

Intensive rabbit production in London and nearby counties in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries: an alternative to alternative agriculture?*

by Malcolm Thick

Abstract

The history of rabbits raised in rural warrens has been investigated, but little has been written about domesticated rabbits, raised for meat or fur. Such rabbits were often bred in London or its suburbs and, because little or no farmland was involved, production did not follow the pattern of alternative agriculture suggested by Joan Thirsk. Rabbits were raised in special pits, hutches, sheds, and courtyards. They also inhabited pens, lofts, cellars, backyards and rented rooms in lodging houses. Their owners ranged from full-time commercial breeders to poor people making a small amount of money from selling rabbits. The reports of trials conducted at the Old Bailey in the eighteenth century describe aspects of London rabbit-keeping in some detail and scattered references at earlier times reveal that the practice had been going on for some centuries.

A number of histories of wild rabbits in England, and the rural warrens stocked with them, have been written.¹ By contrast, little notice has been taken of more intensive rabbit production, especially that which took place within, or near, the built-up area of London, although there has been recent interest in the animal population of London as a whole, especially in the nineteenth century. Urban rabbit production involved domestication: feeding rabbits, looking after their health, and controlling their breeding. In these situations they grew used to human contact, and became docile. Breeding from bucks exhibiting desired characteristics, led in turn to the development of distinctive breeds of tame rabbits.²

* I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and comments on the first draft of this article, the genesis of which was a paper at the 2013 Anglo-American History Conference.

¹ John Sheail, *Rabbits and their history* (1972); id., 'Changes in the supply of wild rabbits, 1790–1910', *AgHR* 19 (1971), pp. 175–7; Elspeth M. Veale, 'The Rabbit in England', *AgHR* 5 (1957), pp. 85–90.

² The most recent book on animals in London is Hannah Velten, *Beastly London* (2003). See also Peter Atkins (ed.), *Food and the city in Europe since 1800* (2007).

I

Joan Thirsk's theory of alternative agriculture in England (that when demand for traditional agricultural products slackens, new or unusual crops and livestock are farmed until, under population pressure, mainstream agriculture again takes over from this diverse agricultural production) works for extensive rural warrens. The fortunes of such warrens waxed and waned from the Black Death until the twentieth century in the English countryside, according to the demand for arable crops – the main use of the land. The theory does not, however, fit the peculiar circumstances of intensive agriculture and horticulture (including rabbit rearing) in and very near London, particularly in the eighteenth century.³

English population was rising particularly fast in the second half of the eighteenth century with a consequent relative increase in the price of grain compared with other agricultural produce. Greater London saw an increase in population faster than that of England as a whole throughout the century. The capital's growth was sustained by an influx of poor people, many sucked in, as Professor Wrigley so elegantly demonstrated some years ago, from all over southern England. London also saw an annual influx of the rich coming on business and for pleasure, as well as accommodating a sizeable resident middle and gentry class.⁴ England's population pressure led, as Joan Thirsk demonstrated, to a shift towards land occupied by arable crops raised for human consumption and away other forms of agriculture, including rabbits in rural warrens. However, the resident and transient rich of London demanded exotic and out-of-season fruit and vegetables, and increasing amounts and variety of animal products, while the large numbers of London poor simply needed sustenance. Some of London's demands could be met in London itself or in the suburbs, by agriculture which used no, or comparatively little, land. So, poultry, pigs, and cows (for milk), as well as rabbits, were raised in yards, sheds, hutches, cellars, spare rooms and lofts, in response to a general increase in demand for food from Londoners both rich and poor. Such production used *no* agricultural land. Similarly, highly productive market gardens, under glass, and using dung and labour in large quantities on small areas of land, supplied fruit and vegetables to the London market at the expense of comparatively few acres of arable. Suburban warrens, where rabbits were kept in hutches, yards or sheds in high concentrations similarly bucked the trend.⁵ Thus these two seemingly contradictory statements by John Middleton in his report on the agriculture of Middlesex in 1798 are perfectly compatible: 'The soil of this county is rendered too valuable by its connection with London, to be profitably employed in the rearing of rabbits', and: 'There are many places in and about London, where poor people make the breeding and rearing of tame rabbits a very considerable article of profit'.⁶

³ Joan Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture* (1997), pp. 10–11, 38–9, 53–4.

⁴ E. A. Wrigley, 'A simple model of London's importance in changing English society and economy', *Past and Present* 37 (1967), repr. in E. A. Wrigley, *People, cities and wealth, the transformation of traditional society* (1987); F. J. Fisher, 'The development of London as a centre of conspicuous consumption', repr. in P. J. Corfield and N. B. Harte (eds), *London and the*

economy, 1500–1700 (1990), pp. 105–18.

⁵ Malcolm Thick, *The Neat House Gardens* (1998); P. J. Atkins, 'Is it urban? The relationship between food production and urban space in Britain, 1800–1950', in Marjatta Hietala and Tanja Vahtikari (eds), *The landscape of food* (2003), p. 133.

⁶ John Middleton, *View of the agriculture of Middlesex* (1798), p. 377.

Other commentators noticed rabbit rearing in or near London by the (landless) poor at this time. In the 1830s, when grain prices continued to be comparatively high, Professor Low wrote:

It is generally found that the rabbit-warren in this country is a very unproductive species of property. At the present price of the animals, there is scarce an inducement to preserve existing warrens, and none to form new ones.

He added: 'If the rabbit, then, is to be cultivated in this country as an object of profit, he must be reared in the house or yard, and then the variety to be selected is the tame or domestic rabbit'.⁷

Welcome to the topsy-turvy world of urban rabbit production! This was a world where rabbits might be found in lofts, cellars, or indeed in any of the rooms in between; they might be kept by the King in Whitehall,⁸ a titled Lady in Kensington; or they might share a cellar with a desperately poor family (see below). This pattern of non-adherence to the theory of alternative agriculture is clearest in the eighteenth century but was probably also observable in and near the London in the late sixteenth century.

II

There was a thriving trade in rabbit skins in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; many were exported through London to the Continent. Good-quality skins were at a premium and warreners in the countryside probably bred selectively for fur quality. Snippets of information imply intensive rabbit rearing in and near London in late medieval times: in 1420 London Poulterers were ordered to charge no more than 2*d.* for rabbits 'of the field' but up to 4*d.* for those 'of the town', implying that tame rabbits were reared in London and were superior to wild ones.⁹ In 1543, Katheren Bracye, a rich widow, died in the London parish of St Nicholas Shambles (near St Paul's). Her multi-storeyed, many-chambered house had, at the top, a 'Connye Chamber' which contained '2 clapers for conys with 6 breoders in them', that is, does kept to produce young. At about the same time an anonymous writer wrote a brief but detailed treatise on rabbits, which were hand-fed and probably kept in hutches.¹⁰

From the late sixteenth century onwards evidence of tame rabbit production becomes more frequent. In the 1580s Sir Hugh Plat made detailed notes of a visit to a suburban rabbit breeding enterprise run by a school friend. Based on a 'pit system' (see below) it was probably sited in a large suburban garden. Plat gives much detail on the equipment used, the structures involved and the economics of the business. This was a commercial enterprise, with up to 20 does and two bucks. Plat was told two does could produce 33 offspring a year whose skins could be sold for 2*s.* or 3*s.* each, a gross annual income from skins alone of £30 to £50.¹¹

⁷ David Low, *Elements of Practical Agriculture* (1834), p. 607.

⁸ *Calendar State Papers Domestic*, 1663–4, p. 45.

⁹ P. E. Jones, *The Worshipful Company Of Poulterers. A short history* (1981), p. 121.

¹⁰ Ida Darlington (ed.), *London Consistory Court*

Wills 1492–1547 (London Rec. Soc., 3, 1967), pp. 82–125; TNA, SP 46/66, fo. 144. *Clapper* is a word, of French origin, sometimes used for a rabbit hutch, sometimes for a rabbit court, and sometimes for a warren.

¹¹ BL, Sloane Mss 2216, fos. 50v–52.

Early in the following century the prolific agricultural writer Gervase Markham published two descriptions of tame rabbit production. In 1616 he edited and augmented a translation from the French of Estienne and Libault's *The Countrey Farme*, which contained a chapter on raising rabbits. Two years later his own work, *Cheap and Good Husbandry*, also had a chapter entitled 'Of the Tame rich Cony, his nature, choyce, profit and preservation'. The former work, originally published in France in 1570 and augmented by Markham from another French work by Olivier de Serres published in 1600, describes a rural warren and also a '*clapier*', an enclosed courtyard similar to the 'court' system for intensive rearing (see below). De Serres's *clapier* was envisaged as a nursery for restocking the main warren but also as an alternative method of raising 'Tame Conies'.¹² Markham's chapter in *Cheap and Good Husbandry* is concerned only with tame rabbits and covers their maintenance fully. Specifically, he describes in detail the construction of rabbit hutches. He advocates selection for fur quality, referring to 'these rich conies'. This chapter was paraphrased or reproduced many times well into the eighteenth century by writers who may have had no personal experience of rabbit breeding.

In the middle of the seventeenth century there was a flurry of interest in intensive rabbit production, centred on Samuel Hartlib and his circle. In 1647 the keen agricultural innovator Sir Cheney Culpepper, possibly influenced by Markham's edition of *The Countrey Farme*, commissioned Adolphus Speed, an associate of Hartlib's, to find a parcel of black rabbits to start a warren in Kent. Culpepper wrote to Hartlib:

I have a quarter of an acre of ground walled in, yf that cowlde be made fitte to keepe & feede them in for breeding & soe from hence to turne them in to an open warren I might perhaps make a tryall of it, I am not willing to trowble myselfe with clappers; but onely with makinge a berry.¹³

Hartlib gathered material on intensive rabbit production, including a paper headed 'To keep tame coneyes had of one in London Anno 1588' and 'An instruction for a warren for tame coneyes found amongst Mr. Sleggers writings'. Cressy Dymock, a regular correspondent, was enthusiastic about tame rabbits but it was Adolphus Speed who was keenest. In a book of agricultural innovations which he first circulated in manuscript and then published in 1659, he sets out detailed but confused proposals for large-scale tame rabbit production in the London suburbs involving either a purpose-built warren or banks of hutches in sheds. He talked to commercial producers who may well have been operating the systems he described.¹⁴ John Smith, probably a former captain in Cromwell's army and an expert arboriculturalist, described a similar plan for a large shed containing banks of hutches in 1670. In the previous year John Worlidge produced the first published account of the pit system. Worlidge mentions several different breeds of rabbit and implies a suburban setting for his pit. John Mortimer, in 1707,

¹² Charles Estienne and Jean Libault, *Maison Rustique or the Countrey Farme* (1616), pp. 646–8; Gervase Markham, *Cheape and good husbandry* (1657), p. 108; Olivier de Serres, *Le Theatre d'Agriculture* (1617), pp. 367–78.

¹³ M. J. Braddick (ed.), 'The letters of Sir Cheney

Culpepper, 1641–57', *Camden Miscellany*, XXXIII (Chetham Soc., fifth ser., 7, 1996), pp. 311–12.

¹⁴ University Library Sheffield, Hartlib Papers, HP 62/32/1A; HP 67/5/1A–4B; Adolphus Speed, *Adam out of Eden* (1659), pp. 1–13.

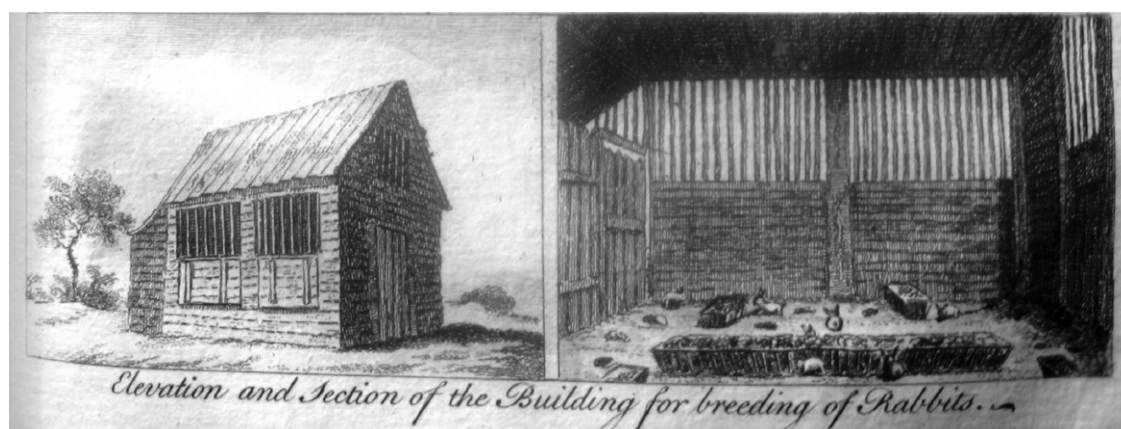


FIGURE 1: 'Elevation and Section of the Building for Breeding of Rabbits'.
Thomas Hale, *A Compleat Body of Husbandry* (1758), facing p. 231. Photo: author.

remarked on the profitability of raising tame rabbits near big towns.¹⁵ In the 1720s Richard Bradley based some of his observations on tame rabbit production on a large suburban London enterprise at Hammersmith housed in two storeys of a former wallpaper factory. This was in business more or less until the 1830s. He also viewed a courtyard system for breeding tame rabbits, situated in the suburban garden of Lady Belassis in Kensington.¹⁶

Of the many descriptions of tame coney-keeping in the eighteenth century, perhaps the most comprehensive is found in *A Compleat Body of Husbandry*, by Thomas Hale published in 1758. He writes: 'There are several methods for breeding and keeping of them. Some allow more and some less liberty to the animal'. He outlines all the methods already mentioned, adding the further variant of a large shed where rabbits are allowed to run freely (Figure 1).¹⁷ Finally, in 1810 we have an eyewitness account of rabbits in hutches kept in long sheds, bred in Aylesbury for the London market.¹⁸

Supplementing these printed descriptions from agricultural writers are mentions of rabbit production in and near London in the eighteenth-century Old Bailey court records. These scattered remarks are valuable because they allow us to glimpse individual enterprises, both great and small, in this period. There *were* big enterprises but the overwhelming impression is of rabbit keeping as a part-time occupation. Even those clearly in business seem to play it down, like the man who kept rabbits in Kensington gravel pits in 1783. When asked, under examination, in court, 'you deal in them I suppose?', he replied ambiguously:

Yes, I keep them for the amusement of my child, to keep him out of the street, from bad company, I lost twenty-nine on the 2nd of May, I fed them the night before, they were all in

¹⁵ John Smith, *England's Improvement Reviv'd* (1670), Book Five, pp. 143–4; John Worlidge, *Systema agriculturae* (1675), pp. 162–3; John Mortimer, *The whole art of husbandry* (1707), pp. 252–3.

¹⁶ Richard Bradley, *A general treatise on husbandry and gardening* (1726), pp. 21–3, 338–61; Thomas

Faulkener, *The history and antiquities of the parish of Hammersmith* (1839), p. 52.

¹⁷ Thomas Hale, *A compleat body of husbandry* (4 vols, 1758–59), II, ch. XXVI, 'Of the tame rabbit'.

¹⁸ St. John Priest and Richard Parkinson, *General view of the agriculture of Buckinghamshire* (1810), p. 331.

pens, and locked in the pens joining to the wall close to the house ... young ones I sold for 11*d.* a piece, and the old ones were worth 3 or 4*s.*¹⁹

By the end of the eighteenth century more emphasis was placed by commentators on rabbit keeping as an activity of poor people. They were probably less affected by market forces. A few rabbits could be fed on waste vegetables scavenged from the markets rather than bought-in feedstuffs and the poor might eat their rabbits if the return on selling them was low.

None of the sources used in this paper specifically mention instances of rabbits as pets. Recent studies on the history of the relationship between animals and man offer no examples, although MacGregor does admit the possibility of pet rabbits in this period. Pet rabbits feature in nineteenth-century English paintings but not earlier ones. The Kensington man quoted above *sold* the rabbits he kept to amuse his son. Live rabbits certainly gave pleasure: rural warrens were created near houses so that rabbits at play could be observed, and Plat suggested a banqueting house above his rabbit-pit where 'you may with no small pleasure behold them feeding at theyre racke and skipping upp and downe'. But even those keeping a few rabbits talked in terms of their eventual destination for the skinner or the pot.²⁰

III

In our period, tame rabbits were raised for meat or for fur. (The only other product of rabbit rearing was their dung, considered to be a useful by-product because of its richness.)²¹ By the 1660s breeds had developed with distinctive fur colouring and varying capacities to put on flesh quickly. John Worlidge in 1669 advised:

The black or silver-haired are most usually kept tame, their skins being of great value. The great Dutch-Rabbit is the best for food, being much larger than the others. But the Shock-Rabbit of Turkie is the most pleasant, having long and fine hair, and is now become the most in mode.²²

The question of meat or fur is to some extent academic for it was impossible to have one without the other. Nevertheless price variations of both commodities made one or the other the dominant reason for intensive production. Taking a long view through the various texts extolling rabbit production, most give emphasis to the profits from their fur, and consequently advise selection for fur quality. This is particularly the case from the 1580s to the 1660s. (Or even earlier: an undated paper in the State Papers which, from spelling, looks as if it is from the first half of the sixteenth century, advises: 'The old Conyes Skines, are in season, when ye blowe them whyte all on the backe & under the Belly'.) As Gervase Markham remarked in 1618, they 'give their bodies gratis, for their skins will ever pay their Masters charge with

¹⁹ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org), June 1783, trial of William Jenkins, otherwise Jennings (t17830604-3).

²⁰ Arthur MacGregor, *Animal Encounters* (2012), pp. 182, 386; Ingrid Tague, 'Companions, servants, or

slaves?', *Studies in eighteenth-century culture* 39 (2010), pp. 111-30; BL, Sloane Mss 2216, fos. 50v-52.

²¹ William Ellis, *The practical farmer or Hertfordshire husbandman* (1759), p. 140.

²² Worlidge, *Systema agriculturae*, pp. 173-4.

a most large interest'. In 1659 Adolphus Speed advised that black rabbits should be bred, for their fur was 'worth near 3s. 4d. the skin, and in goodness near Bever'.²³

An anonymous writer thought in 1737 that if rabbits were well kept, 'The sweetness, and good relish of their flesh, undoubtedly is a very desirable thing',²⁴ but over the century, writers usually recommend tame rabbits both for meat and fur. In 1758 Thomas Hale wrote, 'The silver-hair'd rabbit, is a very profitable kind to be kept tame: The Dutch is a larger kind, and is very good for the table, but the skin is of less value'. This pattern over time probably reflects the increased production of rabbits within towns, especially London or in the inner suburbs where it was relatively easy to market both fur and flesh. Rabbit sellers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in London are often depicted with skinned rabbits on a pole, having taken the profit from fur before selling the meat. Alternatively a hawker would offer to buy discarded skins from kitchen maids.²⁵ The main return was seemingly again in the skins in 1802 when Arthur Young favoured breeding black-furred rabbits: 'The skin of this is dressed as a fur; and as the skins sell for about 4s. a dozen, more than those of the common sort, it is a sufficient inducement for propagating it'. The combination of much larger size and much better fur quality gave urban tame rabbits the edge in the market place over wild rabbits brought in from the countryside.²⁶

IV

Writers recommended various methods of keeping tame rabbits. The pit system was suited to large-scale production but could not be used in very built-up areas: it needed a large garden in which the pit could be sunk. John Worlidge advises this system only 'if you have much garden-ground' and Arthur Young captures the ideal site when he calls this method 'Orchard Rabbits'. Before Young's account of 1802, we have three detailed considerations of this method, Plat's in the 1580s, another manuscript one by John Evelyn, c.1650–1700 and Worlidge's description of 1669. (Later writers copied Worlidge.) All are quite detailed, especially the earliest one which comes from an undated notebook of Sir Hugh Plat's.²⁷

Plat was a London-based proto-scientist keenly interested in many things, amongst them agriculture. He describes an intensive rabbit pit operation in the suburbs, run by an old friend of his, 'Mr. Parsons my scholefellow being an Apothecarie'. To keep 10 or 20 breeders with two bucks, a grass plot of at least one rood (1210 square yards) was enclosed with a brick wall. In part of this enclosure a pit 5 feet deep and 15 or 20 yards square was sunk, brick-lined but with some bricks missing at the bottom to afford the rabbits room to make their earths. Gravel round the walls prevented the rabbits tunnelling too vigorously. A long wooden chest was placed in this vault, with a hinged door-flap at one end and a hinged roof-flap. The rabbits were fed from a large rack (made of wire to prevent the rabbits nibbling it) with little partitions so that each animal could feed without disturbance from its neighbour. A stepped slope out of

²³ TNA, SP 46/66, fo. 144; Markham, *Cheap and good husbandry*, p. 108; Speed, *Adam out of Eden*, p. 8.

²⁴ Anon., *The complete family-piece; and, country gentleman, and farmer's, best guide*, (1737), p. 511.

²⁵ Marcellus Laroon, *The cries of the city of London drawne after the life* (1711); Henry Margary (ed.),

Facsimile of cries of London, c.1754 (1978).

²⁶ Arthur Young, *Gleanings from books on agriculture and gardening* (1802), pp. 324–6; BL, Sloane Mss 2216, fos. 50v–52.

²⁷ Young, *Gleanings*, pp. 324–6; Worlidge, *Systema agriculturae*, pp. 173–4; BL, Sloane Mss 2216, fos. 50v–52.

the vault allowed the rabbits access to the grass enclosure. A board hung on each wall could be let down suddenly to stop the animals entering their earths. A little bundle of hay hung on a string in the vault gave some food to the rabbits: in the rack they were provided with bran and parched oats. 'I have heard parched otes greatly commended to make the doe to take buck the sooner'. The rabbits could also chew on grass, 'and it will not bee amisse to throw them now and then somme greene meate or carrett toppes, mallows, dandelion etc.'

Every morning the rabbits were to be let out of the vault and the floor swept clean. To count or sort the rabbits, the side boards were let down to stop them entering their earths, the door flap of the chest or bin was opened, and the rabbits were shooed into it. The door was closed, and the roof flap opened 'and you shall see them all like a flock of sheepe together'. Surplus bucks (above the ratio of one buck to 10 does) were castrated when three or four months old. 'This buck will grow in a short tyme to be exceeding fatt, very white of flesh, and of a good leane.' For the best returns Plat advised, 'Now because this enclosure will be costly, I hold yt best to keepe only such bucks and does as bee of silver coullor'.²⁸

John Worlidge details a pit largely arranged as described by Plat. He advises, 'In a pit of about ten foot square may be kept two or three *does* (besides the *buck*) which will bring each of them about fifty or more young ones in a year, sometimes seventy or eighty'. Applying Worlidge's stocking ratio to Plat's friend's pit, involves, say, 40 does and 10 bucks, producing, at least 660 offspring.²⁹ In his unpublished *Elysium Britannicum* (c.1650–1700) John Evelyn describes, and sketches, a pit-system for a garden which is detailed and again very similar to that of Plat. Indeed, one wonders if he was drawing on Plat's manuscript for he knew two people who at one time or other possessed Plat's papers, Thomas Henshaw and Sir Hans Sloane.³⁰

The courtyard system had affinities with the rabbit pit. Both had bucks chained up at one end, individual burrows for the does, and systems of flaps to isolate and count the rabbits. The big difference was that rabbits were housed in a paved area surrounded by a wall, rather than sunk in a pit. In the 1720s Richard Bradley sets out in detail how to construct and run a rabbit-court in reply to a gentleman who wishes to create a 'garden of profit' in the suburbs. It is clear from the coincidence of this passage with an earlier description of an actual rabbit-court that he is using the former as his template. This court Bradley found in Kensington, in the garden of 'the late Lady Belassis ... for the breeding and feeding of rabbits, in such a manner, as that, by constant supply of nourishing food, she might draw at any time of the year a sufficient quantity to oblige her friends, and serve her table'. To contain the rabbits, she 'wall'd in a large square place, and paved it at the bottom'. Two initial attempts were made to create almost natural conditions for the does – heaps of earth were rammed hard and grassed over, so that burrows might be made in them by the does, but the burrows collapsed. A second attempt using a terrace of brick arches filled with earth was not successful either. Earth again fell in, the bucks attacked young rabbits, and it was difficult to catch the rabbits. So:

at length [she] concluded to build distinct cells for every female, so order'd that they might hide themselves at pleasure, or take the liberty of the enclos'd ground when they thought

²⁸ BL, Sloane Mss 2216, fos. 50v–52.

²⁹ Worlidge, *Systema agriculturae*, pp. 173–4.

³⁰ MacGregor, *Animal Encounters*, pp. 382–3;

Malcolm Thick, *Sir Hugh Plat: the search for useful knowledge in early modern London* (2010), pp. 372–5.

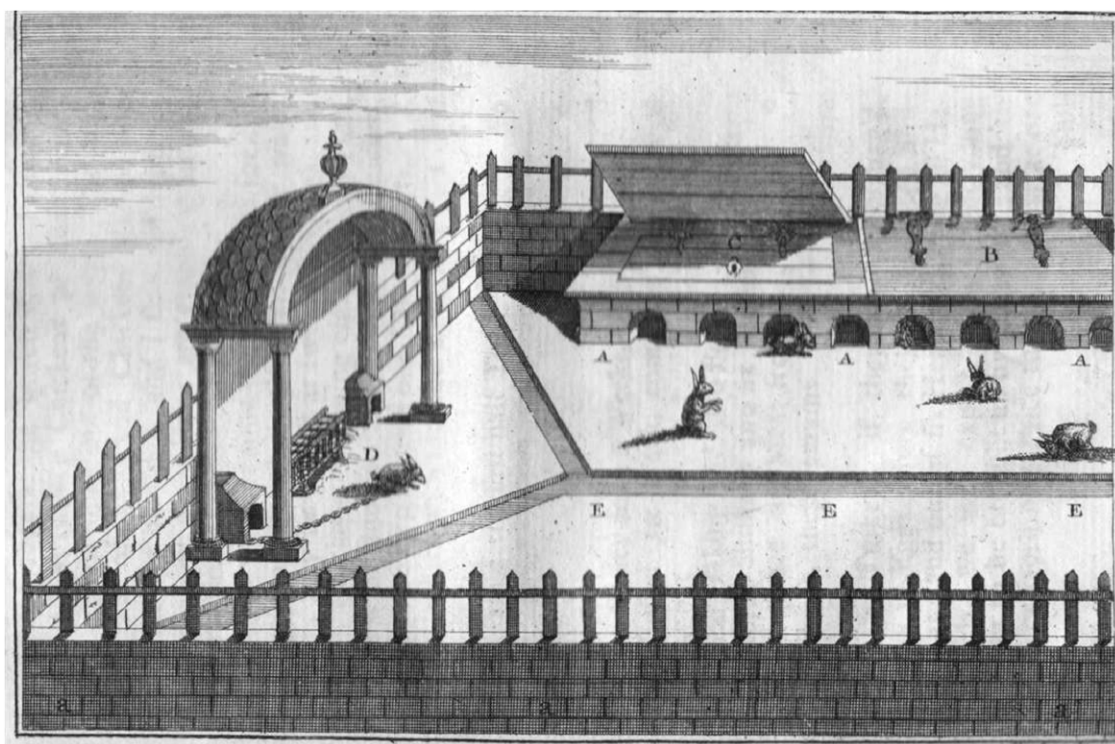


FIGURE 2. Bradley's illustration of a rabbit courtyard, probably that of Lady Belassis in Kensington. Richard Bradley, *A general treatise on husbandry and gardening* (1726), facing p. 358. Photo: author.

fit; these cells were covered with boards, lying penthouse-wise, made to open at discretion, for the better catching of rabbits.

Trapdoors could be closed to trap the animals in the cells. Bucks were chained under cover at one end, near the food racks. The paved floor sloped to aid cleaning. Normal stocking was two bucks and 50 does. Bradley's later instructions contain an illustration of a court, which, from the elegance of the architecture, was almost certainly a picture of Lady Belassis' (Figure 2).³¹

The unsuccessful initial attempts of Lady Belassis are interesting. Did she have no template to work from? Was hers the first purpose-built court in the London suburbs? The only English description of such a court prior to Bradley is in *The Countrey Farme* of 1616. Markham's edition has a chapter describing the making and use of a 'Clapper'. This word, from the French *clapier* is sometimes translated in English simply as warren, sometimes as rabbit-hutch, and in this case, as what looks very much like a rabbit court, a breeding area and nursery for a rural warren. The reader is instructed to:

make a clapper in some corner of your court, kitching, or garden, which may be foure square, narrow, and fenced in with bords, or plaistered walls ... you must build certain

³¹ Bradley, *General treatise*, pp. 21–3, 92.

small lodgings paved with boords, and these must have holes thereof left so wide, as that the young ones might passe out and in unto their dams ... you must build certain small lodgings paved with boords, and these must have holes in them like to those which the conies make themselves in the earth, and every one severall from another, for the conies to betake themselves into: and it will be enough for to allow in such places one male to eight or ten females; and yet therewithall to keep the buck close shut up in his lodgings, for feare he should hurt and wrong the young ones.

It is made clear that 'clapper conies' are tame.³²

The simplest way to contain rabbits was in the humble hutch. These were the most versatile containers for rabbits, suitable for both small and large-scale production. We have encountered the widow who kept 'six breoders' in 'two clappers for conys' in her 'Connys Chamber' in 1543. Gervase Markham, in 1618, whilst not using the word hutch, gives a clear description of one, indeed; his rabbit hutch would be recognizable by rabbit-keepers today:

The boxes in which you shall keep your tame conies, would be made of thin wainscot boards, some two foot square, and one foot high; and that square must be divided into two roomes, a greater roome with open windowes of wire, through which the coney may feed; and a lesser roome without light, in which the coney may lodge and kindle, and before them both a trough in which you may put meat, and other necessities for the coney, and thus you may make box upon box in divers stories, keeping your bucks by themselves, and your does by themselves, except it be such does as have not bred, and then you may let a buck lodge with them.

Markham's much-copied instructions on keeping rabbits in hutches appeared in books published in 1725, 1726, 1735, and 1758.³³

Markham's observation that 'you may make box upon box in divers stories' was also suggested by several later writers for those breeding tame rabbits on some scale. Adolphus Speed, in his chapter on rabbits in 1659, writes that he had known of 'five hundred breeders at a time in an house ... in Hutches'. He sees no reason why 1000 may not be kept this way, or, 'the Rabbits in the house we turn out at liberty to go out and come in when they please'.³⁴ Worlidge in 1669 thought rabbits might be kept 'either in Hutches, or in pits', and a year later, in a chapter on an ideal country estate, the forestry expert John Smith was clearly influenced by intensive production near London when putting forward his ideas:

it hath been my care both to treat with Warreners and Poulterers in London about the same, and they all condescend to my Propositions, and also say that London markets will take off or vent five times more in one or both seasons, than can be bred of a thousand Does.

Smith proposed a warren of 10 acres, enclosed by an 18-foot-wide moat but the rabbits were housed in a 'shed or low rooff House 4 square'.

³² Estienne and Liebault, *Maison Rustique*, pp. 645–8.

³⁴ Speed, *Adam out of Eden*, pp. 1–13.

³³ Markham, *Cheap and Good Husbandry*, p. 108.

Within this house we shall place 240 conie-hutches or boxes, each of them containing five rooms one above the other, or five stories high; in which rooms must be kept 1000 breeding doe conies, and 100 bucks, every one of them in a several room.³⁵

Both Speed and Smith say large profits are to be made from mass rabbit production in hutches: John Mortimer in 1716 observes 'many make great profit of them, by keeping of them in hutches near great towns' and William Ellis in 1759 thought: 'They are more profit, by far, in hutches than in pits'.³⁶

Richard Bradley obtained some statistics on rabbit keeping from a large suburban enterprise in Hammersmith in the 1720s. He gave no details of it but a later writer did:

Rabbit-breeding was formerly carried on extensively at Starch Green; the concern is mentioned by Bradley, as being in a flourishing condition in the year 1720. It had gone to decay for many years, but was revived about twenty years ago, and existed till within these two years [i.e., 1837], when the premises and property were seized and sold by the landlord. The building occupied by the rabbits had been originally built for a paper-hanging manufactory, it was divided into two stories, and was conveniently fitted up to contain one thousand breeding does, which were of the largest breed, weighing from eight pounds to eighteen pounds each, and were of the species called double lops, and single lops, and double smuts, and single smuts, of various beautiful colours. The rabbits were disposed of wholesale, at Leadenhall Market.

This was most likely to have been a business which kept rabbits in hutches.³⁷

In 1810 it was said that 'Tame rabbits are generally confined in hutches, or boxes, and many are kept in the vicinity of London', and in 1813 it was reported that intensive production of rabbits in hutches was carried on by several poor producers in Aylesbury for the London market:

not a small number are sent yearly and weekly to London markets from hence. They are kept by poor men in houses: the houses are oblong: there are three or four such at Aylesbury. One of these is fifteen yards long, three yards wide, and about seven or eight feet high. It is built of clay and covered with tiles, and has a room by a roof leaning to it on one side to lay the food. The lockers for the rabbits are ranged one above another on each side of the house, but raised from the floor to secure them from rats. Each locker is about 3 ft. long, 18 in. wide, and 2 ft. high, and its front formed of wire like a cage for birds. Each locker has a drawer for brewer's grains, and a small neat rack over it made of wire, to hold clover. The breeding lockers have an additional locker to them, length 9 in. One man, who is said to have the greatest number at Aylesbury, keeps 200 breeding does and 20 bucks. Another has 140 breeding does and ten bucks: the house of the latter is nineteen yards long and three yards and a half wide.³⁸

³⁵ Smith, *England's Improvement Reviv'd*, Book Five, p. 143.

³⁶ Ellis, *Practical Farmer*, p. 139; Mortimer, *Whole art of husbandry*, pp. 252–3.

³⁷ Faulkener, *Hammersmith*, p. 52.

³⁸ Priest and Parkinson, *General view ... Buckinghamshire* p. 331.

A final method of keeping rabbits which is occasionally mentioned is simply to build a shed and let the rabbits have the run of it, providing them with food in feeding racks and presumably chaining up the bucks at one end. John Hale in 1758 includes an illustration of one such rabbit-house in his chapter on breeding tame rabbits (Figure 1).

Writers over time suggested similar types of food for tame rabbits, varying only in emphasis. Some, like Plat, another anonymous sixteenth-century writer, and Hale in 1758, placed bran and oats first, supplemented by garden produce and weeds such as dandelions and mallows, as well as grass. Others, such as Worlidge and Ellis, placed the emphasis on garden produce or weeds and this was the principal food of Lady Bellassis' rabbits, according to Bradley. Breeders in Aylesbury were, in 1813, said to feed their rabbits four times a day on brewers' waste grains and clover hay.³⁹

V

These 'textbook' methods of intensive rabbit production were, in practice, often modified to suit individual circumstances. We can examine how rabbits were actually kept in London in the eighteenth century by courtesy of the invaluable Old Bailey court records. Rabbits were, on occasion, like much else in London, stolen; also, stolen goods were hidden in or under hutches, or in rabbit houses and so came within the scope of the court transcripts. Given that most urban rabbits were probably not molested or disturbed, the court records must account for just a few of the instances of eighteenth-century London rabbit keeping. In summary, I find rabbits in the eighteenth-century Old Bailey Records kept in the following locations: lofts/rooms in houses, four; cellars, five; rabbit houses/pens, three; outhouses, three; yards/courtyards, three. Note that, in half of the incidences, rabbits were kept within dwelling houses like the much earlier instance of Katheren Bracye's 'Connye Chamber'. Smelly, and insanitary as it may seem, there were other such lofts in London in the eighteenth century. In 1730 one William Hunter had a rabbit loft in a garret of his house,⁴⁰ a cobbler's house in Westminster housed rabbits upstairs in 1771,⁴¹ and a loft previously used to keep rabbits was rented by a counterfeiter in 1795.⁴² In several instances, other parts of houses were rented by people who did not live there, but used them to house rabbits. In 1776 a former coachman rented a room and 'came backward and forward twice a day to feed his rabbits'. He had: 'Fourteen breeding does; he bred them and sold them'.⁴³ Rabbits were to be found in cellars, on their own or living with their owners. One poor girl died in a damp cellar, on a bed made from rabbit hutches,⁴⁴ and William Platten's wife shared a cellar with her rabbits.⁴⁵ Some cellars contained many rabbits. That of a lodging house

³⁹ University Library Sheffield, Hartlib Papers, HP 62/32/1A; BL, Sloane Mss 2216, fos. 50v-52; TNA, SP 46/66, fo. 144; Worlidge, *Systema agriculturae*, pp. 162-3; Bradley, *General treatise*, pp. 21-3.

⁴⁰ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Mary Boar, Oct. 1730 (t17301014-48).

⁴¹ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Thomas Able and Thomas Walker, Jan. 1771 (t17710116-13).

⁴² *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Solomon

Idswell, May 1795 (t17950520-26).

⁴³ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Robert Williams, Jan. 1776 (t17760109-24).

⁴⁴ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of William Wade, Feb. 1784 (t17840225-63).

⁴⁵ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Susanna King, Elizabeth Crompton and Henry Jones, Jan. 1796 (t17960113-71).

in 1799 contained 'a parcel of rabbits' estimated at 150. The landlady admitted that some of the other 'lodgers complained very much' about this.⁴⁶ One amusing incident involves a rabbit in a cellar: Thomas Stephens, in his defence against a charge of drunken assault in 1746 explained:

I am a Cabinet-maker by Trade ... I went to see a Friend home that had come to see me and my Mother, and I drank at the Nag's-head in Hedge-lane. I being much fuddled, I would not go home till I had drank with her there. As I sat, I had three Pints of Beer. I met with another Neighbour, and would make her drink. I went in again, and had a Pot of Beer, and half a Pint of Gin'.

He was pretty drunk by this time. No doubt the drink made him hungry, so he:

desired the man of the house, as he had a rabbit in the cellar, I desired to have it; I was so fuddled, that in catching the rabbit, I fell upon my face. My Mother sent the maid for me to fetch me home, but I would not go, but went a ramble.⁴⁷

Rabbits were also kept in wash-houses, outhouses, and yards, loose or in hutches. Sometimes they had the run of the premises. A shoemaker from Wapping in 1750 explained, 'my dwelling-house, was broke open ... at night, and from thence were taken out 23 rabbits, which were in the shop when I shut it up at a little after ten o'clock'.⁴⁸ Some of the more commercial rabbit-keeping enterprises however, did have specialist accommodation for their stock, special 'rabbit-houses' tended by 'rabbit-men'. One of several breeders occupying Kensington gravel pits, in the London suburbs kept 'rabbits in pens'. It is difficult to distinguish between private use and commercial rabbit keeping because, although some kept just one or two for personal consumption, many people seem to have kept a few both to eat and to sell. As William Ellis remarked in 1759 'Rabbits not only supply the markets, but also serve a family for variety and at a time of necessity'.⁴⁹

Old Bailey evidence is more abundant for commercial than private breeders. Some we have already encountered – the Wapping shoemaker with rabbits in his shop, the Kensington man with rabbits in cages, and the one who had 150 in a cellar. A so-called 'rabbit-man' who, in 1736, had a walk-in rabbit house near Charterhouse, was also full-time producer.⁵⁰ A carter, who went to Oxford Street in 1789 to 'take up a load of rabbets dung' must have been visiting a substantial business.⁵¹ The Old Bailey records therefore reveal that tame rabbits were definitely part of the economy of London in the eighteenth century, albeit that in many instances they were kept in an *ad hoc* manner by the poor or middling sort as an adjunct to their main occupation or as a desperate attempt to obtain any income, confirming the view of Middleton, quoted above, from 1798. The heyday of large-scale, intensive production, to judge by contemporary reports, was in the second half of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth.⁵²

⁴⁶ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Ambrose King, Sept. 1799 (t17990911–88).

⁴⁷ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Thomas Stephens, Dec. 1746 (t17461205–9).

⁴⁸ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of John Allen and Elizabeth Davis, May 1750 (t17500530–33).

⁴⁹ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of William

Jenkins otherwise Jennings, June 1783 (t17830604–3); Ellis, *Practical Farmer*, p. 141.

⁵⁰ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Elizabeth Bailey, Dec. 1736 (t17361208–25).

⁵¹ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Charles Lee, Jan. 1789 (t17890114–57).

⁵² Middleton, *View ... Middlesex*, p. 377.

VI

Despite the complaint of one gentleman in 1741 that ‘standing in close places, and in a gross air, is apt to taint their flesh’,⁵³ the indications are that rabbit meat was familiar fare for many Londoners. Both published and manuscript recipe books of the period contain rabbit recipes and many of the references to rabbits in the eighteenth-century Old Bailey records confirm that they were on the menu for ordinary Londoners. In 1758 Anne Coulter, an old clothes seller living near Hanover Square, after successfully selling her wares, purchased a rabbit for 6d. to cook for her supper;⁵⁴ the common law wife of a counterfeit coiner passed a bad shilling to buy a rabbit in 1771;⁵⁵ in 1785 a thief stole a watch as she bargained in a shop for a couple of rabbits; and in June 1764 Mrs Oake, a lodger occupying one room, was given 2s. by a friend to buy a rabbit and fry it for his supper.⁵⁶ Many who lodged in London had to rely on their landlady for meals: one couple, in 1732 were given ‘A goose roasted, a giblet-pye, and two rabbits’ for dinner, a good meal, the judge in this case remarked, ‘considering [the landlady] ... boarded both a man and his wife for 7s. a week’. Another lodger, who *did* have cooking facilities, invited a friend to supper in 1763 announcing that, ‘he had three rabbits, and he would smother them with onions’.⁵⁷

Some inn- and tavern-keepers kept rabbits (like the landlord of the Nag’s-head in Hedge-lane above). David Jones, who ran the Black Horse, George-yard, had his cellar broken open in 1788. No doubt the burglars were mainly interested in the ‘three gallons of brandy ... a gallon and a half of rum [and] three gallons of gin bitters’ which they took, but they also went off with two live rabbits.⁵⁸ Other rabbit keepers were publicans. I have noted several instances in the Old Bailey trial records of customers going into a tavern and ordering a rabbit dinner, confident that there was one available to satisfy their hunger. It seems likely that London inn- and tavern-keepers commonly kept a few live rabbits as a ready supply of fresh meat. This was a sensible strategy – the meat kept fresh until needed, and a rabbit was a small animal – slaughterable for one meal.⁵⁹

Many working people, criminals with money and some of the middling sort ate their main meals in modest public houses in London. Some small establishments cooked one dish for household and customers alike and this might include rabbit: Sarah Thompson shared the communal meal of rabbit at the King William Tavern, Charing Cross, in 1741. Some drinking establishments cooked meat brought in by customers. A murder victim in 1725 walked into ‘the Feathers Alehouse in Holborn ... and brought a couple of rabbits in his hand, which he order’d to be roasted for supper’. In 1695 Elizabeth Robinson went to one such establishment

⁵³ Anon., *Complete Family Piece*, p. 511.

⁵⁴ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Jane Witherington, Richard Coulter and Ann Coulter, Jan. 1758 (t17580113–9).

⁵⁵ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Samuel Byerman, May 1771 (t17710515–21).

⁵⁶ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Munday Musturs, otherwise Pawlet, Jan. 1764 (t17640113–3).

⁵⁷ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Corbet

Vezey, Jan. 1732 (t17320114–12); trial of Richard Sinderbury, Oct. 1763 (t17631019–31).

⁵⁸ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Abraham Lee, John Myers, Feb. 1788, (t17880227–20).

⁵⁹ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, t17300116–8; t17350116–50; t17391017–3; OA17410916; t17971206–1; t17441205–62; t17570420–42.

‘and brought a rabbet with her, intending to treat some soldiers with’. Instead, she stole two silver spoons, ‘and pretended that she would go and buy parsley and onions for the rabbet, but went away with the goods, and left her rabbet behind her’.⁶⁰

A meal at a tavern was something special for many Londoners. There they could order fashionable ‘made’ dishes, rabbit recipes included, which we find in cookery books written by the top London tavern cooks – the celebrity chefs of their day. A gentleman trying to seduce a woman he met in the Park in 1757, bought her gloves, then, ‘At the New Inn he had a rabbet for dinner, and he drank to her three times’. Another woman picked up in the Park was taken to the Hercules Tavern, where her companion ordered ‘a fryed rabbit, and he pressed her to eat some, but she would not’. Two young girls accused of theft had gone to a tavern where the boldest ‘had wine, and a rabbit, a French cook frigaseed it’. The younger one, overawed by the place ‘did not taste it, I had nothing but a bit of bread and butter. I sat crying’. At a more convivial meal at a London inn in 1741, two men ‘supp’d together of a boil’d Rabbit smother’d with onions and a roasted fowl’.⁶¹

Thus rabbit meat, once a delicacy for the rich, seems by the eighteenth century to have been enjoyed by all classes, to judge from those consumers who came into contact with the Old Bailey. Prices for meat mentioned in these records place rabbit meat, on average, at some 90 per cent of the cost of beef, pork or lamb during the period.⁶²

VII

To conclude, some thoughts on the origins of commercial tame rabbit production near London. Rabbits in hutches go back at least to 1543. Tame rabbits are said to have been bred by monks in pit systems before the Dissolution⁶³ but I have found no English evidence to support this. It seems strange that, in the absence of earlier examples or comment by writers, Sir Hugh Plat in the 1580s presents us with a sophisticated pit system with individual cells for does, flaps and moveable ceiling boards to count and isolate the animals, feeding racks, controlled breeding and so on, as advised in French textbooks. I feel it is unlikely that the technology was copied by Plat’s schoolfriend from a French agricultural manual, neither is it probable that it was developed over a number of years in England without anyone remarking on it. It is possible that one or more people skilled in this system arrived from abroad and demonstrated its viability to men such as Plat’s friend. If so, where did they come from?

The obvious answer is from northern France or the Low Countries, Protestant refugees fleeing persecution in the second half of the sixteenth century. Many settled in London and the suburbs, bringing new crops and new ways of operating intensive agriculture and gardening. It has been argued that both Estienne and Liebault’s *Maison Rustique* of 1570 and the French

⁶⁰ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Elizabeth Robinson, Aug. 1695 (t16950828–6); trial of Foster Snow, Oct. 1725 (t17251013–25); trial of Henry Baynes, Sarah Baynes, alias Bird, Susanna Thompson, Hannah Randal and Thomas Blewet, Apr. 1731 (t17310428–66).

⁶¹ *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, trial of Daniel Lackey, Apr. 1757 (t17570420–42); trial of Ann Hedley,

Dec. 1744 (t17441205–62); Ordinary’s Account, 16 Sept. 1741 (OA17410916).

⁶² I have estimated the weight of meat on a tame rabbit at 2.5 lbs for this calculation.

⁶³ Bob D. Whitman, *Domestic rabbits and their histories: breeds of the world* (2004), p. 346.

Protestant writer Olivier de Serres's book on agriculture of 1600 reflected a bourgeois attitude to estate management – a willingness to try new things, to farm intensively near large towns and with an eye to the market and it is reasonable to suppose both works were reporting types of rabbit production well under way in France. It may be also be significant that Worlidge, in 1669, recommends 'The great *Dutch Rabbit*'. This is an admittedly thin case for the development of a sophisticated pit system by Continental Protestants but I live in hopes of finding a refugee Dutchman or Frenchman in 1580s London breeding rabbits.⁶⁴ For the moment though, we can conclude that domestic rabbit breeding should not be seen as an aspect of alternative agriculture in the sense intended by Joan Thirsk, but as a way in which a metropolitan population, both rich and poor, could have ready access to fresh meat.

⁶⁴ Chandra Mukerji, 'Bourgeois culture and French gardening in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in Michel Conan (ed.), *Bourgeois and aristocratic cultural encounters in garden art, 1550–1850* (2002); Worlidge, *Systema agriculturae*, pp. 162–3.