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The Rabbit in England

By ELSPETH M. VEALE

IN view of the two letters which appeared recently in these columns readers may be interested in the following conclusions about the introduction to England of the rabbit. In the course of a study of the medieval fur trade, which has extended over several years, I have collected references to rabbits in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and these make possible a more detailed account of the introduction of the animal to England than has hitherto been given.¹ Dr Colin Matheson, in the article in *Antiquity* to which Mr Owen referred in the September number of this REVIEW, was primarily concerned with the distribution of the animal in Wales.² He concluded that the rabbits were well established in the small islands, such as those in the Bristol Channel, and in coastal areas on the mainland from at least the late thirteenth century, but that even as recently as 1813 there were comparatively few in the interior. He explained this by suggesting that the rabbits' original haunts were the sandy soils near the sea coast which favoured their burrowing, and that the animal could more securely establish itself on islands that were too small to support the larger beasts of prey, its natural enemies, which were so numerous in the Middle Ages. The evidence relating to England suggests that the pattern of distribution as described by Dr Matheson for Wales was not unlike that in England. It seems probable that the rabbit became established in the late twelfth century on the small islands off the English coast; that in the middle years of the thirteenth century coney-garths were being more widely set up on the mainland, but that even late in the century rabbits were to be found only on certain estates. By the early fourteenth century, although owners of warrens still valued them highly and frequently haled poachers before the law, rabbits seem to have been more numerous, and the earliest trace of what was later to become a profitable export trade in their skins can be found in the export of 200 skins from Hull in 1305.³

The two earliest references to rabbits in England that I have found are already known to readers of this correspondence. They come from the late

¹ G. E. H. Barrett-Hamilton, M. A. C. Hinton, *History of British Mammals*, 1912, pp. 180-96; J. Ritchie, *The Influence of Man on Animal Life in Scotland*, 1920, pp. 247-54; *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, I, p. 168; Thorold Rogers, *History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, I, pp. 340-1. See also letters in *The Times* in April and May 1936.

² C. Matheson, 'The Rabbit and the Hare in Wales', *Antiquity*, xv, 1941, pp. 371-81.

³ P.R.O., Exchequer K. R. Customs Accounts, E122:55:19. See also *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1334-8, p. 435.

twelfth and very early thirteenth century, and both instances concern rabbits on islands.¹ In 1176 there were rabbits in the Scilly Isles, where Richard de Wyka granted to the abbey of Tavistock his tithe *de cuniculis*, "which for some time I had unlawfully withheld, believing that tithes were not payable on things of this sort."² At some time between 1183 and 1219 the tenant of Lundy Island was entitled to take fifty rabbits a year from certain *chovis* (coves?) on the island.³ Evidence also survives as to the existence of rabbits in the early thirteenth century on the Isle of Wight, where in 1225 there was a *custod' cuniculorum* in the manor of Bowcombe, Carisbrook, then held by the earls of Devon.⁴ It is an interesting and significant fact that there are thirteenth-century references to the payment of tithes in rabbits on each of these three islands, and so far no other references to such tithes have come to light for the early period.⁵ Other evidence from the early thirteenth century does not permit of very certain interpretation. The earliest rabbit bones so far discovered in England may date from the late twelfth century or the first two decades of the thirteenth. These were found in the midden at Rayleigh Castle, Essex, and identified by Martin A. C. Hinton, Keeper of Zoology at

¹ Two other possible twelfth-century references have been found: (1) A word listed as *coneleia* in the *Medieval Latin Word List* under *cunicularium* and dated 1199 proves to be a misreading of Coveleia, in the Forest of Shotover: i.e. Cowley, Oxon.—*Rot. Chart.*, I, p. 2b. Cf. *Cal. Charter Rolls*, I, p. 5. (2) A grant by a Walter de Vautort of Drake's Island (St Nicholas Island), Plymouth, *cum cuniculis*, to Plympton Priory. This was dated "about 1135" by H. G. Hurrell, 'Fourth Report on Mammals', *Trans. Devonshire Assoc.*, LXXXV, 1953, p. 228. There seems to be no evidence at all to support this dating. Information about the grant is derived from a statement by Leland, who gave no date for it and who has been correctly quoted by later historians of Plympton Priory and of Plymouth: J. Leland, *Itinerary in England and Wales*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, I, p. 215; W. Dugdale, *Monasticon*, VI, p. 51; R. N. Worth, *History of Plymouth*, 1890, p. 23; C. W. Bracken, *History of Plymouth*, 1934, p. 16. Nor has it proved possible to identify Leland's Walterus de Valtetorta. The Rev. W. M. M. Picken, an expert on the feudal history of Devon and Cornwall, knows of no one of this name among the Vautort lords of Trematon or among those who were lords of the Maker-Sutton-Tamerton member of the Trematon honour. Mr Finberg has very kindly allowed me to use this information, collected by him in the course of a correspondence initiated by Dr Matheson.

² H. P. R. Finberg, 'Some Early Tavistock Charters', *Eng. Hist. Review*, LXII, 1947, p. 365.

³ Exeter City Archives, Misc. Deeds, D.614. A translation of this deed was printed by J. R. Chanter, 'History of Lundy Island', *Trans. Devonshire Assoc.*, IV, 1870-1, p. 574. It is accurate except in one respect: the number of rabbits should be 50, not 100, information which I owe to the kindness of Professor Carus-Wilson. The deed is undated, but limits can be fixed from internal evidence: E. St John Brooks, 'The Family of Marisco', *Journal Royal Soc. Antiquaries of Ireland*, LXI, 1931, p. 32, notes 45, 46.

⁴ P.R.O., Exchequer, Foreign Roll 8 Henry III, E364: 1, f. 2d. I am indebted to Mr Finberg for suggesting this source to me.

⁵ *Cal. Liberate Rolls*, 1240-5, p. 228; *Cal. Inquisitions Misc.*, I, p. 538, no. 1994. According to Selden, tithes were payable on beasts of the forest, but he gives no instances of the payment of tithes in rabbits: J. Selden, *Historie of Tithes*, 1618, pp. 445, 298-368, 414-48.

the British Museum (Natural History).¹ The castle, built soon after the Conquest, was part of the escheat of Henry of Essex and was in royal hands from 1163 to 1215, when John granted the honour to Hubert de Burgh.² It seems probable that the castle itself fell into disrepair some time during the first quarter of the thirteenth century, and was no longer occupied after about 1220. The building was repaired in 1183–4 but it was not mentioned in the grant of 1215; by 1230 Hubert was building himself a new castle at Hadleigh close by, and by 1277 cattle were grazing on the site of the castle at Rayleigh.³ Possibly the rabbits once eaten there had come from the islands just off the Essex coast, such as Foulness or smaller ones like Wallasey, which were manors in the Honour of Rayleigh.⁴ In 1221 6,000 rabbit skins were mentioned in a Devon plea.⁵ They may have been English skins as it seems probable that rabbits were established on the mainland in the south-western counties at an early date, but they may equally well have been of foreign origin as Spanish rabbit skins were regularly imported to England in the thirteenth century, and the large quantities involved lead me to prefer this alternative. There were, too, many grants of warren made at this time. But only seldom, unfortunately, do grants of warren of any period specify which animals were to be reserved to the owner. Certain charters and cases of trespass reveal that the hare and fox were the chief beasts of the warren, at least in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.⁶ No case of trespass involving the rabbit has been traced before 1268, in which year Richard, earl of Cornwall and king of Almain, complained that his coney warren at Isleworth, Middlesex, had been broken into.⁷ Only where a coneygarth is specifically mentioned may the existence of rabbits be assumed with certainty. The earliest reference found in the British Isles to rights *in warennis et cumigariis* appears in a charter granting lands in Connaught to Hugh de Lacy in 1204.⁸ The actual existence of a coneygarth in England on the mainland has not been

¹ E. B. Francis, 'Rayleigh Castle', *Trans. Essex Arch. Soc.*, new series, XII, 1913, p. 184; M. A. C. Hinton, 'On the Remains of Vertebrate Animals found in the Middens of Rayleigh Castle', *Essex Naturalist*, xvii, 1912–13, pp. 16–21. See also M. Hinton's letter to *The Times*, 28 May 1936.

² *Rot. Litt. Pat.*, I, p. 153.

³ E. B. Francis, *op. cit.*, pp. 150–2; *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1225–32, p. 417.

⁴ F. M. Powicke, *King Henry III and the Lord Edward*, p. 766, note 2.

⁵ *Curia Regis Rolls*, x, p. 249.

⁶ G. J. Turner, *Select Pleas of the Forest*, Selden Society, XIII, pp. cxxiii–cxxxix; *Cal. Charter Rolls*, I, pp. 74, 108, 129, 130, 142, 169, 423.

⁷ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1266–72, p. 285.

⁸ *Rot. Chartarum*, I, p. 139. This does not necessarily imply that Hugh had at that time a coneygarth on his Connaught lands, for the wording of a charter was often common form.

confirmed until 1241, when the king ordered hay to be carted from his *cuningera* at Guildford.¹

It is possible, however, to be certain that there were rabbits on the mainland from 1235 onwards. In that year the king presented as a gift *decem caninos vivos* from his park at Guildford, and in 1242 he sent men there to catch thirty or forty rabbits *secundum quod invenerint prefatam cuneram fertilem*.² These low figures suggest a fairly recently established colony, and Henry III does not appear to have had any other coneygarths at this time. Scattered throughout the Liberate Rolls from 1226 onwards are the orders he sent out for the supply of venison, boars, fish, swans, peacocks, hens, eggs, and hares for his various feasts.³ Yet not until preparing for his feast at Christmas 1240 did he order a supply of rabbits. Although orders for provisions were then sent to the sheriffs of eleven southern and eastern counties, the bailiffs of three towns, the keepers of the bishopric of Winchester, then vacant, and one of the king's escheators, rabbits were included in only three cases: 100 were to be supplied from the lands of the bishopric of Winchester, 200 from those of the earl of Warenne, and 200 by the king's escheator.⁴ In 1241 the sheriffs of Hampshire, Sussex, Surrey, and Kent were to produce 100, 50, 100, and 500 respectively.⁵ In 1243 180 rabbits were required from the estates of the bishop of Winchester, 100 coming from the Isle of Wight, and 300 from those of the archbishop of Canterbury; 300 were to come from the lands of the bishop of Chichester in 1244 and 200 in 1245.⁶ Similar orders were going to the sheriffs of Essex, Hertfordshire, and Middlesex in 1248, and to those of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire in 1249.⁷ The coneygarth belonging to the manor of Kempston, Bedfordshire, held by the earl of Chester, is referred to as early as 1254.⁸

The possibility that the critical period in the spread of the rabbit on the mainland was from about 1230 to 1250 is strengthened by some interesting evidence about the stocking of warrens. In 1241 the keepers of the bishopric of Winchester were ordered to take 100 rabbits within the bishopric where it could most conveniently be done and take them alive to Sugwas, the manor of the bishop of Hereford, for his use.⁹ In the same year the keepers of the lands of the bishopric of London supplied the king's uncle, Peter of Savoy, with eighty live rabbits from Clacton, Essex, for his warren at Cheshunt,¹⁰ and

¹ *Close Rolls*, 1237-42, p. 381.

² *Close Rolls*, 1234-7, p. 217; *ibid.*, 1237-42, p. 390.

³ e.g. *Cal. Liberate Rolls*, 1225-40, pp. 8, 9, 191-3, 247-8, 262, 354, 358-9, 390-1, 431, 435.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1240-5, pp. 11-12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 196, 197, 280, 289.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1245-51, pp. 201, 251.

⁸ *Cal. of Documents relating to Scotland*, 1, p. 369, no. 1958.

⁹ *Cal. Liberate Rolls*, 1240-5, p. 54. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

by 1244 the king himself had begun to stock his park at Windsor. The sheriff of Surrey sent some rabbits from Guildford; the keepers of the bishopric of Chichester and the earl of Derby produced others, those coming from the earl's warrens being apparently sent all the way from Stamford.¹ The earl of Aumale sent some to the royal park at Nottingham at the same time, and these seem to have come from Lincolnshire, unless they had been dispatched across the Humber from the coneygarth on the Holderness estates.² This particular delicacy must in fact soon have become a favourite dish on the tables of the great, and it is interesting to put the query who was responsible. Can it be that a man like Peter des Roches, bishop of Winchester, accustomed to eating rabbits in his native Poitou, encouraged their establishment on the English mainland? The rabbit may by the thirteenth century have penetrated far into France from its original home in Spain. In classical times it had spread to the islands of the western Mediterranean and during the first century B.C. it was a newcomer to Italy.³ Although, writing towards the end of the thirteenth century, Peter de Crescentiis of Bologna, in his *Opus Ruralium Commodorum*, considered that its distribution was limited to Spain, Lombardy, and Provence, there seems little reason to doubt that the animal was more generally known in France and that it was from France that it eventually reached England.⁴

Rabbits were very expensive during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a sufficient indication of their relative scarcity. They must then have been limited to certain localities, and owners guarded their warrens with jealous care.⁵ Rabbits cost four or five times as much as chickens and must have been considered a luxury. In 1270 on a Cambridge estate rabbits were worth 5d. each, and even a century later for a feast held at Merton College, Oxford, in 1395, rabbits were bought at 6d. and 8d. a couple and transported, at the cost of ½d. each, from Bushey to Oxford.⁶ Their spread seems, however, to have been encouraged, although even as early as 1254–7 the burgesses of Dunster, Somerset, had recognized their destructive habits.⁷ By the fifteenth century they were more plentiful, although considerable variations in price suggest that even then they were not easily obtainable every-

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 251, 255.

² *Ibid.*, p. 255; *Close Rolls*, 1259–61, p. 97. This coneygarth was included in a list of the earl's lands made in 1260.

³ *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, I, p. 168; Barrett-Hamilton and Hinton, *op. cit.*, pp. 178–84.

⁴ P. de Crescentiis, *Opus Ruralium Commodorum*, 1471, f. 170 d.

⁵ e.g. *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1327–30, pp. 157, 208, 209, 335, 429, 568.

⁶ Thorold Rogers, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 558, 559, 644, 646.

⁷ Ballard and Tait, *British Borough Charters*, 1216–1307, p. 107.

where. While rabbit skins on Lundy Island were valued in 1275 at 5½d. a dozen, they were being bought elsewhere at prices averaging 1s. 1½d. a dozen in 1310, 1312, and 1313.¹ The countess of Warwick was buying them at 1s. 4d. a dozen in 1405, but throughout the middle years of the fifteenth century the cellarer at Syon Abbey was selling them regularly at 4d. a dozen.² Thorold Rogers suggested that the comparatively small rise in the price of rabbits after 1540 might be explained by their increasing numbers: average prices rose from 5d. to only 7¾d. a couple.³ By 1555 the great Swiss naturalist Conrad Gesner could write: "There are few countries wherein coney do not breed, but the most plenty of all is in England."⁴ Then rabbit skins were a not insignificant item in our export trade, and Richard Hakluyt pointed out that the export of black coney skins might well be increased, "for that we abound in the commoditie and may spare it."⁵ No doubt many a farmer would still echo his views today.

¹ *Cal. Inquisitions Misc.*, I, p. 298, no. 979; Thorold Rogers, *op. cit.*, I, p. 583.

² *Ibid.*, III, p. 545; IV, p. 582; Syon Abbey, Ministers' Accounts, Cellarers' Accounts, 1447-60, 1511-23. I owe this information to the abstracts made for the Beveridge Price History.

³ Rogers, *op. cit.*, IV, pp. 345, 346-55.

⁴ C. Gesner, *Historia Animalium*, translated by E. Topsell, London, 1607, p. 110.

⁵ R. Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations of the English People*, III, p. 273.

Notes and Comments

THE BRITISH AGRICULTURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

The fifth Conference and Annual General Meeting of the Society was held at Wills Hall, the University of Bristol, on Thursday the 11th and Friday the 12th of April 1957. Some thirty-five members of the Society attended. The Thursday evening was devoted to two papers on the Berkeley Estates which members visited the next day. Dr H. Hilton, Lecturer in History, the University of Birmingham, spoke on the Berkeley estates in the medieval period and Mr Francis Peter, former agent at Berkeley, gave their more recent history. On the Friday morning there was a paper by Dr Dawe, Provincial Agricultural Economist, University of Bristol, on the recent agricultural history of the Bristol

Province. He was followed by Dr Axel Steensberg, Keeper of the Danish Folk Museum and Lecturer in Cultural History, University of Copenhagen, who read a paper on his recent experiments in neolithic agriculture and also showed a film of the work. The Society was privileged to welcome Dr Steensberg as its guest for the meeting. In the afternoon the members of the Conference visited Berkeley Castle where they were conducted round by Mr Peter and Mr H. J. Baldwin, the present agent.

In the unavoidable absence of the President and the Chairman of the Executive Committee the Chair at the Annual General Meeting was taken by the Treasurer, Professor Edgar Thomas. The retiring officers

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