

Rabbit Warrens and Chipping Campden's Coneygree

David Gould

Rabbits were introduced into the UK by the Normans¹ and were essentially farmed in man-made warrens for their meat and fur. Known as *coneygarths*, these warrens consisted of artificial mounds of earth called pillow mounds, although originally known as *buries*, and were occasionally enclosed by pales, hedges, walls or natural waterways. Pillow mounds encouraged rabbits to burrow and concentrated them within a defined area in order to facilitate their capture. Not until the eighteenth century did feral rabbit colonies become commonplace, and in places, notably Dartmoor, warrens remained in use until the early twentieth century.

Pillow mounds are incredibly common with over 2,000 examples estimated to survive in England and Wales², while at least 1,337 examples have been identified in south-west England alone³. Most surviving examples are probably post-medieval and are today more common in the west of England and in Wales. Medieval references suggest, however, that warrens were formerly more common in eastern England, sustaining an export trade with mainland Europe and supplying the royal court at Westminster.

During the medieval period, the right to hunt small game, including rabbits, was conferred by granting the right of *free warren* by royal charter. Rabbits and rabbit warrens therefore carried connotations of exclusivity and their meat and fur were luxury commodities affordable only to the medieval aristocracy. During the post-medieval period, as rabbits became more common they became less expensive and shed any connotations of wealth, eventually becoming food for the poor. Later post-medieval warrens were therefore purely commercial ventures.

So what was Chipping Campden's *Coneygree* role in this history of warrening? Outside of Dartmoor, Gloucestershire has the highest number of pillow mounds in the South West, particularly concentrated in the Cotswolds. References to medieval warrens in north-east Gloucestershire are however relatively rare, and the earliest known examples belonged to ecclesiastical magnates, which is perhaps to be expected given that they held much land in the region. Not until the seventeenth century do we find references to warrens associated with the region's lay aristocracy and there is much archaeological evidence of later medieval / post-medieval warrens in north-east Gloucestershire as many of its pillow mounds overlie ridge and furrow, the earthwork remains of medieval strip fields. This is symptomatic of the contraction of medieval arable farming in the region in favour of pastoral

¹ The earliest reference to rabbits in the UK dates from 1167 in the Scilly Isles, although a questionable reference records rabbits in the Plymouth Sound in 1135.

² Williamson 2007, 31

³ Gould 2016, 74

farming, buoyed by a thriving wool industry. Pasturing sheep in the region was therefore often accompanied by pasturing rabbits on former arable lands.

The *Coneygree* ties in with this local scenario as extensive ridge and furrow is evident within its eastern half. The warren is however not recorded until a lease dated 16 November 1719, although it is almost certainly earlier as it is a constituent element of Sir Baptist Hicks' designed landscape surrounding his manor house which was constructed in 1612. However, although unconfirmed, Hicks may have built upon the site of an earlier mansion and it is noteworthy that ridge and furrow is absent from the western half of the *Coneygree*, indicating that that part of the warren was not arable farmland during the medieval period. Whether this indicates that the warren was a medieval institution attached to an earlier mansion house is unknown, but it was certainly at least extended eastwards over former medieval arable land, a trend so typical of north-east Gloucestershire.

The *Coneygree* almost certainly preserves at least one pillow mound at SP15553940, although it has unfortunately been built upon by the extension of the Church of St. James's graveyard. The pillow mound has not been recorded by either Gloucestershire's Historic Environment Record (HER) or by Historic England's National Monuments Record (NMR).



As mentioned, medieval and early post-medieval warrens were status symbols because they were restricted to the aristocracy and because rabbit meat and fur were luxury commodities. Consequently, several commentators have discussed how warrens were often proudly displayed as ostentatious

symbols of wealth. In truth, this notion has probably been overstated and although many warrens were certainly near elite residences, they were not necessarily obviously visible. The *Coneygree* does however appear to be an example of a warren that *did* express connotations of wealth. Although eighteenth-century watercolours of Hicks' estate emphasise the north-south axis of his mansion and gardens, and despite the fact that the *Coneygree* is separated from them by a boundary wall, that Hicks' eastern banqueting house overlooks his warren is important. This particular vantage point must have been deemed an appropriate backdrop for banqueting and must have been understood as a representation of Hicks' wealth and control of natural resources. As such, the warren belongs to the medieval / early-post medieval tradition rather than representing a purely commercial warren of the later post-medieval period. This again argues for a foundation date contemporary with, or before, the construction of Hicks' mansion.

So while the *Coneygree* is not necessarily unique (in fact it is in many ways typical of north-east Gloucestershire's warrening experience), it nevertheless preserves a previously unrecorded pillow mound and a surviving warren boundary wall. More importantly, it is a relatively rare example of a warren that served as an ostentatious display of wealth. In effect, it is as integral to Sir Baptist Hicks' estate as his more celebrated mansion and gardens.



References

1. Everson, P. 1989, 'The Gardens of Campden House, Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire', in *Garden History* 17 (2).
2. Gould, D. 2016, *Rabbit Warrens of South West England: Landscape Context, Socio-Economic Significance and Symbolism*, forthcoming PhD thesis.
3. Sheail, J. 1971, *Rabbits and Their History*, David & Charles.
4. Veale, E. M. 1957, 'The Rabbit in England', in *Agricultural History Review* 5 (2).
5. Warmington, A. (ed.) 2005, *Campden: A New History*, Campden and District Historical and Archaeological Society.
6. Williamson, T. 2007, *Rabbits, Warrens & Archaeology*, Tempus Publication.