

11 *Preparations for release*

The Cheshire village where I was by then living had long before become something of a dormitory suburb of the nearby conurbation of Greater Manchester. I was a commuter myself, driving daily to and from work in north Manchester, weaving along the twisting, hedge-lined lanes separating the village from the motorway. The village is a classic of ribbon development, a narrow band of old-fashioned cottages mixed in with more modern houses bordering both sides of the main road as it winds its way through. Behind this residential veneer stretch the fertile Cheshire fields, grazed by great herds of Friesian cows, conspicuous in their magpie colours against the unnaturally bright, shiny green of their well-fertilised pasture land.

At the very end of my road, a mile or so from the village, lay a rather less intensive enterprise. Greenwood Farm was a family business run by a father and son, Jeff and Philip. There was certainly a small herd of cows, and also sheep and poultry, cereal and root crops, and even a part-time car repair business – what in town and country planning terms is called ‘mixed use.’ Infinitely more interesting to me, though, was the abundance of wildlife to be found in and around the farm. On the approach, where the lane passed through a steep-sided cutting, chestnut-brown bank voles could be seen scurrying through tangled undergrowth and twisted tree roots; just before you reached the farm, a frequently flooded, low-lying area might be playing host to a heron, or on one occasion to a moorhen trying, against the odds, to construct a viable nest there; and, most attractive of all, in the unkempt woodland that bordered the farm and provided its name, a tribe of badgers, occupying an ancient and enormous sett originally excavated many decades before from the sandy Cheshire earth. This secure and tranquil environment contrasted starkly with the roads on which I travelled to work, which were invariably littered with the mangled remains of any creature – fox, pheasant, hare – unwary enough to stray from the relative safety of the adjoining fields onto the deadly, tarmac killing zone.

Not only did the environs seem ideal barn owl territory, but the farm buildings and farmyard too were just what I was looking for. Though built in the local red brick, rather than the coarse grey limestone of the Lakeland buildings I’d been shown by Jane and Teddy Ratcliffe, the barns and other outbuildings were largely unused. With only limited storage now required at ground floor level, the upper floors were completely redundant, no longer needed to hold bales of hay because fodder to see the beasts through winter was supplied in cylinders of silage, like huge black puddings in their tight, shiny, plastic skins. Ironically, whilst this intensive silage production has resulted in empty farm buildings, producing potential homes for barn owls, the self- same process, involving the frequent, mechanical



harvesting of hay crops, has deprived the birds of their rich foraging areas, where small mammals are unable to survive for long enough to breed before the next cut comes along.

It was in one of these disused haylofts, on the first floor, that the farmers, Jeff and Philip, agreed that I could carry out my first release. The room was situated in one end of a long, two-storey brick-built barn, with a neatly-fashioned circular opening, about four feet in diameter, in the gable end ('for chucking bales through,' as Philip explained). At the opposite end of the loft was an internal dividing wall stretching the full height of the building, with a heavy wooden door at first floor level. There were therefore only two ways in and out – the circular opening and the door – both of them requiring the use of ladders. Using the hole involved setting ladders on a concrete yard adjoining the shippen. This yard, covered as it frequently was in a thin, treacherous coating of liquid cowshit, would be unlikely, I reckoned, to hold the ladder in place for long. If the cowshit didn't do the trick, the cattle surely would when they used the ladder as an impromptu scratching post or accidentally barged into it as they milled about the yard. Whatever the cause, the effect would be to maroon me in the loft with no means of escape. The safer bet therefore seemed to be to retreat inside the building and position a ladder against the whitewashed dividing wall so that I could access the loft via the elevated wooden door. Although this would involve a rather awkward stooping manoeuvre to step from the ladder and through the entrance, not least because the door opened outwards, I consoled myself with the thought that the sacks of cattle nuts piled at the foot of the wall would be more likely to cushion my fall than the unforgiving, slippery concrete of the yard outside.

Like most farmers, Philip was perfectly at ease climbing up and down ladders, and must have been amused as he watched my first, tentative steps up to the loft.

'You can do whatever you like!' he shouted up once he'd seen me safely over the threshold.

'I think I'll go home, then' I muttered in response, as an icy blast of winter wind swept in through the circular window to catch me full in the face.

In fact, I'd only ever intended this first ascent to be a reconnoitring exercise. Having had detailed orders from Jane, I was determined to follow them to the letter, as she would doubtless demand a full report back, and I wanted to work out what materials and tools I would need. With Jane's uncompromising words ringing in my ears – 'You'll have to block every possible exit – remember, barn owls can get through a two-inch gap!' – I worked my way painstakingly round the loft. Most obvious both in terms of owl-proofing and personal safety, parts of the floor had completely disappeared, providing a clear and disconcerting view into a row of cattle stalls below. Taking great care from then onwards to tread only on the joists, and as lightly as I could in case the remaining floorboards were in a similarly precarious state, I noted numerous small gaps in the brickwork, particularly where the roof met the walls. The more closely I looked, the more full of holes I imagined the loft to be and realised that, instead of importing quantities of DIY materials, I might have to improvise by plugging the gaps with anything that came to hand. The round opening was clearly a different matter. I would need to use netting there, I thought, partly because of the size of the gap, but also to provide the captives with a window onto the world, a place from which they could look out and familiarise themselves with the immediate locality during their forthcoming months of involuntary confinement. Fortunately, in contrast with the floor,



the roof appeared to be well-maintained and completely sound. Eventually, I finished my survey by sizing up the central roof beam as a suitable place to attach the all-important nest box. That, at least, looked as if it would be a straightforward task.

Knowing how essential it was to rehouse the birds as soon as possible, I returned to the farm within a couple of days, equipped with every item that could conceivably be needed, and set to work. Unfortunately, the weather was still bitterly cold, encouraging me to work considerably faster than my normal, thoughtful pace. Working my way from the innermost point – the internal wall – I neurotically checked for any gaps of two inches or more. I took no chances, stuffing bits of brick, scrunched-up newspaper, sacking and handfuls of straw as tightly as possible into any space bigger than the merest crack. Edging painstakingly forward, towards the circular opening, I laid planks of wood to replace the vanished floorboards as I went. By the time I eventually reached the outer wall, I had already been at work for several hours.

Covering the circular opening presented me with my greatest challenge so far. It involved the construction of a lightweight wooden frame, square in shape and covered with netting, which could be easily fastened to the surrounding brickwork, and just as easily removed when the time came to do so.

As I banged and crashed about, a small gathering of young cattle assembled in the yard below, eyeing nervously this strange apparition, the warm air they anxiously snorted from their nostrils hanging like miniature cloud formations in the chilly air. Like a shoal of fish, they reacted as one, skittering noisily across the yard whenever they were startled by a particularly loud crash from my hammer or an occasional sharp cry of pain as I misjudged the blow and brought the hammer down on a semi-frozen finger instead of the intended nail.

‘Oh, bloody hell!’ I bawled, dancing around the loft like a madman, shaking my hand violently in a vain attempt to lessen the agony.

At times like these I was glad that the farmyard was so often deserted, my profanities heard only by an uncomprehending, yet spellbound, bovine audience. At least, I hoped so.

But my foul language wasn’t the only thing that I might have wanted to keep to myself. Alone in my garret, cold, tired and hungry, I suddenly found myself talking to the cattle as if they were human, explaining what I was doing (‘You’ll have some new friends in here soon – that’ll be interesting, won’t it?’) or trying to coax them back into the yard after they’d been spooked by a particularly noisy burst of hammering (‘It’s alright, steady now, that’s good girls’). In reality, the last thing I wanted was to be regarded as sentimental or just plain mad, which probably would have worried me rather less. Throughout my dealings with site owners I’ve always been at great pains to stress the serious, practical conservation purposes of my project and minimise any fancy talk about ‘the ethereal beauty of the barn owl, floating like an angel against a moonlit sky’. I certainly did not want my behaviour to undermine this approach and get me simply written off as a harmless eccentric. So, determined to stop talking to the animals, I decided to put all my energies into completing the loft conversion instead.

But there were other challenges to be overcome. The weather, bitterly cold and unpredictable throughout, tried one last time to drive me, finally frozen to the marrow, from the loft. Timing to perfection its most fierce onslaught, an undoubted skill of the British climate, the weather conjured up a particularly vicious blast of icy wind, accompanied by a



swirling cloud of sleet and snow, at the precise moment when I had crouched at the round window to fix the final missing floorboard in place. Like a hapless climber caught out on a mountainside ('the north face of the Eiger', Dad, a keen reader of mountaineering tales, would have called it), I instinctively drew myself in and waited for the awful storm to pass. Even the cattle, I noticed, had retreated into the shippen, despite the protection provided by their thick hides, to gain shelter from the appalling cold. As I crouched there, I began to muse on the first signs of hypothermia and frostbite. Dad's books had been full of unpleasant photographs of climbers whose various extremities had been reduced by the effects of sub-zero temperatures to mere blackened stumps. Perhaps sitting out the storm wasn't such a good idea, after all. Shouldn't I just call it a day and bugger off back to my nice warm home?

But just as I'd convinced myself that sticking it out any longer was not only unnecessary but also unwise, the weather suddenly changed once again. As unexpectedly as it had arrived, the storm passed, the howling wind dropped and, behold, the sun broke through the clouds, bringing a feeble but welcome warmth to my aching body. Even the cows were back.

'May as well carry on then, girls,' I muttered to them, as I felt a renewed enthusiasm to complete my task seep slowly back with the sun's rays. So, soldiering on, I finally managed to fit in place the square wooden frame that I had made and covered with wire netting. At last I could retreat into the relative comfort of the loft's interior and set about the final job: erecting a nest box.

I had thought that this would be the most straightforward task, as I'd brought with me a tea chest already adapted by the removal of its silvered lining paper, surplus tea leaves, protruding sharp nails and jagged strips of metal edging. I also had a cover, complete with entrance hole cut to the prescribed dimensions. The box, I naïvely thought, could simply be nailed in place on the central beam. It was while trying to implement my plan that I discovered several snags. Perched on a pair of stepladders, balancing the tea chest hard up against the beam with one hand and attempting to drive a large nail through the frame and into the beam with the other was, I soon discovered, a feat of gymnastics that I was incapable of sustaining for long. Even when I did achieve a brief equilibrium, I found it impossible to drive the nails home because of both the unyielding density of the oak beam and the sheer difficulty of taking a good back-swing with my hammer within the confines of an 18-inch square wooden box. As I toppled down from the ladder, releasing the box, hammer and nails to crash noisily to the floor, I once again howled curses of frustration.

Recovering my composure after a few minutes and deciding to make one last attempt, I convinced myself that the elegantly simple approach was not necessarily the only solution. So I opted to suspend the box beneath the solid beam, using a combination of heavy gauge wire, to form a cradle, binder twine and thin wooden laths, positioned vertically and nailed to the outside of the box and the less dense rafters that ran above the beam. Although this Heath Robinson construction was hardly pretty to look at, it was stable and secure as a roosting and nesting place. I had therefore achieved my main objective. Motivated now by thoughts of returning to a warm house and a decent meal, I quickly fitted out the loft with additional perching places, made from tree branches fastened across corners of the room. One of these I fastened close to the circular hole to encourage the owls to look out over the

surroundings of their temporary quarters. And with that, and bidding farewell to my bovine friends, I jumped into my car and sped home, in desperate need of something that would defrost my severely chilled extremities.

No sooner had I completed my unconventional loft conversion than it was time to introduce its new occupants. January had all but passed and I was anxious to avoid carrying out the transfer when it might interfere with the birds' pairing and mating behaviour. I'd read that in the wild, established pairs maintain only a loose alliance, like being 'just good friends' during the winter months, meeting up again, if they both survive, early in the following year. One night I had a vivid demonstration of how such a rendezvous might be arranged. Hearing a racket going on outside my house, I first poked my head through the curtains to check whether all was well in the aviaries. Although it was a pitch-black winter night, I could make out my captive pair of barn owls by the light cast from an upstairs room. Both birds were in a highly agitated state, flying around wildly and coming to rest only to stare intently at the apparently featureless sky. As I strained to follow their gaze, the window by now propped wide open, I was surprised by a tremendous howling noise, as if a strong breeze had suddenly got up. Yet the night air was perfectly still. Then another sound, more akin to a screech, seemed to come from a different part of the sky. Still in my carpet slippers and indoor clothes, I grabbed a torch and shot out of the house into the nearby fields from where I was sure the strange noises were coming. As I stared up into the sky, waving my torch wildly in all directions as a feeble searchlight, more eerie sounds penetrated the night air, but, maddeningly, there was nothing to be seen. Like invisible rockets on bonfire night, the screams sped rapidly – sometimes erratically - across the sky, seeming to die away as they became more distant. Then, without warning, they would sound directly overhead, moving rapidly to left or right, never staying still. By now, I knew what I was witnessing, although a sighting or two would have provided conclusive evidence. I'd read about the courtship flights of barn owl pairs and was convinced that this was what I was now hearing: tremulous screeches uttered by both birds as they danced wildly together in the chill night air all around me. Oh, what I would have given at that moment for a pair of night-sighted binoculars, so that I could pick out these whirling spirits in their nocturnal courtship ritual. Instead, I could only imagine their twisting and turning pursuits as they uttered their mysterious calls.

Eventually, cold and exhausted from stumbling about the frozen fields, I had no option but to retreat indoors.





Left: Barn Owl in full threat display, intended to deter a would-be attacker

Below: It worked! Inside the aviary nest box, the female barn owl stands over her clutch of eggs whilst the male (Mr McKay) glares back defiantly. A close look shows that his tongue is extended as he makes clicking sounds to intimidate the intruder



17 *Free to come and go at last*

By mid-June, it was clear that decision-time was fast approaching. The adult pair release method advocated by Jane and Teddy provided for only a very narrow window of opportunity to let the birds fly free. As unfledged offspring provide adults with a powerful incentive to return and fulfil their parental duties, the best time to open up the barn was when the young had reached five or six weeks of age. At this point, there was minimal risk of the adults simply clearing off.

It was easy enough to understand the theory, but extremely difficult, I thought, to accept its practical implications. A host of unpleasant possibilities flashed through my mind, from the obvious risk of a parental disappearing act to the rather more fanciful notion that the owlets could be stolen by a human intruder. Baby barn owls, I'd been told, could change hands for quite a lot of money on the black market. Still, I told myself, you can't keep accumulating captive barn owls. The whole point, after all, was to release them into the wild.

Having determined to bite the bullet, I arranged for the owlets to be ringed. Once again, Martin and Chris were happy to do the honours, and I knew now that I had passed the point of no return – the rules prohibited me from keeping ringed birds in captivity without good reason.

As we ferreted about in the nest box, capturing the youngsters, I discovered a rather discoloured egg. Not only was it now far too late for this to hatch, but it was also badly cracked, presumably as a result of several weeks spent as a football being kicked around the floor of the box. It was now impossible to tell what could have happened to the fourth egg, which I'd clearly seen on one of my daily visits. There was not a trace of it to be found. The ringing completed, we retreated smartly from the loft.

'I'll let you know when I open up the barn,' I told Martin and Chris. 'It'll probably be in two or three days' time.'

I was keen to give the whole family time to recover from their disturbing experience. Sure enough, on the next suitably fine and sunny afternoon, I entered the loft and, as quietly as humanly possible, removed the various ramshackle barricades that I'd constructed six months before to seal off all possible escape routes. Finishing with the large circular opening, I eventually tip-toed away, greatly relieved that the owls were showing no obvious signs of disturbance. As a parting thought, I placed a handful of fresh chicks on the feeding shelf as I eased my way through the door and down the ladder.

After an anxious wait of several hours, I returned to the farm that evening with great trepidation. I climbed the ladder stealthily and crept into the loft through the little door, as



I had done so many times before. There was no sign of the parent birds, although I couldn't be certain that, despite my precautions, they hadn't heard me coming and shot out through the circular opening. I knew that barn owls, like any wild creature, will react to disturbance by escaping if they can, unseen and away from the source of any unfamiliar sound. I'd once been given a vivid display of this ability to disappear. While visiting Jane and Teddy, they'd offered to show me a potential release site where they'd previously seen barn owls roosting. As we approached the classic Lakeland limestone barn, walking in single file with me bringing up the rear, I was the only one of the party to spot a solitary owl shoot silently from the far corner of the building, ride the gusting breeze like a surfer on the waves, and float high and wide around the barn to plummet into a small stand of trees to our right. The whole aerial manoeuvre had finished before I could utter a sound, so I simply smiled to myself at the ease with which the bird had evaded detection, even by two such acknowledged experts.

During this first visit after opening up the barn, I noticed that two chicks had been taken from the feeding shelf and realised that this must have been the work of the adult birds, since their young were still unable to fly. To be sure that the owlets ate that night, I took the remaining food items and placed them just inside the nest box. The same pattern continued for several more nights, although on one late visit I spotted the parent birds in the fields and woods behind the farm, so they were certainly around. But, increasingly fearful of losing my nerve and abandoning the whole enterprise, I decided to contact Jane and Teddy.

'Oh, the parents will certainly be about!' Jane proclaimed when I expressed my anxieties to her. 'Just keep providing food for them in the usual place - they'll take it if they need it. You can hack the owlets back, anyway.'

She was very matter-of-fact, and although my original intention had been to establish a breeding pair on the farm, I knew that the juvenile release method, known as 'hacking back', was also a tried and tested technique. It had not taken me long, in fact, to discover that the respective merits of the two methods, and indeed the value of breeding-and-release as a conservation measure at all, were hotly disputed amongst naturalists, with claim and counter-claim flying between their various proponents. I decided to follow

Jane's advice whilst keeping an open mind and was, above all, anxious to avoid doing, or not doing, anything that might harm any of the birds. At least I now had a chance to try out both release methods on the same site.

Over the next few weeks, it was to be a case of good news and bad news. Whereas the still-unfledged owlets seemed to thrive on their regular diet of chicks, leavened from time to time with more wholesome rodents, their parents were unfortunately nowhere to be seen,

BALTERLEY GREEN

29.5.1988. Young ringed by David & me. Nick also present. Adult pair flushed out while young being removed from nest box. Female disappeared so thoroughly we thought she may have escaped. In fact, she was hiding in the cavity between two bricks in the gable wall opposite the nest box. Decided to open barn up, if weather OK, on 31.5.88.

1.6.1988. Barn opened up. Watched with Nick that evening. Parents seen inside barn taking food up to nest box, apparently not realising they were free to leave. After an hour, both adults began to look nervously out through the windows & pop-hole. Eventually, one came out, hovered over yard & perched on roofs of various buildings around yard. Then flew over roof of nesting barn & seemed to disappear, probably into trees beyond barn. Subsequent visits showed chicks being taken...



their food left untouched on the feeding shelf. Extensive searches in the surrounding area produced no sign of the absent parents, although I was hardly surprised by this, given the barn owl's famed talent for concealment. Instead, I had to console myself with incidental encounters with other wildlife during my searches, the highlight being the evening when I spotted a total of four badgers and a fox. And, of course, I still had my role of surrogate parent to perform.

It was during this nerve-racking period, when I was assailed by self-doubt, that Martin, one of the ringers, telephoned me to suggest that I should listen to a local radio station, which was due to broadcast a programme called *The Outsiders*. My appetite whetted, I duly tuned in to hear two members of a local conservation trust, Doug and Stuart, describe how they were releasing young barn owls, by the juvenile release method, in their part of the county. Even more impressive was their track record. They told their listeners how they'd first become involved when the owner of a factory unit in Trafford Park, the old industrial heart of south Manchester – the very place in which my dad had served his apprenticeship, and from which he'd subsequently been so keen to escape – had finally discovered why he was regularly being called out to his premises late at night to attend to suspected break-ins. It turned out that his burglar alarm was being triggered by barn owls breaking an infra-red beam on their way to and from a metal ventilation shaft positioned on the roof of the building. Having been called in to investigate, Doug and Stuart had been amazed to find five unfledged, but completely healthy, owlets sitting contentedly at the base of the shaft. Needless to say, the factory owner had been unimpressed by the birds' nocturnal activities, and the two conservationists had been given the task of removing the youngsters and relocating them to a more suitable site. They reported, with a well-deserved sense of self-satisfaction, that they had successfully hacked back the owlets, without their parents.

I was fascinated by their story for a number of reasons. Most striking, to my eyes, was the apparent ability of the parent birds to raise a large family in a place that was so totally different from the ideal barn owl nesting sites that I'd read about and studied. Not for them, it would seem, the bucolic charms of a ramshackle English farmyard; instead, they'd plumped for the exceedingly dismal industrial environment that my parents had so often referred to in the most unflattering terms. As for food, I could only imagine that they had been living off an abundant supply of rodents that must have infested the so-called Park. The tale also reassured me that the disappearance of parent birds, whether because of disturbance or through their own choice, did not necessarily spell the end of the release project for my youngsters. Greatly heartened by these thoughts, I decided to continue my release along the lines I was already following.

18 *Working with Chester Zoo*

I never did, to my knowledge, see my adult owls again, despite undertaking many nocturnal searches and stake-outs. For a while, I left sufficient food for the owlets in their nest box, and additional chicks on the feeding shelf should the adults return. Not one item was taken from the shelf, and by the time the owlets were themselves flapping around the loft, I decided to stop duplicating the food supplies.

Now that the two owlets were flying, I could monitor their progress like the proud parent I felt I had become. At first, I found that if I crept up the ladder extremely quietly and opened the door just a crack, I could catch a glimpse of them sitting on the landing platform at the front of their nest box, or on one of the various perches close by. A few visits later, I would discover that they'd ventured further from the box, perhaps sitting high up on one of the oak beams, crouched tight under the slope of the roof. For these first few weeks, wherever they were at first, the slightest sound from me would send them hurtling for the safety and security of their tea chest home. Inevitably, though, there came a time when this ceased to be the case, and I would open the door only to see one or both owls shoot not into their nest box, but straight out of the loft through the circular opening. They really are entering the big, wide world now, I thought.

In the early days, I could find them easily following one of their rapid exits. One might be trying to sit on a tractor in the farm yard, flapping its wings furiously and skidding about on the unfamiliar metal surface, finally regaining its balance to find a feature that could be gripped to serve as a perch, while the other owlet, perhaps the older and more experienced of the two, might be spotted in a nearby tree, going in for a leisurely bit of preening. During this stage, I noticed that the owlets always stayed within clear sight of the loft, to which they could retreat if alarmed. After a few more days, though, I began to see them at greater distances from the farm, hedge-hopping along the lane or, on one occasion, standing apparently bewildered in the middle of the carriageway. Such sightings began to worry me immensely, as if I had teenage offspring who were trying to make sense of the world whilst being assailed by its many dangers and temptations. I could only console myself with the knowledge that both birds were now, self-evidently, strong flyers and that they still had a back-up food supply that I was continuing to leave in the loft for them each day.

For a short period, during the summer, the owls regularly visited my back garden, drawn there by the captive birds in their aviaries. As time went by, though, not only did these visits cease, but their presence on and around the farm became increasingly difficult to verify. They stopped taking the food that I supplied and didn't seem to be using the nest box. In an effort to check up on them, I took to scouring the farm yard for pellets that I could dissect



for evidence of the prey that they were catching. After a while, even chance sightings by the farmers tailed off. Unable to find any sign of their presence around Greenwood Farm, I was forced to assume that my owls had probably gone for good. Yet on one of my regular recces, I was to learn a valuable lesson about barn owl elusiveness.

'Hullo!' Jeff's voice startled me as I emerged from a barn one day, deep in thought after yet another fruitless search for clues. Sitting on a tractor, the elderly farmer appeared keen to have a natter with me.

'Not seen any sign of the owls, have you, Jeff?' I asked, trying hard not to sound quite as despondent as I felt.

'Can't say I 'ave'. Jeff confirmed my suspicions. If anyone were to see them about, it would be the farmers, out and about in the early hours of the morning or late at night.

'I think they've cleared off!' he added, somewhat unnecessarily, I thought.

No sooner had Jeff uttered his gloomy verdict than, as if pre-arranged and with the precision of a Red Arrows flying display, two beautiful white owls, gleaming in the bright afternoon sunshine, zoomed round the corner of the barn, shot a few feet over his head and plunged into the nearby woods.

'D..did you see that?' I stuttered, gesticulating wildly towards the trees. 'B..barn owls!' I cried in the astonished tones that a marooned sailor might use when spotting a passing ship.

Jeff had neither seen nor heard them, of course. With his back turned towards them and his attention focused on me, he'd been totally unaware of the owls' swift and silent fly-past. Nor, I think, did he believe me, though he was too polite to say so.

'Ah well, better be gettin' on.' With those few words, and a shrug of the shoulders, he chugged away on his tractor.

As he went, I thought what a pity it was that he hadn't been able to share my almost ecstatic feelings of joy and relief at seeing that the owls were fit and well. Later, in conversation with his son, Philip, I learned how proud of 'his' barn owls Jeff really was.

ROSE COTTAGE

31.8.1987. Birds placed in box @ Rose Cottage. Entrance/exit to box to be kept covered (with see-through board) until weekend.

7.10.1987. Visited M.B. Three birds still present. Seeing them around a lot. M.B. is keeping a daily diary (must get a photocopy!) Birds roosting often in empty water tank in part of barn where dog sleeps. M.B. has analysed some pellets, but no sign of rodent prey yet.

16.11.1987. Phoned – not taking food (stopped doing this 4 – 5 weeks ago). M.B. is still putting three chicks per night out. Thinks she is hearing them & says that under large ash tree near house there are a lot of white droppings like owls left in barn. Also reported speaking to man two weeks ago who lives near farm. He had been startled @ about 10.30 p.m. one night by a white owl sitting on his car when he went out of the house.

9.12.1987. Visited M.B. Still putting food out but none being taken. Had a look in loft - no sign of recent occupation. NB: M.B. did analyse pellets while owls were still resident and found shrew skull in one.

30.1.1988. M.B. phoned to say she was hearing barn owls around – large splashes of white on trees in garden. I advised her to clean out the nest box so that she could tell if they were using it & to put food out.

20.2.1988. M.B. phoned - hearing barn owls around on both sides of cottage (probably setting up territories). Has cleared out nest box as suggested.