

Raising Rabbits- A Medieval Industry



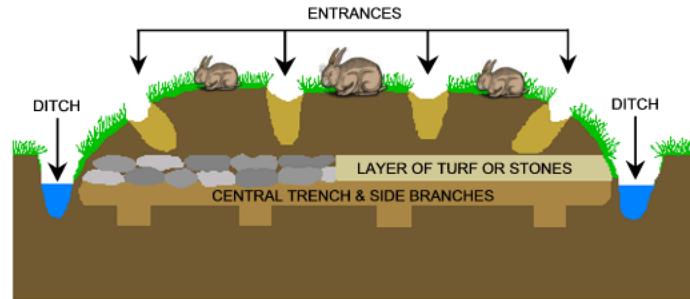
Before the 20th century, rabbits were highly valued, both for their meat and for their fur. Rabbits were introduced into England by the Normans, and until the late 19th century were kept in protected enclosures known as warrens. These were heaps of earth with multiple, well-ventilated inner chambers where rabbits mated, gave birth and raised their families. The pillow-like mounds were often built in oblong shapes and sometimes were connected with each other with stone-lined tunnels. To prevent the rabbits from escaping, a field of pillow mounds was surrounded by a moat, or ditch filled with water. A fence provided protection from predators. Many warrens were accompanied by a lodge and a watchtower where the warrener lived.



Pillow mounds in Dartmoor.
Photo: www.dartmoorcam.co.uk



Mildenhall Warren Lodge.



Today the rabbit is regarded as prolific, destructive and of little value but historically, the rabbit was a rare and highly prized commodity. The animal, believed to be indigenous to England during a previous interglacial period, was considered extinct until deliberately reintroduced via France in the 11th and 12th centuries.

When first reintroduced, the rabbit found the English climate inhospitable and needed careful rearing and cosseting inside specially created warrens or pillow mounds. Surprisingly, the early rabbits were reluctant burrowers, which prompted some warreners to construct these artificial burrows.

The collapse of the grain market in the later 14th and 15th centuries encouraged some landlords to develop their warrens as an alternative source of income, making rabbiting a successful late medieval growth industry. The most common method of trapping the rabbits, was with ferrets and nets. Ferrets were released into specific burrows to drive the rabbits above ground and into nets tended by trappers.

It was not until the 18th century that rabbits broke free of their confines and colonized a much wider area.

<https://www.amusingplanet.com/2020/08/medieval-rabbit-warrens.html>

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