

Changes in the Supply of Wild Rabbits

1790-1910

By JOHN SHEAIL

DR Chaloner has recently drawn attention to developments in the breeding and raising of poultry during the late nineteenth century.¹ Among others, "The Anglo-American Poultry Company and Cyphers Incubator Company may be specifically named as having introduced improvements likely to revolutionize the poultry industry."² At the same time, experiments were being carried out in breeding large numbers of rabbits in artificial conditions, thereby increasing the growth rates of the animals and reducing the amount of rabbit damage to farmland and woods.

Rabbits are not native to the British Isles: they were introduced by the Normans and kept in warrens where the animals were periodically slaughtered for their fur and meat.³ Wild rabbits were usually reared in one of three habitats—grass-heathland, coastal dune formations and islands, and on calcareous grasslands. Thorold Rogers, in his famous study of medieval prices, wrote that "Rabbits do not seem to have been plentiful, at least the price paid for them is relatively exceedingly high."⁴ In the 1690's, Gregory King estimated that there were 1,000,000 rabbits in England valued at 5d. each, compared with only 24,000 hares which were priced at 1s. 6d. each.⁵ The period examined in this note starts with the 1790's, when the practice of keeping rabbits in warrens was still very important in some parts of the country.

There was usually a section on the wild

rabbit in the Board of Agriculture reports published around 1800. In 1796, the Board heard that there were important warrens in North Ormsby, Lincolnshire, and sent a letter to a warren owner in that locality.⁶ The letter contained nine questions, seeking information on rent, output, and the reproduction rates on the warren. The Board wanted to know whether the common or silver-grey rabbits were reared and whether the animals' diet was supplemented in winter. There is a long section on warrens in the county report later compiled by Arthur Young in 1799.⁷ He described the warren at North Ormsby as one of the best in the county and noticed that the more valuable silver-greys were kept. However, the warren owner believed that corn and grass seeds for sheep would have been more profitable than rabbits during the 1790's.

This decline in the value of warrens, detected from the late eighteenth century onwards, continued. Although the price of rabbit fur and meat was maintained, landowners found more profitable ways of using their previously marginal farmland. The rabbits were slaughtered and replaced by other farmstock and crops: rabbit-keepers searched for other ways of breeding large numbers of animals and tried to keep rabbits in a completely artificial habitat.

Rabbits were sometimes bred and reared in pits, sunk six or seven feet into a well-drained soil. The animals made their burrows in the walls which were reinforced to prevent the sides from collapsing. The pits gave them

¹ W. H. Chaloner, 'A Note on the Origins of the "Broiler" Industry', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xvii, 1969, p. 161.

² Edith Bradley and Bertha la Mothe, *The Lighter Branches of Agriculture*, 1903, pp. 199-200.

³ Elspeth M. Veale, 'The Rabbit in England', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, v, 1957, pp. 85-90.

⁴ J. E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices*, 1865, vol. 1, p. 33.

⁵ Gregory King, 'Natural and Political Observations, 1696', in *An Estimate of the Comparative Strength of Great Britain* by G. Chambers, 1802, pp. 428-31.

⁶ I am most grateful to Mr J. K. Nixon for permission to quote from two letters written by Sir John Sinclair.

⁷ Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lincolnshire*, 1799, pp. 382-94.

shelter and stopped their escape. 'Artificial warrens' were set up on the Isle of Thanet and at Swanscombe in Kent in the 1830's.¹ In the former place, a hole was dug, six feet deep and three feet wide, one foot away from another hole which was four feet wide. The two holes were used for breeding and exercise respectively, and they were connected by a small tunnel. Lids of wood, oil-cloth, or tarred-sail covered the holes and could be lifted off during fine weather. The owner found that the wild rabbits flourished, ate all the food given them, and that it was easier selecting and trapping the best animals within the confines of the artificial warren.

Many other keepers were content with more modest structures. They bred wild rabbits in hutches and rough sheds, placed in the middle of a plot of land. Litters of rabbits were allowed to run about the small, enclosed pieces of land during the daytime. Experiments were carried out in increasing the output of these warrens and some attempts were made at setting up 'rabbit farms', where rabbits could be reared very intensively. One 'farm' had a thousand rabbits arranged like an enormous chest-of-drawers, with rabbits in each compartment, but after a short time the venture failed because an epidemic broke out and hundreds of young rabbits died. Outbreaks of infection could destroy an entire population within a few days and large sums of money could be lost. The same thing happened in enclosed poultry pens because, in the words of one writer, "We cannot violate any of Nature's rules with impunity . . . pure air is as necessary, and even more so, than wholesome food."²

Having failed to breed large numbers of rabbits in this way, keepers were forced to keep the wild rabbits in the open air, and they revived some of the old warren practices of the eighteenth century, although the grounds of the new warrens were much smaller. Even some of the old arguments on the merits of

warrens were revived. A writer in 1884 observed that, "A cow consumes daily as much grass as will 150 rabbits. The rabbits will in twelve weeks realize, at 1s. 6d. each, £11 5s. od., whereas the produce from a cow during twelve weeks will certainly not amount to £6."³ This kind of calculation was similar to the estimates made by William Marshall and John Parkinson at the end of the eighteenth century. It is likely that these Victorian rabbit-keepers read many of the early agricultural books which made reference to warrens. A number of new books also appeared which included discussion on the subject of small warrens of wild rabbits. Morant wrote one called *Rabbits as a Food Supply and how to Fold them on our Poor Pastures*. A short while later, in 1884, Lloyd Price published *Rabbits for Profit*, and the most famous book of all was written by John Simpson, called *The Wild Rabbit in a New Aspect, or Rabbit-Warrens that Pay*.

A few warrens were established in the late nineteenth century. Wistman's Wood warren was formed in the 1890's and covered 330 acres of Dartmoor.⁴ Marginal cornland on light chalkland soils frequently reverted to grass and the land was "absolutely abandoned to rabbits." This occurred in a valley called Poverty Bottom on the South Downs,⁵ and a number of landowners in Hampshire, Wiltshire, and Sussex found their fields were "unfit for any other purpose than for conversion to a rabbit warren." Big wire fences were erected around the warrens, which soon became covered with wiry weeds, mosses, and lichens. At first, farmers made a profit on the sale of rabbit fur and meat, and some professed that, "It will serve me my time."⁶

The books and letters of John Simpson were brimming full of confidence that these new warrens would be profitable. In 1896, he wrote, "At the most moderate estimate, I am sure that every acre of any moderately good estate, wood or fields, would produce annually at least fifty

¹ *Quarterly Jnl of Agric.*, ix, 1839, pp. 30-4; Anonymous, *Farming for Ladies*, 1844, pp. 322-39.

² G. F. Morant, *Rabbits as a Food Supply*, 1883, pp. 18-20.

³ R. J. Lloyd Price, *Rabbits for Profit*, 1884, p. viii.

⁴ Brian le Messurier, *Crossing's Dartmoor Worker*, 1966, p. 61.

⁵ William Somerville, 'Poverty Bottom', *Board of Agric. & Fish.*, Misc. Pubns, no. 20, 1918.

⁶ W. H. Hudson, *A Shepherd's Life*, 1910, pp. 15-16.

good rabbits, and leave ample stock."¹ He later claimed that as many as a hundred rabbits could be killed on an acre of ground each year, as long as the soil was well manured with gas-lime and salt. Several writers in the *Field* magazine challenged Simpson on this point. They thought that he was wildly optimistic in forecasting immense profits from keeping rabbits. One correspondent in 1912 pointed out that the return on investments had declined. The idea of turning rabbit warrens into an Eldorado was a delusion. In the 1880's, rabbits were sold for 3s. a couple, and Simpson in the 1890's received 2s. 9d. a brace. By 1912, some dealers gave as little as 1s. for a couple. All this time, the cost of running a warren was increasing, and many men gave up trying to make a profit.

Warreners experienced competition from two directions. Throughout the nineteenth century, large quantities of rabbits had been imported from the Low Countries, but from 1869 onwards rabbit fur (and later carcasses) were imported from Australasia. In 1889, Australia sent £341,735 worth of skins: in 1903, the figure had risen to £723,881. At first, the imports merely supplemented the output of English warrens, but gradually they undercut the market of the home producer. Australian producers even found it possible to sell

tinned rabbits in England.² There was a further source of competition: the Ground Game Act of 1880 gave tenant farmers the inalienable right to kill and sell rabbits on their land. Rabbit-money was a useful subsidiary income, especially in times of agricultural depression. There were often over fifteen rabbits per acre in the fields and woodlands by the late nineteenth century, and farmers and full-time rabbit trappers used gin-traps to crop the population. Their overheads were small or non-existent, and the rabbit warrener was unable to compete.

A few sportsmen maintained warrens on moorland and calcareous grasslands. On Fyfield Down, Wiltshire, about 5,000 rabbits were killed each year by visiting parties of sportsmen, and the carcasses were sold to poulterers and game salesmen in the Central Market, London, in order to defray the expenses of the sport.³

The value and function of the warren had been transformed since the early 1800's. The extensive commercial warrens had fallen into decline and keepers failed to find alternative ways of rearing large numbers of wild rabbits cheaply. By the late nineteenth century, even the few surviving warrens on marginal farmland were no longer profitable. Competition from abroad and the rabbit-trapper ended the period of commercial warrens in England.

¹ *The Field*, LXXXVII, 1896, p. 302.

² *Select Committee on the Game Laws*, House of Commons, 1872-3, Q. 7375; Patrick Wright (ed.), *The Standard Cyclopaedia of Modern Agriculture*, 1911, vol. 10, pp. 69-72; E. C. Rolls, *They All Ran Wild*, 1969, pp. 72-8.

³ Wiltshire Record Office, MS. 106.

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