

A photograph of two rabbits in a field of yellow flowers. One rabbit is in the foreground, sitting on the grass and looking to the right. The other rabbit is in the background, standing on its hind legs and looking to the left. The field is filled with green grass and yellow flowers, with a large green bush in the middle ground.

# *the* Rabbit

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# *Contents*

	Glossary of Terms	6
	Introduction	7
1	The Natural History of the Rabbit	9
2	Wild Rabbits around the World	33
3	Rabbits in the UK	43
4	Rabbit Diseases	51
5	Rabbits in Sport	57
6	Methods for Control	65
7	Culinary Matters	83
8	Rabbits in Myth, Legend, Fiction and Art	87
9	History of Warrens	95
10	The Rabbit Fur Industry	113
11	Rabbit Warrens – Law and Punishment	123
12	Location of Historic Warrens	129
	Index	191



## *Rabbits in the UK*



Wild rabbits in the UK today are descendants of the European wild rabbit which originated in Iberia some 4,000 years ago. Although it is popularly believed that the Normans introduced the European rabbit to Britain, bones found by archaeologists have led scientists to think that they might possibly have been here before the last Ice Age but then became extinct. There is no mention of rabbits in the Domesday Book (1085) and they were first recorded in the south of England in 1100 and Lincolnshire in 1130. The earliest documentary evidence that the value of rabbits was being recognised relates to Drake's Island in Plymouth Sound which was granted to Plympton Priory '*cum cuniculi*' (meaning with the rabbits) in 1135.

At first rabbits were kept on small islands around the coasts of England, Wales and Scotland where there were no mammalian predators and from which they couldn't escape. Also on the mainland they were kept on coastal sand dunes or inland where there

*The Rabbit*

was light sandy soil which was often heathland. It soon became obvious how efficient rabbits were at digesting the poorest of vegetation and converting it into valuable meat and fur. Keeping them soon became very much part of the farming scene, such was their value. At last a financial return could be realised from land which had previously proved impossible to farm. Wherever there was a possibility of setting up a warren, one was built. In less suitable places, artificial mounds were created.

From the 13th century, when large commercial warrens began to appear on the mainland, until the 20th century, rabbits played a big part in the rural economy. In the middle of the 14th century the Black Death killed up to half the human population of Britain and the demand for food obviously dropped. Until then villages had been growing in size and sufficient grain was being grown. However with less demand land was turned back to grass and more animals were kept although in some areas where warrens had become neglected, the land was turned over to growing woad, a plant used to produce dye. This was a highly profitable crop at the time – so much so that restrictions were eventually put on growing it.

In centuries past, coneygarths (warrens) where rabbits were kept, along with deer parks, dovecots, duck decoys, orchards and fish ponds were a feature of every manor and country estate. Before the invention of electricity, fridges and freezers, the easiest way of storing perishable meat was to keep it alive and harvest it when required.

The keeping of rabbits, then known as ‘coney’, became widespread across the country with the majority of commercial warrens being established between the 15th and 17th centuries. Some of these were in excess of a thousand acres and were often leased out to professional warreners.

Wherever the place names of ‘warren’, ‘burrow’, ‘clapper’ or ‘coney’ occur, and in whatever context, it is possible there may well have been an association with the historic keeping of rabbits. Coney Hill is now part of Gloucester, Coneyhurst is a hamlet near Billingshurst in West Sussex and Coneysthorpe is a small village close to Malton in Yorkshire. If however the place name ‘coney’ appeared in the Domesday Book it is unlikely to have had any connection with rabbits as they had not become established in Britain by that date. Instead the names have probably derived from ‘Konunger’, the Scandinavian word for king as is the case in the history of the village of Coney Weston on the Norfolk/Suffolk border, even though it was close to a small rabbit warren established in 1302. It’s thought also that the names of many towns and villages that end in ‘borough’ or ‘bury’ may have been derived from the word burrow.

In a few places, besides the ordinary grey rabbit, silver-grey or black coloured ones were specifically bred and the fur was much sought after. Henry VII favoured black

*PREVIOUS PAGE: Young rabbits often have a white mark between their eyes.*

*RIGHT: Rabbits will eat most vegetation but not thistles or nettles.*



*The Rabbit*

rabbit fur from Norfolk to keep him warm and used it to line his night attire. Rabbit meat was so prized it could only be afforded by the rich. In 1465 when George Neville was installed as the Archbishop of York, 4,000 rabbits were provided for the celebrations. It wasn't until the 18th century that rabbit meat went out of favour for a variety of reasons. Then it became the food for the poor.

Inevitably, over time, rabbits from enclosed (fenced in) warrens escaped into the wild, a new environment to which they soon adapted. Once they began to breed, it resulted in centuries of friction between land owners and tenants. Despite its unpopularity with farmers rabbit proved a welcome addition to their diet during the Depressions of the late 19th century and 1930s as well as during the First and Second World Wars when fresh meat was either unaffordable or in very short supply. Pre-1950 about 40 million were being killed in the UK for their meat and fur each year but eventually in 1954 following the outbreak of myxomatosis, under Section 1 of the Pests Act when the whole of England and Wales (except for the City of London, the Isles of Scilly and Skokholm Island) was

*BELOW: A buck will closely guard his chosen mate.*

