



Keir Starmer should protect the countryside – he comes from a line of gamekeepers

Campaigners call on Labour leader to look to his family history when devising policies

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Herbert Starmer remembered his rural upbringing fondly – how their cottage would be used by the shoot to hide from the rain and his gamekeeper father left with a gun slung

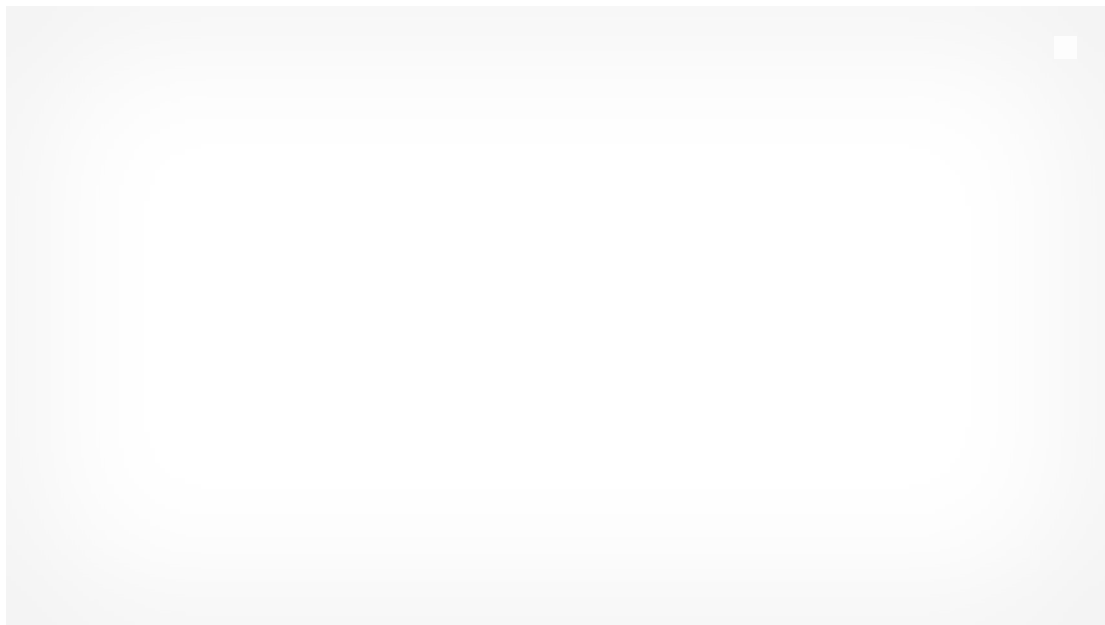
under his arm.

Some of his earliest memories, he told a local history pamphlet, were catching rabbits and of the tame fox living in the family's shed.

The quintessential image of a rural life is a far cry from that of his grandson – the knighted human rights barrister who is vying to become the country's next prime minister.

In the interview, a copy of which has been obtained by The Telegraph, Mr Starmer explains how his father, his seven uncles, and his grandfather were all gamekeepers.

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It is perhaps surprising that Sir Keir Starmer, always keen to shake off his reputation as a member of the metropolitan elite and to talk about the fact that his father was a toolmaker, has done little to highlight his rural history.

Perhaps that is because traditional Labour voters, the majority of which come from cities, would not know what a “gamekeeper's larder” is, or the detail of a day in the life protecting pheasants.

But Labour is aware that it has to win over rural constituencies if it wants the keys to No 10 in July. At the last election, the party won just 1 per cent of seats in the areas, compared to the 28 per cent that went to Conservative MPs.



Sir Keir Starmer pictured during a visit to a farm in Wiltshire | CREDIT: PA/Stefan Rousseau

The party has vowed to pay more “respect” to rural communities. But it has angered some with a vow to outlaw trail hunting, seen as a return to the class warfare that erupted under Tony Blair.

Campaigners have now called on Sir Keir to look to his family history when devising policies ahead of July’s election.

The call comes as the Labour leader used his first major speech of the general election campaign on Monday to tell voters his “character is shaped by where I started in life”.

He said that Oxted – where his grandfather Herbert also grew up – was as “English as it gets”, recalling his first job picking up stones for local farmers and sharing a football pitch with the local cows.

“It’s part of why I love our country. Not just the beauty – or the football – also the sort of quiet, uncomplaining resilience,” he told an event in Sussex. “The togetherness of the countryside. That is the best of British.”



Sir Keir comes from a family of gamekeepers such as his grandfather, Herbert

Sir Keir would have been just 14 years old when his grandfather also turned his thoughts to his childhood in the countryside for the Local History Records of the Bourne Society, based in north-east Surrey.

In the 30p pamphlet, Mr Starmer explains that his “first memory is of being punished for killing a rabbit by setting a gin trap, the type which is now illegal”.

“It shocked my mother and my father gave me a beating. I suppose it wasn’t too surprising; my father was a gamekeeper for Sir Walpole Greenwell of Marden Park and he was killing rabbits all the time,” Mr Starmer recalled.

‘A tame fox’

The family had no running water but would collect it from a local spring or a rainwater barrel.

His father, Gustavus, worked as a gamekeeper for Sir Walpole Greenwell, who owned Marden Park and founded W Greenwell & Co, one of the City's most successful stockbroking firms.

“On shoot days that turned out wet, Walpole Greenwell's guests used our cottage and its table for their picnic lunches, though father was hard on rabbits and all other predatory wildlife, we had tame rabbits, a rearing pen for pheasants... and a tame fox!” Mr Starmer recalled in the 1977 interview.

“The fox was with us for about three years, kept in an open shed, but my father shot it after it bit my youngest brother, Reg.”

Gustavus had moved to Surrey from Yorkshire “where his father (a Lincolnshire man) had had eight sons. All were keepers and two are still alive”.

“Each morning, my father set off on his ‘beat’... Looking after the pheasants was his job and this meant that he would kill or trap practically everything that walked, ran or flew,” Mr Starmer told the Bourne Society.

“There were partridges on the estate, by the way, though they never reared them. Rabbits, badgers, owls, moles, jays, magpies... all were shot and my father kept a “gamekeeper's larder” – a little shed with the dead animals hung around outside. Owls were caught in a trap mounted on a high pole, a very cruel device.”



Keir Starmer with his parents, Rodney and Josephine, at his wedding to wife Victoria

Stuffed and sent to a museum

On one occasion in a snowstorm, his father shot “what he thought was a sparrowhawk” but that was later found to be a “hen peregrine falcon”, which was then stuffed and sent to a local museum.

“Foxes got special treatment,” he said. “This was hunting country and shooting foxes might have got father the sack. He would tell my mother ‘I’m going out looking for monkeys’, gun under arm. The fox population never got out of hand in the Marden Valley, though you could never have got my father to admit that he’d ever had one in his sights.”

Mr Starmer, who went on to work as a farrier, even recalled how he got 50 shillings from the Greenwell family when his son Rodney – Sir Keir’s father – was born on Christmas

morning in 1934.

Tim Bonner, the chief executive of Countryside Alliance, said: “Hopefully the fact that Keir Starmer comes from a long line of gamekeepers and rural workers will shape his approach to the countryside.

“His grandfather was brought up in a deeply rural community and many of the issues facing his family remain very relevant today. Jobs, housing, education and a sustainable countryside were the most important issues for Keir Starmer’s family 100 years ago and remain priorities for rural people now.”

The Labour Party was contacted for comment.

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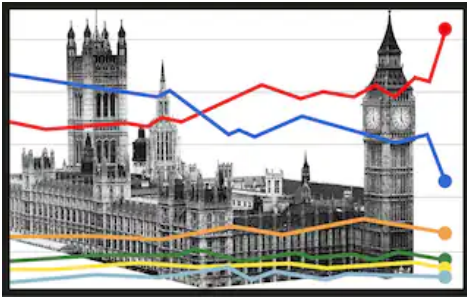


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