead of round it or under it. These moles are always female, for some reason, and much harder to catch.

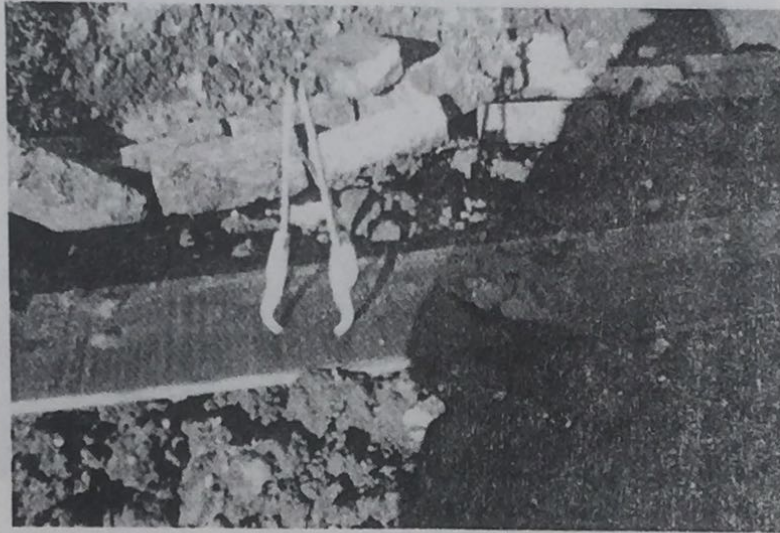
'WEATHERING' THE TRAPS

1



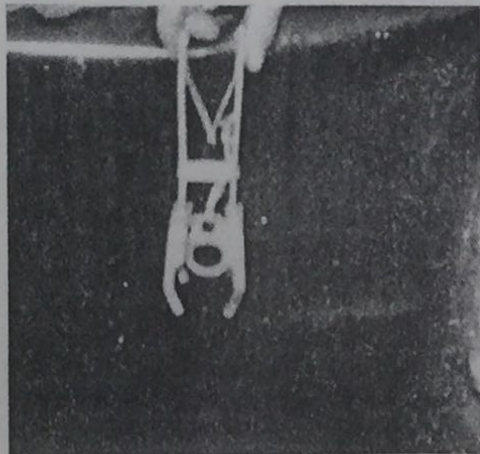
Widening the trap to at least 2"

2



Trap in the 'set' position

3



(Caught)

4





Preparing the set trap



Set the trap well deep



A weasel



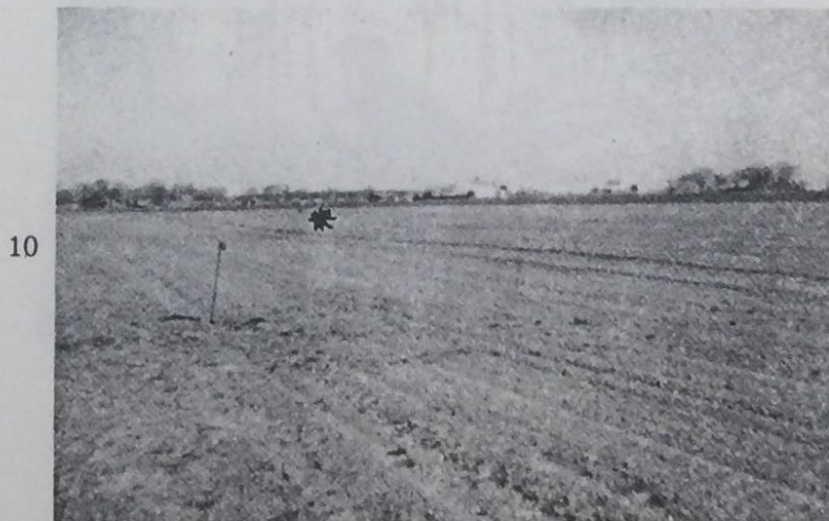
Successful catch



Locate main run \*Position of trap



Marker shows trap \*shows where mole is working



Should you want to catch a mole alive always approach the workings head wind on. Stamp your heel down about 2 - 3 feet behind the mole, and he will at once turn around, with such amazing speed, and try to re-dig his tunnel home. Do not try to kick him out but work quickly and you will be able to pick him out. Remember he is incredibly fast underground!



Several years ago I was asked by a biologist studying moles at the University College, London, to supply live animals. I was unable to do this, as it is impossible to keep moles alive in captivity, no matter what the conditions, for more than 24 hours. They just die of fright.

## CONCLUSION

That concludes my book in which I have not only reminisced on my life, when the grass seemed greener, but tried to record as simply as possible my methods for catching moles.

From the advice given I hope that you will be as successful as I have been in ridding your lawns or fields of the unwelcome guest. You will find several products on the market for destroying moles but to my mind the only proven ways are by trapping or the careful use of poison.

Do not be downhearted if you are not successful immediately, with perseverance you will soon be able to succeed. Remember to look for that main run and all the tell tale signs that lead to it. Set your trap in the right place and success will invariably follow. Think you may never have to call on the professionals again!

Even though I am now in my 74th year I am still catching moles for anyone that needs my services, and I fully intend to continue doing so as long as I am able.

In addition my eel fishing also keeps me busy, but..... that's another story!!!

