

The Working Knife: Essential Tools of Gamekeeping, Hunting and Conservation Management

Opening framing

For the overwhelming majority of people who carry a bladed tool in the course of their work, it is as unremarkable as a spanner to a mechanic or a trowel to a gardener.

Gamekeepers, stalkers, land managers and conservation practitioners across England, Scotland and Wales rely on knives, machetes, billhooks and axes every working day — not as weapons, but as the basic equipment of countryside management. This talk sets out what those tools are, what they are used for, how widespread that use is, and — separately — what genuinely distinguishes lawful occupational possession from the warning behaviours agencies should be alert to.

This is an overview of what I intend to speak about at the Inquiry.

Legitimate uses, and how common they are

The range of tools in use

"Bladed article" covers a wide family of implements in this sector, each suited to a distinct task:

- General-purpose fixed-blade and folding knives, everyday tasks: cutting twine and baler cord, opening feed bags, general fieldcraft.
- Skinning and gralloching knives, specialist, often curved blades used in deer and game processing, where a dull or wrong-shaped blade increases risk of injury rather than reducing it.
- Billhooks and machete-type blades (brush knives, parangs, kukris), longer, heavier blades used for vegetation management: clearing bramble and scrub from rides and fence lines, cutting brash after tree work, opening flight lines for game bird releasing, maintaining access tracks, hedge-laying and coppicing.
- Axes and hatchets, felling small trees, splitting fence posts and firewood, general estate maintenance.
- Trapping and wire-working knives, for the lawful setting, checking, and dismantling of controlled predator management equipment.
- Fencing and general estate-maintenance knives, rope and repair work across large rural holdings.

The common thread is fitness for purpose: each blade shape and length exists because it does a specific job more safely and efficiently than a smaller, larger, or powered alternative would on the ground it's used on.

How common is this use?

- Gamekeeping alone employs several thousand full-time professionals across the UK, managing several million acres of land between them. The land that they work on where bladed tools are used daily as standard kit, not exceptional equipment.
- That figure sits within a far larger population of part-time and volunteer keepers, stalkers, and shoot workers, plus the wider agricultural workforce for whom knives and billhooks are equally routine.
- Deer stalkers, forestry workers, hedge-layers, fencers, and countless smallholders and farmers use the same tool categories as a matter of course.
- Membership bodies across the sector (NGO, BASC, Countryside Alliance, DMQ-qualified stalkers) represent well over 100,000 people for whom this kind of tool use is unremarkable, regulated by custom, training, and — for skills like deer work — formal qualification.

This is not a marginal or unusual use case that legislation can afford to treat as a footnote. It is a large, identifiable, traceable, and already well-regulated population.

Distinguishing legitimate use from warning signs

Indicators consistent with legitimate occupational or sporting use

- Traceable acquisition, purchased through known agricultural, country sports, or hardware suppliers, often with account history, rather than anonymous online sale.
- Proportionality to stated purpose the type, number, and condition of blades held is consistent with the person's actual land, livestock, or shoot management responsibilities (e.g. a working billhook and a gralloching knife for an active stalker, not a large, varied, unexplained collection).
- Open, contextual use carried and used visibly, in the course of identifiable work, on land the person has a legitimate connection to (employment, tenancy, shoot membership, land access agreement).
- Institutional corroboration employment by an estate, membership of a recognised body, holding of a firearms or shotgun certificate, or a relevant qualification (e.g. DMQ deer stalking qualifications) all provide independent, checkable context.

- No inconsistency between the tool and the person's account of it a straightforward, unremarkable explanation that matches the item and the setting.

Behaviours that should raise concern, independent of the tool itself

Escalation disconnected from purpose, acquiring bladed articles (or combinations of weapons) in a pattern, quantity, or type that has no relationship to any land, livestock, or land-management context the person can be independently linked to.

Secrecy inconsistent with lawful use, concealment of ownership from family, employer, or landowner where a legitimate occupational user would have no reason to hide it; false or evasive explanations when asked.

Combination purchasing, the acquisition of disparate items with no common lawful purpose. Knives used in the countryside are often for a specific purpose.

Absence of any institutional anchor, no employment, land connection, membership, or qualification that would explain occupational possession, where the person's own account relies on the tool being a general or hypothetical entitlement rather than a specific task.

The practical ask for agencies

The distinction is rarely one signal in isolation — it is the coherence of the whole picture: does the tool match the task, does the task match the person's verifiable life, and is the pattern of acquisition proportionate. Legislation and guidance should equip agencies (police, retailers, online platforms) to ask those questions efficiently, rather than relying on blade length or category definitions that will always simultaneously under-capture disguised weapons and over-capture legitimate agricultural tools.