The WARRENS of BRECKLAND

A Survey by The Breckland Society
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2010
Part of the perimeter bank of Beachamwell Warren, on the edge of Narford Wood.
Estate workers on the Elveden Estate, assembled for a shooting party c1900. The warreners, dressed in their white smocks, are gathered mostly on the left. The gamekeepers can be distinguished by their darker clothing and bowler hats.
The European Rabbit

*Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Rabbits are native to the Western Mediterranean region, and although the Romans are known to have brought domesticated rabbits to England in the 1st century BC, wild rabbits were probably not introduced to Britain until at least 1,000 years later. Sociable and territorial animals, they live in often extensive colonies controlled by dominant bucks and feed on short vegetation, preferring grass and leafy weeds. They emerge from their burrows as dusk falls and graze mainly at night, the darkness affording them protection from predators such as foxes, stoats, weasels and birds of prey.

The does give birth away from the main colony and dig short tunnels to provide cover and shelter for their young. They breed from February to September and can have as many as eight litters in a season, with an average of six kittens in a litter. The young are completely independent at six weeks and can begin to breed at four to six months old.

Rabbit numbers fluctuate, according to weather and other factors. They do not search for food in very wet or snowy weather and are therefore susceptible to starvation. Meanwhile, their communal living habits render them vulnerable to disease, with myxomatosis being the most lethal.

During the medieval period, adult rabbits were known as “coneyes”; only the young were called “rabbetts”. Their ecology made it possible for them to be farmed for their meat and fur in designated areas known as warrens. Although managed warrens no longer exist in Britain, rabbits remain a common sight across much of the Brecks landscape.
Introduction to the Project

Very barren soyle neverthelesse very good for brede of cones.

(Lease for Brandon Warren, 1563)

In March 2008, the Breckland Society was awarded a Regional Capacity Building Grant by English Heritage to research the archaeological and archival evidence of the managed rabbit warrens of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks.

Perhaps surprisingly, considering the dominance of the rabbit in Breckland's economy for so many centuries, there has hitherto been no definitive study of the history of warrenning in the Brecks, nor, indeed, any assessment that draws together the archaeological and archival evidence for the establishment and management of the warrens. The Breckland Society, already experienced at running research projects, such as our award-winning Vernacular Architecture Project (completed in 2007), was ideally placed to undertake this task. The total cost of the project was £12,600, covered by the English Heritage grant of £12,100 and £500 from the Society's own resources.

The project had several individual but complementary components: fieldwork and site visits, aimed at ascertaining the precise extent of warren remains still present "on the ground"; archival research, designed to identify and collate documentary sources and references related to individual warrens and to the rabbit industry generally; an oral history exercise, involving the interviewing of people associated with the industry and warrenning practices; an illustrated report, summarising the project's overall findings and looking in turn at each of the known warrens in the Brecks; an information leaflet, drawing attention to this important part of Breckland's heritage and highlighting where surviving warren features can best be viewed; and finally, a series of web pages, presenting information about the project and its findings and indicating where further related resources can be found.

The grant award from English Heritage was announced in the Society's April 2008 newsletter, which invited members to take part in the project. In addition, articles in the local and regional press cast the net wider, and information about the project was circulated in particular to adult education archaeology students at the University of East Anglia. Of key importance was the recruitment of a project manager capable of marshalling the project through to a satisfactory conclusion. The Society was delighted to be able to secure the services of experienced heritage consultant Anne Mason, who had played such an important role in the success of our Vernacular Architecture Project.

Twenty-five people attended the inaugural Warrens Project training session in August 2008 at Oak Lodge Community Building, High Lodge Forest Centre, near Brandon. They were given an introductory talk about the history of warrens and warrenning in the Brecks and then invited to select one warren – from the
list of over twenty – to research in detail, usually working in teams of two. Each team was given a resource pack containing information already known about their particular warren, including any Sites and Monuments Records, as well as a list of documentary references and a map showing the known or conjectured perimeter.

To help those new to documentary research, the Norfolk Record Office gave a guided tour of its facilities in September 2008, including an explanation of the procedures for finding and requesting documents. The Society is very grateful to the NRO for hosting this session free of charge. The following month, a fieldwork training session was held, again at Oak Lodge. We were pleased to welcome two new volunteers, bringing the total involved to 27, and it was especially rewarding to have the support on that day of Rachel Riley, Neal Armour-Chelu and Frances Evershed from the Forestry Commission, with which we have worked closely throughout this project. David Kenny from English Heritage also attended, as did the University of East Anglia’s Professor Tom Williamson, one of the leading landscape historians in the country and an acknowledged authority on the history of warrening.

After a presentation on the structure and identification of warren banks, both perimeter and internal, and of lodge sites, the volunteers tested the project’s specially compiled fieldwork survey forms in a site assessment of Downham High Warren. A visit was also made to Thetford Warren Lodge, the best surviving example of its type, and the various defensive and domestic features of this evocative building were discussed and interpreted.

Fieldwork then began in earnest, and throughout the autumn (2008), winter and early spring (2009) the teams of volunteers traced the perimeter boundaries of their allocated warrens, recording the condition, height and width of visible banks, as well as searching for any evidence of internal banks and lodge sites. This was a considerable undertaking, as it often meant difficult walking through dense forestry plantations and often in cold weather. Some of the distances covered were impressive by any standards – Thetford Warren’s perimeter banks run for no less than 10 miles, for example. As well as completing the fieldwork survey forms, the volunteers also compiled photographic evidence of their investigations and mapped any surviving features.

Throughout the same period, and continuing until autumn 2009, the volunteers were also researching the archival evidence for their particular warren. This process took them to a wide range of resources: the Norfolk and West Suffolk Record Offices; the Millennium Library in Norwich; the University Library and Christ’s College Library in Cambridge; the Public Record Office; the Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life; Thetford Library; the Forestry Commission’s Archives and the Norfolk and Suffolk County Archaeological Units. The Access to Archives and the Norfolk Heritage Explorer websites were valuable resources and much used. An archival record form was completed for each warren, listing the various documentary sources that had been discovered during the research process. Several volunteers took their detective work further still, with one even stopping off en route to Luton Airport and a doubtless much-needed holiday in order to follow up a lead in the local museum about the use of rabbit fur in the hat trade!

Meanwhile, six volunteers were trained in oral history interviewing techniques, and then interviewed ex-warreners, ex-employees of the fur factories and members of families historically involved in warrening. The recording of these memories comes at what, it is fair to say, can be regarded as the “eleventh hour” – many of those interviewed are in advanced old age and are the last living link with what was once a major regional industry. This project represented almost certainly the last chance for them to tell their story.
The project attracted extensive media coverage, with articles in one national and seven local newspapers, as well as features in five journals and newsletters. A particular highlight was an appearance on BBC’s Look East regional television news programme.

The vast quantity of data yielded by the fieldwork and archival research has been carefully analysed and a database compiled and distilled into this report. All the original recording forms and digital photographic records have been submitted to the appropriate record offices, along with copies of the project database, and surviving warren evidence has been mapped in GIS (Geographical Information System) format on to Forestry Commission maps. We have been supported throughout by FC staff; as well as by David Gurney and Colin Pendleton, county archaeologists for Norfolk and Suffolk respectively, and by David Kenny of English Heritage.

The project formally ended on 31 March 2010. As a Society we can look back with pride and satisfaction at what has been a remarkable endeavour and one that has made a real difference to the knowledge and understanding of such an important chapter in the history of the Brecks. The wider conclusions and implications of the project’s work and findings are discussed elsewhere in this report, but at this point I would like to thank Anne Mason for her exemplary project management and, most of all, the volunteers, without whose dedication and enthusiasm none of this would have been possible.

James Parry
Chairman, The Breckland Society
Historical Background

The practice of confining rabbits in warrens was probably introduced to Britain by the Normans, a warren being an area designated for the farming of rabbits for their meat and fur, and in which they were nurtured, protected and ultimately trapped by a warrener. Rabbits were farmed first of all on islands and coastal sites during the twelfth century, with records from Lundy, the Scilly Isles and the Isle of Wight dating from 1176. They were luxury items for the upper classes, much prized and carefully managed. Only those with manorial rights could own a warren, and rabbits enjoyed the same exclusive protection as, for example, the pigeons in a lord’s dovecote.

There is good evidence of their importance as a high status commodity. Rabbits from warrens in Kent and Sussex featured in the list of foodstuffs taken to Henry III’s court at Winchester for Christmas in 1253. Four thousand rabbits were provided for the banquet that followed the installation of George Neville as Archbishop of York in 1465. Rabbit fur was used to trim luxury robes and cloaks, especially if it was black or silver-grey. Henry VI had a nightshirt lined with black rabbit fur and the monks of Thetford Priory gave Katherine of Aragon a gift of rabbit fur trimmings for her gowns when she visited them in 1513.

From the late twelfth to the early twentieth century, the Breckland region was noted for its warrens. It has a climate not too dissimilar to that of the rabbits’ native Mediterranean, with warm, dry summers and low rainfall in winter. The warrens occupied the higher, permanently dry pastureland of parishes whose settlements clustered along the natural boundary between heathland and fen, or along the region’s rivers. They were concentrated where the greatest depth of blown sand overlaid the chalk below, probably because such a depth of sandy soil made it easier for the rabbits to burrow.

There were over twenty warrens in Breckland by the eighteenth century and they sustained an industry that included two fur-processing factories at Brandon and short-lived premises in Thetford and Swaffham. The annual cull on many of the warrens ran to over 20,000 animals, with the meat being sent up to London and to the Cambridge colleges, as well as to markets locally. The fur was despatched to Luton, for use in the hat industry, but also to Europe and as far afield as South

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Above
Thetford Warren, showing rabbits, lapwings and stone-curlews, as well as the lodge on the horizon. From Henry Stevenson’s 'The Birds of Norfolk' (1866).
America. There was even a trade in rabbit skins and fur to the Baltic as early as the 1390s.

Many of the warrens were established by monasteries or by great landowners such as the Duchy of Lancaster. Lakenheath and Brandon Warrens, for example, belonged to the Prior of Ely; Mildenhall to Bury Abbey; Wangford to Old Warden Abbey; and Santon, Snarehill and Bodney were leased to Thetford Priory by the Duchy of Lancaster. The rabbits were a source of fresh meat in winter, but they were also a means of making a profitable income when sold commercially. This was particularly significant in an area where much of the land occupied by the warrens was too marginal for productive arable farming.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s, the warrens passed to lay landowners, often as part of an estate purchased as monastic lands were sold off. However, they mostly continued to function as working warrens until the eighteenth century and in some notable cases well beyond this date. Lakenheath was one of the last working warrens and survived until 1940.

Since warrens in different ownership often directly abutted each other, their boundaries had to be demarcated; the rabbits prevented from escaping, and vermin and poachers stopped from entering. In the relatively flat Breckland landscape, there were few, if any, natural features which could be utilised to do this. Manmade boundaries had to be constructed instead, mostly taking the form of raised banks, although archaeologists remain undecided on whether some medieval warrens were also bounded by ditches.

There are several documentary references to how warren banks were constructed. They were made of turves and reached heights of up to two metres, with each bank perpendicular on its inner side and with the outer side sloped. Banks could be up to ten metres wide. Each turf – also called a "sad" or "clower" – was approximately one-third of a metre square and the turves were laid in the manner of a brick wall with the grass on the vertical face. Once constructed, the bank was either topped with gorse faggots, often tied together with willow twigs, or planted with gorse or thorn bushes, which were then encouraged to overhang the inner face of the bank and thereby help prevent the rabbits from escaping. Francis de la Rochefaucauld (A Frenchman's Year in Suffolk 1784, trans N Scarfe, 1988) wrote of a warren north of Thetford with "a four-foot bank of turf sown with gorse, which forms a boundary beyond which the rabbits cannot go".

Within the warren itself further banks served particular purposes. Since the warrener aimed to breed as many rabbits as possible and to produce rabbit meat and fur of the highest possible quality, internal enclosures on some of the warrens may have been used to grow crops to provide additional feed for the rabbits. The sections of three and even four parallel banks, often adjacent to a perimeter bank, may be the trapping banks named on several warren maps.

The medieval warrener, who was either a paid employee or a leaseholder, occupied a lodge on the warren. As one of the highest-paid of manorial officials, it was his responsibility to care for the rabbits, to trap them when most propitious, and to guard them against predators, both animal and human. (Such was the value of the rabbits’ meat and skins that armed gangs of poachers often attempted to raid the warrens.) The lodge in which the warrener lived had therefore to serve a three-fold purpose: accommodation for himself and his family; storage for the trapping equipment and carcasses, and a lookout and defence against poachers.

Since Faden's 1797 Map of Norfolk and Bryant's 1824 Map of Suffolk both show warren lodge sites, it has been possible to identify these in the modern landscape and to make site visits to almost all of them during this project.
The Warrens

The following is a summary of the archaeological and archival research carried out by the project for each warren, listed alphabetically. Further information, including the detailed fieldwork and archival recording forms for each warren, can be found at www.brecsoc.org.uk. Images of the surveyed archaeological features and archival material are included for many of the warrens.

The OS grid references given denote the approximate central point of each warren. The individual maps represent the first comprehensive attempt to plot the warren boundaries and lodge sites.

Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BAHR</td>
<td>British Agricultural History Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUL EDC</td>
<td>Cambridge University Library, Ely Diocesan Collection</td>
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<td>NCUACS</td>
<td>National Cataloguing Unit for the Archives of Contemporary Scientists</td>
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<td>NHER</td>
<td>Norfolk Historic Environment Record</td>
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<td>NRO</td>
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<td>SMR</td>
<td>Sites and Monuments Record</td>
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<td>WSROB</td>
<td>West Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds</td>
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Barton Mills

Researched by Rachel Riley and Anne Mason

Grid reference TL728743

Earliest known date 1754 (ref deed of ownership WSROB EtS/452/69).

The exact extent of the warren is not known. The only reference is to an 80-acre warren of which the ownership passed from John Holderness to Sir William Bunbury in 1754. A “warren house” is noted on the Highway Diversion Order of January 1812 (WSROB Q/SH/72) and is also marked on Bryant’s 1824 Map, but two modern dwellings now occupy the site.
Beachamwell

Researched by Sue Pennell and Peggy English

Grid reference TM766075

Earliest known date 1275 (ref Blomefield, vol 7).

Banks and enclosures The boundary of the warren is evident, albeit often as a low, linear bank through plantations, shelter belts and across pastureland. The eastern, southern and western perimeters are also parish boundaries. There is extensive archival evidence for the banks, such as the 1760 Terrier, which lists “Warren bank north and east … and a modulus of one pound is paid a year on the warren” (NRO DN/TER 13/1). An 1842 Estate map indicates an internal bank separating “sweepages” from “burrowings” and names the Sheep Gate, Warren Brick Kiln Gate, Wellmere Gate, Brandon Gate, Cley Gate, Swaffham Gate, Narford Gate and Narborough Gate (NRO MC 2506/2).

Lodge 1595 Lodgeway (Will of Thomas Tooke NRO ANF Bale 65 MF195). The lodge was converted to early brick-built Victorian farm buildings for stabling horses, in use to mid-20th century – the site is now derelict. A pair of semi-detached Victorian cottages is nearby (now a holiday home, and previously one of two pairs of cottages). The name “Lodge” seems to alternate with “Warren House” on the maps. The 1851 Census Return lists three lodges.

History Owned by the Earls of Clere during the medieval period. After the Dissolution, the warren passed into the ownership of local families and was bought by tenant farmers in the 1960s and ploughed for arable. A remarkable collection of leases and maps survives, giving information about the gates in the 1740s, in 1797 and 1842; the “clap croft” in 1706, 1727 and 1791 and the sending of rabbits to Brandon and their sale to Oxburgh Hall in 1628. There are Wills of warreners in 1595 and 1678 and the Parish Registers list the warreners and their families from 1788 to 1931. Photographs of warreners in 1908 and the 1940s complement the superb maps showing the warren in 1776 and 1842.
**BLACK RABBIT (WRETHAM)**

*Researched by John and Diana Davies*

*Grid reference TL907937*

*Earliest known date* 1641 Lease (NRO NAS 1/1/20/162).

**Banks and enclosures** Named on Faden’s 1797 Map as “Wretham Warren” but on Ordnance Maps as “Black Rabbit Warren”, this is probably a post-medieval foundation. Perimeter banks marked on the Wretham Estate Sales Particulars of 1910 are visible along the western and southern edges and follow the parish boundary to the north. The two and sometimes four parallel banks along the eastern perimeter may be trapping banks.

**Lodge** The 1641 lease (NRO NAS 1/1/20/162) refers to “land on Ringsmearside and on the lodge side” but the name “Warren House” is used by 1910.

**History** The warren was part of the Wretham Estate, which was purchased from Eton College in 1755 by William Colquhoun and then bought by Wyrley Birch. The current owner of the estate is the Ministry of Defence.
BODNEY

Researched by John and Diana Davies

Grid reference TL833972

Earliest known date 1499 (ref Dymond, The Register of Thetford Priory).

Banks and enclosures Perimeter banks are shown on Faden’s 1797 Map and the eastern warren bank is also the parish boundary between Bodney and Threxton (now Hilborough and Little Cressingham). There is a 1791 archival reference to exchange of land between Lord Petre and George Tasburgh and the need to maintain the boundary between the warren and neighbouring lands (NRO MC67/52 513/2).

Lodge The site is marked on Faden’s map, but only slight mounds remain on the ground. It was built some time before 1499: for that year and the following one, repairs are listed in the Thetford Priory accounts: “per manus Baxter pro reperac fact apud Bodney logge £6 6s 3d” (Dymond, The Register of Thetford Priory).

History In the medieval period, the warren was owned by Thetford Priory. In 1545, it was given to the Duke of Norfolk and then passed through various owners before becoming part of the estate of William Amherst Tyssen-Amherst in 1870. Land Tax Assessment of 1770 records it as being of 1,300 acres in a parish of 2,500 acres. The Lease of 1774 allowed “the lopping of trees to feed to the rabbits when the depth of snow exceeds 2 inches and the tillage of 10 acres for crops as fodder”. It is now in Ministry of Defence ownership.
Brandon

Researched by Rachel Riley and Anne Mason

Grid reference TL798837

Earliest known date Manorial accounts of 1252 record the sale of rabbits (PRO SC61304/23–26).

Banks and enclosures Visible around most of the boundary with substantial banks between this warren and the adjacent Downham High Warren, although on the northern boundary the bank appears only as a low mound. There are double banks in the north-eastern corner of the warren and where the boundary runs alongside Elveden Warren. The 1807 Enclosure Act (WSROB HD1964/2) stipulates that there shall be no digging of turves “except for the purpose of repairing, supporting and mending the banks, walls and fences adjoining or belonging to Brandon Warren”.

Lodge Built in 1368, and rebuilt in 1386 with an enclosure around it (PRO E101.543/4). This record includes an itemized list of materials used in the re-building, such as stone from Northampton for the corners and also timber from Norfolk (Account Rolls 1386–87 HD1538/146 and HD1538/148/11). The site of the lodge is marked on the 1791 Cadogan Estate Map and on Hodskinson’s 1783 Map of Suffolk. The first edition OS Map names it as “Two Chimney Lodge” and marks a rectangular enclosure around the lodge and a well close by. A surface archaeological investigation in autumn 2009 revealed sections of 19th-century brickwork and some knapped flints.

History Owned by the Bishop of Ely during the medieval period and after the Dissolution had a succession of owners including Rear-Admiral George Wilson and Edward Bliss, before being bought by the Forestry Commission. Extensive archival evidence exists for this warren, including Leases of 1563 (PRO E 310/24/138) and 1644 (WSROB HD126/21/10 and the Will of Thomas Baker, Warrener 1643/44 (WSROB FL136/11/32). There are extensive manorial accounts from 1252, listing the number of rabbits culled and sold. The 1807 Enclosure Act exempts “a certain tract of land and heath called Brandon Warren containing by estimation 2,800 and 20 acres (exclusive of that part of the said warren called the Severals and which contains by estimation, 372 acres)” (WSROB HD1964/2). It was still functioning in 1917, when it was described as “large and prolific”. The Forestry Commission is the current owner.
Broomhill/Weeting

Researched by Tim Bridge

Grid reference TL796877

Earliest known date 1413, when twenty shillings were paid for the farm of the warrens at Otertinghithe, Santon and Brundale (ref PRO DL29,290/4765 and 4769 cited in Bailey, The Rabbit and the Medieval East Anglian Economy, pp 1–20, BAHR 36.1 1988).

Banks and enclosures Perimeter banks are visible in the north-eastern corner; on the short western boundary and along the southern boundary.

Lodge Located on edge of Lodge Breck and marked on the Cadogan Estate Map 1791 (WSROB M550/3). 19th-century bricks and some flints with mortar attached, found on a site visit in December 2009.

History The warren was the property of Broomhill Priory, which in 1526 leased the manor of Bromehill with a “warren of conies” to Thomas Page, yeoman of Brandon Ferry. The manor and its lands subsequently passed to the ownership of the master, fellows and scholars of Christ’s College, Cambridge. In 1627, it was leased by the college to Rowland Forster (or Fowler?) of Bromehill for “5½ quarters of wheat, 6 of malt, 1 quarter of oats and a boar for brawn at Christmas”. These leases run in an unbroken series until 1813, when the land was purchased by John Julius Angerstein, and give details of the management of the warren (Leases in the archive of Christ’s College and Pat.23 Hen. VIII, pt. ii, mm. 23 and 24). The current owner is the Forestry Commission.
Culford

Researched by Pam Tait and Peter Hicks

Grid reference TL857755 (for Culford Lodge Farm)

Earliest known date 1435 (ref Lease BL ADD MS 42055f38).

Banks and enclosures None found and no archival evidence to date as to the extent of the warren.

Lodge "Culford Lodge" is marked on Hodkinson's 1783 Map and on other maps, and survives today as the site name of the Culford farm buildings (Culford Estate Map 1793 WSROB P7201 OS 1891 OS 1904).

History The 1435 Lease is the only archival evidence for a warren, as it states that the Abbot of Bury held 4 acres here which were called "le conyngger". The area surrounding the present farm buildings is of 4.296 acres – roughly equivalent to the 4 acres held by the abbot. Six warreners were employed on the Culford Estate in 1891 but there is no mention of a specific warren (Culford Estate, edited by Clive Paine, copy in WSROB). Culford Farms Ltd is the present owner.
DOWNHAM HIGH WARREN

*Researched by Rachel Riley and Anne Mason*

**Grid reference** TL809849

**Earliest known date** 1440 (ref poaching gangs: WSROB 651/31/4).

**Banks and enclosures** Some of the best-preserved warren banks in Breckland. They are generally substantial, particularly where they abut the warrens of Brandon (west), Thetford (east) and Elveden (south). The 1778 estate map names “warren bank” and marks “doles” at regular intervals round the perimeter (NRO MC662/22 793X5). The three and then four linear parallel banks on the western edge of the warren, two of which converge to create a funnel, may be trapping banks.

**Lodge** Marked on the Cadogan Estate Map of 1791 with “Lodge Field”, enclosed by internal banks (WSROB M550/3), the lodge was close to where Oak Lodge Community Building now stands. High Lodge Forest Centre is within the “Lodge Field”.

**History** Probably owned by Ixworth Priory, the warren was in existence by 1440 when poaching gangs are recorded as operating there (WSROB 651/31/4). In 1618, the estate was bought by Wrights of Kilverstone, and then in 1778 by Charles Sloane Cadogan. Cadogan held the position of Surveyor of the King’s Gardens and began to establish plantations on the warren which were only destroyed in the First World War, when the Board of Timber Supply requisitioned the trees. The Forestry Commission is the current owner.
Elveden

**Research by Nick Gibbons and Anne Mason**

**Grid reference TL795822**

**Earliest known date** 1618. Lease notes that it was divided into Upper and Nether Warrens (Iveagh Papers: Elveden Mss J3). Possibly formed out of the “border”, the term described by Crompton (*History of Lakenheath Warren*) as given to land deliberately left between warrens, in this case between Eriswell, Downham and Lakenheath.

**Banks and enclosures** Perimeter banks survive along western and northern boundaries and are marked by a line of gorse along the eastern boundary. The southern edge is now the boundary of Center Parcs holiday village. There is a low mound close to Spinks Lodge, with two smaller mounds to the south of it, but there is no evidence to date as to whether these were linked to the warren.

**Lodge** Two lodge sites are marked on Hodkinson’s 1783 Map, and an 1802 Estate Plan names them as Eldon Lodge and High Wrong Lodge (WSROB Q/SH/28). The former is marked as “warrenhouse” on the 1841 Tithe Map. Now known as Spinks Lodge, it is a farmhouse-type building of chalk and flint, but it was not been possible to inspect closely in 2009 as it is a private dwelling.

**History** A post-medieval foundation, formed from the “border” between Eriswell, Downham and Lakenheath Warrens in the 1600s. The 1701 Lease states that “the tenant at his own cost to bank all along the Warren side to the west end of the said borders so far in breadth from Downham Warren as have been formerly meeted parted and dolled out ... to the intended new bank fifty roods and no further” (WSROB HD/1720/19). The Elveden Estate is the current landowner.
Eriswell

**Researcher** by Nick Gibbons and Anne Mason

**Grid reference** TL761791

**Earliest known date** 1309 (Valuation of Manor of Eriswell: WSROB HD998/1).

**Banks and enclosures** The perimeter banks are largely intact, except where they cross the modern arable fields. Double banks on the eastern boundary are marked by a line of gorse on top of the outer bank. The northern bank is also the boundary bank between Eriswell and Lakenheath parishes.

**Lodge** Two lodges are marked on Hodkinson’s 1783 Map as High Lodge and Lower Lodge. At High Lodge, Reverend Munday, historian, notes that material from the medieval lodge was incorporated into the post-enclosure (1818) farm buildings (WSROB HD998/1) and this was confirmed on a site visit in 2001. The site of Lower Lodge is now part of RAF Lakenheath. A banked enclosure around the site of High Lodge is marked on the 1905 Ordnance Survey Map.

**History** First mentioned in 1309, when the manor was valued after the death of Robert de Tudenham as “a small rabbit warren with a right of free-warren valued at 1 marc [13s 4d] a year” (WSROB HD998/1). When the New England Company purchased the manor of “Eereswell cum Chamberlains” in 1652 the title abstract noted “two free warrens containing 2000 acres and the game and stock of coneys in the said warrens” (WSROB M597/10). The current owner is the Elveden Estate.
FRECKENHAM

Researched by Anne Mason, Rachel Riley and Tim Bridge

Grid reference TL694700

Earliest known date The warrener Ealfred/Galfrido is mentioned on a deed of transfer of land in 1295 (Registrum Roffense, referenced on the SMR).

Banks and enclosures Most of the warren area was sold in 1926 for the building of Red Lodge village and for further housing in the 1980s and 2000s. Little now remains of the warren banks. The 1824 Enclosure Map shows two banked rectangular enclosures of 10 acres and 11 acres within the warren (WLS LX/1 MS 21505/1).

Lodge Red Lodge Inn may include part of the warrener’s lodge. Inside is a room 11 metres by 4 metres, of which the walls are of chalk to a height of 2 metres; above that are courses of 16th-century brickwork.

History Owned by the Bishop of Rochester during the medieval period and purchased in 1536 by Sir Ralph Warren. Leases show how the warren area fluctuated in size, from 450 acres in 1794 (WSROB 613/349/1) to “592 acres and 2 roods” in 1862 (WSROB 613/361). By 1918, only 133 acres remained as warren.
THE WARRENS OF BRECKLAND

GOODERSTONE

Researched by Mark and Eileen Powell

Grid reference TF800028

Earliest known date 1370 (ref manorial records, listing 348 rabbits culled, NRO Hilborough Deposit Box T).

Banks and enclosures A large earthwork bank, also the line of the parish boundary, marks the northern limit of the warren. Elsewhere, low banks mark the perimeter. The Lease of 15 November 1841 notes “760 acres of Gooderstone Warren bounded by the boundary of Cockley Cley towards the north by the boundary of Hilborough towards the east and south-east by the boundary of Foulden in part and by the public road towards the south ... towards the north-west together with the cottage or tenement used as a warrener’s house” (NRO HIL1/219/1). Two parallel banks, one smaller than the other, on the eastern perimeter may be trapping banks.

Lodge A Conveyance of 1619 lists the warren as having “two lodges or warrenhouses” (NRO HIL 1/37, 869X8). The present Warren Farm is a flint and brick building dated 1845 in the Gothic style (NHER 46209). The 1840 Tithe Map shows the warren buildings in place; a site visit by Norfolk Archaeological Unit in October 1995 recorded that “extensive ruins of the former warren lodge are preserved to the immediate south-west of the house”. The second lodge may have been in the north-west corner of the warren where a well is marked on the current Ordnance Survey Map.

History In existence in the 1370s, when the manorial records list rabbits culled (see above) and when in 1376 six acres of oats were planted “in the warren to sustain the conies there” (NRO Hilborough Deposit Box T). There is a large collection of archival material for this warren. Records show that in 1469 arable land totalling 100 acres had been abandoned “to the warren” (NRO Hilborough Deposit Box T), while a Lease Rental of 1535 names “the ferme of the warren of conies” which was owned by Denny Abbey (NRO MS13534). A Conveyance of 1619 by Sir Henry Rich gives the Manor of Hilborough to the Earl of Warwick and Sir Nicholas Rich, with the “warren with two lodges or warrenhouses and stock of conies” (NRO HIL1/18 20, 869X9, HIL 1/19, 21, 869X8). In 1768 it was proposed to enclose this “open barren land” but the “coney and other rights” were protected. (NRO HIL3/16/1–41 879X1). The current owner is the Hilborough Estate.
ICKBURGH/LANGFORD

Researched by Helaine Wyatt

Grid reference TL818977

Earliest known date 1476 Indenture (NRO PTR 1/123/12).

Banks and enclosures With no maps discovered to date recording the bounds of the warren, archaeological evidence on the ground is difficult to interpret. The presumed eastern perimeter bank runs along the edge of the conifer plantation; two more short sections of bank run east to west, one to the north of the lodge site and one to the south of it.

Lodge Named on Faden's 1797 Map as Langford Lodge (the parishes of Langford and Ickburgh were united in 1775). However, an earlier date for the lodge is a reference to “in same field by Langford Lodge” in a mortgage deed of 1742 (NRO WLS/XXVIII/11/416X2). A section of upstanding masonry remains on the site, very badly eroded but retaining evidence of regular coursed flintwork and the use of thin bricks as cornerstones.

History The 1476 Indenture “made at Langford between Richard Methold and John Wright/William Nele (of Methold Hythe)” provides for the “lease for 5 years from the Feast of Candlemas the conyger at the downe and Claper Hill and from thence unto Musden Lyng to Shakerswaye”. The current landowner of the lodge area is the Forestry Comission.
**Lakenheath**

*Researched by Nick Gibbons and Anne Mason*

*Grid reference TL752807*

**Earliest known date** 1333 (ref three Lakenheath men had grazing for their animals “in fossata de la conegar”, CUL EDC/7/15/11 Box 1/9).

**Banks and enclosures** Perimeter banks on the north, east and south are clearly discernible. The western section of the warren is now under RAF Lakenheath, but banks are still traceable in the area of Maids’ Cross Hill. There are sections of four parallel banks on the eastern perimeter and double banks on the northern perimeter. Various gates are marked on an 1835 map (WSROB MS E3/18/11.2). Trapping banks are marked as such on OS Maps for 1835, 1881 and 1905, in the northwest corner. There are four enclosures with low surrounding banks on the warren (TL776801, TL763801, TL759814 and TL753801), which may have been for the cultivation of fodder for the rabbits. Leases of 1561 and 1662 mention “the closes upon the coney warren” and the 1649 Terrier (CUL EDC 2/4/1) instructs the warrener to “support and relieve the said coneyes in the time of winter with hay and all other necessary feedings ... the lessee sufficiently to store, nourish and diligently conserve the coneyes” (NCUACS 38.6.92/C.12 Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives).

**Lodge** Three lodges are mentioned in the Terrier of 1649 and two of these may only have been occupied during the trapping season, with the main lodge located in the centre of the warren. In the 1870s the main lodge had a shelter belt of oak, larch, Scots and Austrian Pines planted along inside edge of an enclosure of 4 acres, and in 1872 the “warrenhouse” was repaired and extended and “takes in the old garden”.

**History** Owned by the Prior and Convent of Ely Abbey and in existence by 1300, when a charter was granted for a “cunicularium”. By 1304 a warrener was employed, who was paid 30s 4d a year. Post-Dissolution, it was held by the Dean and Chapter of Ely and sold to Duleep Singh for £8,000 in 1872 and then to the Iveagh family in 1894. Its boundaries were determined by the parish boundaries with Wangford, Elveden and Eriswell and also by the edge of the common meadows and fields of Lakenheath settlement. There were sheep walks on the warren, grazing rights for the “Herd of Great Cattle” and common rights over herbage (Crompton, *History of Lakenheath Warren*). During the First World War, prisoners of war held at the camp at Beck Row cultivated the east end of the warren, growing oats for the army’s horses. The warren is now in the ownership of the Elveden Estate and the Ministry of Defence (RAF Lakenheath).
METHWOLD

Researched by Anne Howlett and Eileen Wallace

Grid reference TF745931

Earliest known date 1413 (ref manorial accounts CUL EDC 7/15/1/ 20).

Banks and enclosures There is a double bank on the southern boundary; the eastern is the Devil’s Dyke but the bank deviates from this earlier (Anglo-Saxon?) boundary and is then lost. A clapper in the north-east corner (the present-day road is its southern boundary) is shown on early maps (NRO FX288 and MC556/1) and on an 1806 Enclosure Map (NRO MC62/27).

Lodge A stone lodge is recorded in 1413, when repairs costing £9 9s 9d included the shipment of 4,200 tiles from Lynn to Hockwold. This lodge was demolished in 1607, with William Osgood, warrener, “carrying off a great part of the said lodge and replacing it with a Great New Lodge” (NRO MC42/109 527X3). This is probably the two-storey building shown on the drawing in Lynn Museum (see inside back cover) with a hipped roof, a chimney stack to one side of the roof ridge, three buttresses, and lower thatched extensions with a rear wing (by Newcombe, 1808). A 1699 map surveyed by Thomas Cleere shows the “Old Lodge” with two wings (NRO MC556/1). The building now known as “Warren House” may be a later, second, lodge.

History The medieval manor of Methwold was owned by the Duchy of Lancaster (Blomefield, vol 2, pp 187–200) and the warren must have been in existence by 1413, when the lodge was repaired. In 1578, a lease was assigned by Sir Thomas Tendall to his sons William and John for 21 years for a “warren of conies” (NRO MS 569/3 778x4). A series of illustrated maps for 1566, 1580 and 1699 show the boundaries, lodges and even the long nets and the black rabbits for which this warren was “famous to a proverb” (Blomefield, vol 11, p 204). These maps provide evidence of how the extent of the warren has changed through the centuries, and are supported by a wealth of other archival documents. The Enclosure Act of 1807 mentions “the old warren gate in the parish of Feltwell” and the accompanying Enclosure Map shows an area marked “Feltwell Warren”, which may have been a remnant of Methwold Warren (NRO MC62/27). The warren area is currently divided between private ownership and the Forestry Commission.
Mildenhall

**Researched by Rachel Riley and Anne Mason**

**Grid reference** TL740755

**Earliest known date** 1323 (ref manorial accounts cited Bailey, 1989, p 132).

**Banks and enclosures** Low banks survive along the northern perimeter and there are traces along the southern perimeter parallel to the Bury Road. Those on the eastern boundary have virtually disappeared under later gravel workings and on the western boundary have been obliterated by the modern road systems. Trapping banks are marked on the 1807 Enclosure Map in the north-east corner (WSROB E18/410/1) but are not visible on the ground.

**Lodge** The warren lodge is a standing but roofless two-storey building about 7 metres square. Its walls are of flint rubble-core with a knapped flint facing. The four original window and door openings with stone dressings survive (in the same position as at Thetford) and the cornerstones are of dressed limestone, which may have come from the earlier church at Mildenhall. Low banks to the south of the warren lodge were noted in 2000 and are shown on the OS 1905 map; however, these appear to have been destroyed by felling operations in 2000. There may have been a second lodge at Three Hills, in the south-east corner of the warren, but no trace survives.

**History** The cellarer of Bury Abbey was receiving income from Mildenhall Warren by 1323 (Bailey, 1989, p 132). After the Dissolution, the Manor of Mildenhall, including the warren, was owned consecutively by the Bacon, North and Bunbury families. The 1807 Enclosure Map for Mildenhall Parish shows the warren of 1,066 acres (WSROB Q/SH/72) and it was this area that was purchased in 1934 by the Forestry Commission, the current owner. The 1540 Will of Nicholas Mey (WSROB IC500/1/36/24) includes “the Wareyn” and the inventory accompanying George Childerstone’s Will of 1662 includes “at the warren lodge one bed with a flockbed 3 ould hayes or netts and other implements belonging to him as the warrener” (WSROB IC500/1/114/87).
OXBOROUGH

Researched by Teresa Squires and Barbara Pritchard


Earliest known date 1666 (NRO PD139/52).

Banks and enclosures Not known. Fieldwork was restricted due to lack of access, the sites of “Warren Hill” and “Lodge Farm” being in private ownership.

Lodge This is conjectured to have been on the current site of Lodge Farm, as shown on the map.

History Only two documentary references to the warren have been found, in estate surveys of 1666 (NRO PD 139/52; also see p 42) and 1725 (NRO BRA 2524/2).
SANTON

Researched by Charles Heal and Anne Mason

Grid reference TL826890


Banks and enclosures The boundaries of the warren and the parish of Santon were the same.

Lodge The lodge site was identified from Faden’s 1797 Map and verified by a site visit in 2009, which revealed sections of medieval walling reused in a field barn. The lodge was built prior to 1499, because in that year it was repaired: June 1499–June 1500 “pro reparac fact apud Santon logge 1s 1d and in 1502/3 8d and in 1505/6 4s 10d”. (Dymond, *The Register of Thetford Priory*). A map of 1805, surveyed by T Skynner, shows the warren of 1,487 acres and depicts the “warren house” with a red roof and yellow walls (NRO NRS 21391 37X).

History In 1413–14, twenty shillings were paid for the farm of the warrens at Oteringham, Santon and Brundale (PRO, DL29, 290/4765 and 4769 cited in Bailey as above, BAHR 36.1 (1988)). In 1428, a licence was obtained by the overlord, the Duke of Norfolk, to grant Santon Manor to Thetford Priory (NRO MS7293 7 B S). It passed through various owners, including the Gresham, Bancroft and Wright families, and then became part of the Cadogan Estate in 1791. It is now in the ownership of the Forestry Commission.
Santon Downham

Researched by Rachel Riley and Anne Mason

Grid reference TL865835

Earliest known date 1778 (ref Wright map, NRO MC 662/22 793X5).

Banks and enclosures A comparatively small warren, occupying land between the Thetford to Brandon Road and the River Little Ouse. Its boundary banks are clearly visible and there is a complex series of parallel banks, which may be trapping banks.

Lodge In the 1891 Lease, “Low Lodge Farm” is named and 699 acres are “more or less arable and pasture land” (NRO MC114/2/1 583 X 4). A site visit in November 2009 found 19th-century farm buildings and two modern dwellings on the site, which is now known as “Little Lodge Farm”.

History The Manor of Santon Downham was held by St Edmundsbury Abbey before the Conquest, and by Frodo, Abbot Baldwin’s brother, in 1086. A John de Santon appears c1170, and his granddaughter, Alice, married Robert de Vere, 5th Earl of Oxford (1240–96), which is the likeliest explanation for the manor passing to the de Vere family. The manor was subsequently subdivided, but a relevant feature of its history is the granting of Downham Ixworth Manor to Ixworth Priory in 1250–51. After the Dissolution, it was granted to Richard Codington. The estate passed through many hands until it was sold to speculators in 1918. Today the warren area is partly in private ownership and partly owned by the Forestry Commission.
Snarehill

Researched by Diane Jackman

Grid reference TL889805

Earliest known date 1482 (ref Dymond, The Register of Thetford Priory).

Banks and enclosures Site visits have not found any traces of the boundary banks and the only archival evidence for the boundary to date is a map in the 1898 Sales Particulars, which show the extent of the warren at that time (Sale Catalogue, Norfolk and Norwich Heritage Collection, Millennium Library, Norwich, filed under “Rushford”). Much of it was used for a First World War airfield. There were gates where roads crossed the warren, to prevent the rabbits from escaping: payment was made to “Thomas Polett, smith, for staple for Snarehill Gate 1527/8”, and for “eyes and hooks for Snarehill Gate” (Dymond).

Lodge The map shows the extent of the warren in 1898, but the site of the lodge is clearly outside this perimeter and therefore suggests that the original warren covered a much larger area. The lodge site, marked on 19th-century OS maps as Old Lodge, is characteristically on higher land, commanding an all-round view. The present buildings (1, 3 and 4 Snarehill Farm Cottages) are mid-19th century, but there is a range of ruined Victorian flint farm buildings further down the slope, which may incorporate flints from an earlier warren lodge. The medieval lodge was in existence by 1482, because between that date and 1535 there were three payments for repairs to the warren lodge listed in the Hertford Priory accounts (Dymond).

History Leased to Thetford Priory by the Duchy of Lancaster in the late-medieval period. After the Dissolution it was owned by the Fulmerstons from 1549 to 1554, and then from 1558 to 1619, the latter through marriage held jointly with Edward Clere; from 1619 to 1758 by the Campions; and from 1758 to 1898 by the Buxtons (Agreement NRO PTR 1/147, 757X2; Will NRO T/N5/1 Purchase Sussex RO; Danny MS 1596; Settlement 31.5.1758 cited DAN/151 1768 Sussex RO; also Buxton MS Box 94/25; Sale Catalogue, Norfolk and Norwich Heritage Collection, Millennium Library, Norwich, filed under “Rushford”). When John Musker bought the estate in 1898, the warren was yielding an average kill of about 8,600 rabbits, producing an approximate income of about £430 per annum (Roper, Breckland Portraits). The Shadwell Estate Account Books 1847–50 contain much information about the management of the warren, including “payments made for killing rabbits, food and keep of dogs and pony, ferrets, lines, nets, killing rats, brushing with dogs” (Buxton Papers, Box 124/2 MSS Dept, Cambridge University Library). The Census Returns for 1841, 1851, 1871, 1875, 1881 and 1891 list warreners and their families at the lodge. The current owner is the Shadwell Estate.
STANFORD

Researched by John and Diana Davies

Grid reference TL863927

Earliest known date 1775 (ref map of warren NRO WLS/XXVII/1–24).

Banks and enclosures Along the eastern boundary is a low but well-defined bank, and where it abuts Sturston Warren there are two parallel banks. Banks are also evident on the northern boundary. In the north-west corner of the warren are possible trapping banks.

Lodge Main lodge 1780 (WLS LV/82).

History No archival evidence giving a medieval date for this warren has been found, but by 1775 it was owned by Lord Walsingham (NRO WLSXXIX/21, 416X7). In 1824, the warren included pieces occasionally broken up and sown for corn for feeding to the rabbits, but there was a problem with “depredations committed by improper persons” and these poachers accounted for 15 dozen rabbits (NRO WLS XVIII/3 410X7). The current landowner is the Ministry of Defence.
**Sturston**

*Researched by John and Diana Davies*

*Grid reference* TL885936

*Earliest known date* 1780 (ref deeds WLS/XXIX/1–22 and WLS/XXX/1–4).

**Banks and enclosures** Perimeter banks are evident along the southern and northern boundaries and there are three or four parallel banks in the south-east corner with another multiple-bank complex in the north-west corner. There is also a series of low banks marking small rectangular enclosures. A “Paled Close” is included on an 1820 Lease, which states that 30 acres of the warren could be ploughed and used for arable at any one time (WLS/XXIX/1–22 and WLS/XXX/1–4).

**Lodge** Two lodges are marked on Faden’s Map of 1797. On a visit in 2008 very slight earthworks were visible at one site.

**History** In 1546 the manor, and probably the warren, were purchased by Nicholas Bacon from Richard Wingfield and after various other owners, including the Bacon and Bedingfeld families, it was sold to Lord Walsingham in the 1770s. (Deeds 1500–1899 NRO WLSXXVII/1–24 and 1700–1899 WLS/XXIX/1–22 and WLS/XXX/1–4.) The current landowner is the Ministry of Defence.
THE WARRENS OF BRECKLAND

THETFORD

Researched by Jackie Collins and Richard Ware

Grid reference TL825890

Earliest known date Known as Westwick Warren (being part of the Manor of Westwick in Thetford), it was in existence by 1514 when records list repairs to the lodge (Dymond, The Register of Thetford Priory).

Banks and enclosures The perimeter banks of Thetford Warren survive only in part, and mostly where they are also the parish and county boundary. They have been destroyed on the eastern edge by a rifle range and on the northern by a golf course. However, the most striking feature of the banks is on the western boundary where, in sections as long as 100 metres, the side of the bank facing into the warren has been faced with flints, the only known instance of this in Breckland to date.

Lodge A medieval (15th-century?) stone keep-like building with defensive features, this is one of only two medieval standing warren lodges in Breckland, the other being Mildenhall. It is a flint building about 9 metres square, with the principal room being on the first floor. There are window openings on each elevation at first-floor height and a defensive door at ground level. There are additional slit-openings at ground-floor level, possibly for ventilation and light. The high quality of the first-floor fireplace, the staircase and gardrobe may indicate that it was used also as a hunting lodge by the Abbot of Thetford Priory. The Priory’s accounts list £1 9s 9d “pro reparac fact at Westwyk logge”, paid in 1514–15 to the mason John Dalton (Dymond, The Register of Thetford Priory). A brown ink drawing of the Warren Lodge, Thetford, by Thomas Martin in 1740 has the following note beside it: “This sketch was taken 17 Decr 1740 a very cold frost and Snowy day tis drawn too wide and should be higher particularly the watch tower narrower. The Revd. Mr John Wright Rector of Euston and Mr Alexander Falconer with my self din’d here this day on three excellent fat Conies Roasted” (Ancient House Museum, Thetford, T.976.431). A photograph taken in 1900 (Sussams, p 98) shows the lodge with a thatched roof and two wings of single-storey outbuildings, but these were burnt down in 1935 (see p 40). Project fieldwork evidence suggests a second lodge at High Wrong Corner.

History Westwick Warren was leased to Thetford Priory by the Duchy of Lancaster and after the Dissolution it was purchased by Richard Fulmerston. From 1837 this warren specialised in the breeding of silver-greys and the annual average cul of all rabbits there reached a peak of 28,000. An Agreement made in 1893 includes “to net trap snare dig and take the rabbits in over and upon the south-west portion of the Thetford Warren now marked and banked off from the remainder of the said Thetford Warren” (NRO MC1/14/2/1 583X4). Current ownership is divided between the Crown Estates, the Forestry Commission, English Heritage and local government.
TOTTINGTON

Researched by John and Diana Davies

Grid reference TL890940

Earliest known date 1404 (ref Blomefield).

Banks and enclosures A bank marks the northern boundary of the warren.

Lodge Named as Robin’s Lodge on 1905 OS Map but omitted from Faden’s 1797 Map.

History The 1404 date for the warren relates to its ownership by John Fitz-Rauf, when the “Profits of the Vicarage much impaired by number of rabbits on the warren” (NRO WLS VII/6), but the manors in Tottington were also divided between Thetford Priory and Campsey Abbey. By 1784, the warren was owned by Lord Walsingham and farmed by William Smith. The Ministry of Defence is the current landowner.
Wangford

**Researcher by Colin Pendleton and Anne Mason**

**Grid reference** TL770819

**Earliest known date** The manor of Wangford was gifted to Old Warden Abbey in 1175, but the earliest certain reference to the existence of a warren is on Kirby’s Map of Suffolk of 1766 and there is a Will for “John Eagle, Warrener at Wangford” dated 1751 (PROB 11/787).

**Banks and enclosures** The boundary banks are traceable around nearly all the perimeter, with the exception of the western end, which lies under RAF Lakenheath. There is a possible clapper area in the south-west corner.

**Lodge** One lodge is marked on Hodskinson’s 1783 Map and is named as “Shakers’ Lodge” on the OS 1st edition 1836. A site visit in 2001 showed it was a late 18th-/early 19th-century dwelling, with a well close by with its winding gear intact; this house is now in private ownership.

**History** The archival evidence for this warren to date is sparse. Owned by Old Warden Abbey in the medieval period, the Manor of Wangford passed to the Lord Chief Justice Wright before being split between the Angersteins of Weeting and Duleep Singh of Elveden. When the Wangford Hall Estate was sold in 1866, the warren was mentioned as “well stocked with rabbits, providing a good income”. The current landowner is the Forestry Commission.
Wordwell

Researched by Robert Halliday

Grid reference TL832763

Earliest known date 1800 (ref map of parish WSROB M593)

Banks and enclosures: The 1800 map of the parish shows the warren occupying 89 acres in the north-east corner of the parish (WSROB M593/1). Site visits in 2009 could not find any archaeological evidence of warren banks.

Lodge: Shown on Hodkinson’s map of 1783. No trace now visible on the ground.

History: Little has been discovered about this warren. It was in existence in 1800, but by 1840 the Tithe Map shows all parish land as either arable or woodland and in the north-west corner are the names “Warren Breck” and “Warren Covert”. The current landowner is the Forestry Commission.
Overall Assessment of the Fieldwork Research

The detailed work carried out by the volunteers for each warren is here drawn together in an overview of the archaeology of the warrens in general.

Warren banks and enclosures

Although both the Norfolk and Suffolk County Archaeological Units have mapped and recorded sections of banks, as detailed in the Sites and Monuments Records, there has not been a systematic survey of all the Breckland areas where warrens were known to have existed. Equally, no record had ever been made of the dimensions and condition of all the warren banks. Such a survey was therefore one of the primary purposes of this project.

The project has identified the perimeters of all but four of the warrens, the exceptions being Barton Mills, Culford, Feltwell and Oxborough, where neither maps nor archaeological evidence have been found. All the other warrens have at least part of their boundary banks intact, the best example being Downham High Warren, where the bank is almost continuous. The dimensions of the banks vary, from very low mounds less than half a metre high to over two metres in some cases; width varies from slightly less than a metre to over ten metres. The condition of the surviving banks depends very much on subsequent land use. Plantations of forestry have generally served to preserve the banks, although these are sometimes damaged by harvesting machinery. However, warrens which became arable land have often lost their banks to the plough and other agricultural activity.

Clear patterns emerge from the results of the fieldwork. Where two warrens were adjacent to one other, for instance, each appears to have had its own bank and thus there are many examples of perimeter warren banks running parallel, sometimes with the space between the banks used as a trackway – such as that between Lakenheath and Wangford Warrens. There are also double parallel banks from south of Grimes Graves, and these formed the boundary between Santon Warren and that at Broomhill/Weeting. The north-eastern boundary of Sturston...
Warren, where it abuts Stanford Warren, is double-banked with the banks standing about 25 metres apart.

On twelve warrens, there are sections of multiple banks running parallel to each other, most often in one of the “corners” of the warrens and generally up against the perimeter bank. These may have been used as trapping banks. (See “The Results of the Archival Research” for more details).

Internal enclosures have been recorded on thirteen warrens and most seem to have been about 10 or 11 acres in extent. Archaeological evidence of banks enclosing small areas adjacent to the warren lodges (which may have been garths in which the warrener would grow vegetables or tether his livestock at night) has been noted on 12 warrens.

The lodge sites

*The warren lodge is a curious building, almost on the highest part of the warren and of great antiquity.*

(WG Clarke, *In Breckland Wilds*, 1925)

Each warren was managed by a warrener, whose task was to nurture, protect and trap the rabbits. He therefore needed to live on-site and his accommodation had a threefold purpose: living quarters; a storage space for equipment such as nets, traps and lanterns, as well as for the rabbit carcasses; and a lookout and defence against poachers.

The project has identified sites for a lodge in every warren and in some cases has recorded the existence of more than one lodge site in a particular warren. The warrener could be supported by assistant warreners during the trapping season and they may have occupied these other lodges. In nearly every case the lodge site has been visited, the exceptions being Culford and Oxborough, to which access could not be obtained.

There are two standing warren lodges in Breckland which give a very clear idea of what the medieval warren lodges must have been like: those at Thetford and Mildenhall. Both look like small castle keeps or Northumbrian pele towers.

Thetford Warren Lodge is a rectangular building of two storeys, 8.5 × 5.8 metres, with walls to their original height and almost one metre thick at ground floor level, constructed of mortared flint rubble with brick and tile and limestone dressings. One pointed arched doorway gives entrance to the ground floor and there are five narrow window slot openings. A staircase to the upper floor had an octagonal turret, as shown in a sketch of 1740; there are four rectangular window openings, one on each elevation, and a fine fireplace. There was a lean-to structure against the north wall and two single-storey thatched wings were added in the 19th century, but these were destroyed by fire in 1935. The Sites and Monuments Record states: “As a substantial stone building in an area where stone and brick were costly materials, it demonstrates the wealth and social standing of its builder” (The Cluniac Priory of St Mary in Thetford).

Mildenhall Warren Lodge is a similar but smaller square stone building with an upper floor. Originally it too had a single entrance; at first floor level are four rectangular window openings, one on each elevation, and evidence of a fireplace. The walls are of flint with limestone dressings and some of the cornerstones are reused Romanesque dressed stone. An additional door and windows were added in the 19th century, a kitchen range inserted on the ground floor and a lean-to constructed against the east and north walls. Collyweston roofing slates were found during
restoration in 2000. A print of Methwold Lodge – now in King’s Lynn Museum – shows it to have been a similar four-square defensive building (see inside back cover). It is reasonable to assume that warren lodges in the Brecks were built to a standardised plan which was “fit for purpose”, as well being an indication of the privileged status attached to the ownership of a warren.

Other surviving lodges are less complete. Langford (Ickburgh) Warren Lodge site is a mass of tumbled masonry with a small section of upstanding wall. Freckenham Warren’s Red Lodge Inn has sections of medieval masonry within its 18th-century walls.

The sites of the lodges at Eriswell High Warren, Methwold and Santon are now occupied by later farm buildings incorporating sections of medieval walling. Only fragmentary foundations or scattered mortared flints remain at Bodney, Brandon, Broomhill, High Wrong Corner, Stanford, Sturston and Tottington.

Other lodge sites, known from Faden’s 1797 Map of Norfolk and from other archival evidence, are now occupied by later buildings and there are no visible traces of an earlier lodge. These are at Beachamwell, Culford, Gooderstone, Lakenheath, Little Lodge Farm (Santon Downham Warren), Snarehill and Wangford.

In the post-medieval warrens, the name “warren house” seems to have been preferred to that of “warren lodge”, as at Barton Mills, Black Rabbit Warren at Wreatham and Elveden.

Above
Thetford Warren Lodge in the early 1930s, showing the additional wings that were destroyed by fire in 1935; (right) the lodge as it survives today.

Right
Santon Warren Lodge, where part of the medieval walling has been incorporated into a later farm building.
Overall Assessment of the Archival Research

The work by the volunteers in record offices, libraries and museums has yielded a wealth of documentary evidence to support, collaborate and enhance the fieldwork results.

Archival research concentrated on primary sources, with manorial documents forming the focal point. The manor was the unit through which land tenures, rents, transactions and accounts were administered and recorded, and a wide range of agricultural resources exploited and controlled. The manorial documents consulted included customals, which record the tenurial obligations and agricultural practices on a manor; extents, the surveys of land use and yields, given as a monetary valuation; rentals, which list tenants and annual rent charges; terriers, listing individual land parcels of the manor and the location of each; leases, stating the terms by which land was rented for an agreed term and agreed rent, as well as stipulating certain conditions and the bounds of that land; and deeds of title, giving ownership of land and property and surveys, which provide a “word picture” of a manor or estate and generally date from the 1540s.

Brandon’s manorial account rolls give a detailed description of the construction of the warren lodge in 1382–83 (WSROB HD1720/17) and in 1386, when an additional solar was added. They include a list of the materials used: “160 cartloads of stone; 5 poplar boards for making the sinkette and 1 Baltic board [a pine plank] for making 1 bar for closing the door. In establishing the solar and les corbell of the lodge, walled with clunch dug for the same, 4s. In 1 quarter of quicklime bought for pargetting the walls of the same lodge, rod. In contract with 1 mason for the walls of the solar of the same lodge, for whitewashing and plastering, 2s 4d”. The labour expended is not forgotten: “One man was hired for 8 days to dig chalk for ramming in the Lodge” and “Digging sand for the same lodge”. Nor did this labour pass unrecognised, for the final item in the account rolls is for a “Present given to the stone masons as well as the senior carpenter, by order of the chief steward”.

Manorial records also list the numbers of rabbits killed and the prices for which they were sold, making it possible to see the expansion and contraction of the rabbit populations over the centuries. Such detailed lists survive for many of the warrens, including Brandon in the 1340s; Methwold in the 1380s and 1390s; and for Broomhill, Snarehill, Stanford, Sturston and Thetford in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Leases and conveyances are extremely valuable sources of information, as they usually describe the boundaries of the warren in great detail (although the challenge is to identify the place-names!). When Thetford Priory leased Bodney Warren in 1453, its bounds were described as “begynnynge at a close called fyshpondyke on the south, part of the comyn of Bodney on to a forowe that leadeth beewene the mounts otherwyse called Copdoe hylles and from thare abutting upon the weye leading from Stanford onto Threxton towards the south-east” (NRO HILL1/12 869X8 and HILL1/13-14, 869X9). Thirteen of the warrens have at least one lease, and for the warrens at Beachamwell, Broomhill, Downham High Warren, Elveden, Gooderstone, Lakenheath, Methwold, Mildenhall, Santon, Santon Downham, Snarehill, Thetford and Tottington it is possible to trace an unbroken line of ownership from the medieval period.

One of the issues regarding the warren banks is their date of origin and whether they are medieval, ie constructed when the warren was established, or much later, when the rabbit populations expanded in the 18th and 19th centuries. Despite the extensive archival research undertaken by the volunteers, evidence remains
elusive and inconclusive, although some interesting references have been discovered. For example, the Brandon Court Roll of 1385–86 includes expenditure for “making the bank on the east side of the grange and making a hedge on the crest of the same bank in wage of one workman at 3d a day for 14 and a half days” (translated Revd Munday).

Meanwhile, manorial accounts for Lakenheath Warren list a payment for making “a ditch around the new warren at the head of the village” (CUL EDC7/15/1/8). There is a further reference to this ditch in 1333 when three men were convicted of illegally grazing their animals “in fossata de la conegar” (CUL EDC7/15/II/Boxi/9).

The 1701 lease for Elveden states that “the tenant at his own cost to bank all along the Thetford Warren side to the west end of the said borders so far in breadth from Downham Warren as have been formerly meeted parted and dolled out ... to the intended new bank fifty roods and no further” (WSROB HD/1720/19). Manorial records have also shed light on the possible uses of the internal banked enclosures and on the general management of the warrens (see The Management of the Warrens for more detail).

From 1384 to 1838, the Prerogative Courts of Canterbury and York had to prove all wills. A will could only be proved if the bequests exceeded £5 (the yearly wage for a warrener in the 1300s). The National Archive’s website has a wills section which can be searched under “Occupation” and as a result wills have been found for warreners at Beachamwell, Broomhill, Eriswell, Gooderstone, Lakenheath, Methwold, Mildenhall, Snarehill, Thetford and Wangford. Inventories of the goods and possessions held at the time of death are also very useful and examples include such items as “one bed with a flockbed 3 ould hayes or netts” and other implements belonging to the warrener George Childerston, who died at Mildenhall in 1662 (WSROB 6/24).

Census Returns are another rich source of information about the warreners and their families.
The returns for Rushford in 1851, 1861 and 1871 include Snarehill and list warreners and their families living at the lodge and boarding out in the parish.

“Notices of Sales” and “Particulars of Sale” for estates, most of which date from the 19th century and describe land and properties in detail, are a further useful source of material, especially as they often include maps and photographs. Black Rabbit Warren (Wretham), Brandon and Wangford Warrens are all included in estate sales particulars. Those of 1866 for the Wangford Hall Estate include a detailed description of the warren lodge “containing Bed Chamber, Rabbit House, Trap House and Skin Chamber; Coach house with Granary over, Nag Stable for 3 Horses, Cart Horse Stabling for 12 horses, 2 Bay Barn, Hay House, lean-to; also capital open Implement Shed lean-to ditto, open shed and several good enclosed Farm Yards”. There is also “near to the preceding a warrener’s house”, which has 6 rooms and Turf Lodge, with Garden’ (WSROB HD1720/17).

Maps have been one of the principal sources of information, as not only can they show the extent of a warren but also the lodge site, the tracks and gates and even, in the case of Methwold Warren, depictions of the rabbits and nets. Beachamwell Warren has two particularly fine coloured, annotated and illustrated maps, dated 1776 and 1842 respectively. Estate maps and plans, enclosure maps, tithe maps and the first edition Ordnance Survey maps have all been studied and analysed for evidence of the warrens.

Left
Detail of an 1842 map of Beachamwell Warren. Along with a 1766 map, this unique document had survived unknown to historians in an attic until brought to the attention of The Breckland Society.
The Management of the Warrens

…there is none who deeme their houses well seated who have nott to the same belonging a commonwealth of conies, nor can hee be deemed a good house-keeper that hath not a plenty of these at all times to furnish his table.

(R Reyce, A Breviary of Suffolk, 1618)

The project has brought together for the first time the names of individual warreners and their warrens, largely through the sourcing of wills and inventories and searches through trade directories and census returns. The data discovered has also unearthed new information and details about the warren management practices. Relevant documents include:

**Beachamwell**
- 1678 Will of John Cowper

**Brandon**
- 1327 *Villata de Brandone* Tax List includes “Adam le Warner”
- 1389 John Porter warrener paid £4 11s 0d.
- 1643/44 Will of Thomas Baker Warrener

**Broomhill and Santon**
- 1752 The will of George Thompson, warrener of Weeting, left his farm and warren in Broomhill, together with the stock of rabbits, to his son Thomas and the lease of the warren at Santon with the rabbits to his son George

**Freckenham**
- 1295 Ealfred/Galfrido listed as “le warrener” on deed of transfer of lands

**Methwold**
- 1733 Will of Benj Paty, Warrener
- 1784 Will of John Currey, Warrener
- 1813 Warrener Edmund Preston, widower, and child Ann (2 years) removed from Methwold to Shouldham

**Mildenhall**
- 1540 Will of Nicholas Mey
- 1662 Will of George Childerston
- 1696 Will of Henry Coates
- 1711 John Curtis, Warrener

**Snarehill**
- 1841 Census return, George Hilton, aged 50, Warrener (also listed in 1831 Census return)
- 1871 Census return, George Finch, aged 21, Warrener, boarder in a household in Rushford.
- 1881 Census return, Robert Coote, aged 30, Warrener, and Alfred Coote, aged 27, Warrener, lodging with John Sexton, aged 46, Ag Lab and his wife Sarah, 47.
  - Alfred Hubbard, Warrener, daughters baptised 1894, 1896, 1898
Robert Balls, Warrener, daughter, baptised 1853
Frederick Loveday, Warrener, daughters, baptised 1877

**Wangford**

1751 Will of John Eagle

Photographs, some given to the project’s researchers by descendants of those involved in warrening, bring the warreners vividly to life and bear out the words of Herbert Turner, warrener and gamekeeper on the Elveden Estate in the 1930s. He recalled “The real old rabbit catchers all had what we called smocks ... made of stout stuff and looped around the neck and brought down just below the knee. You could be out practically all day in rain or snow and you wouldn’t get wet”. Meanwhile, two sisters interviewed as part of the oral history element of the project (see page 52) recalled the clothes worn by their father, a warrener at Croxton, as being known as “slops”, “a type of gaberdine… made of a hard-wearing special type of cloth”.

Warrener Jacob Winner, wearing his smock, was photographed at Beachamwell in 1908, as was William Partridge in the 1940s. Fred White was photographed at Gooderstone as the last warrener there (1940s) and there are group photos of warreners at Drymere, also in the 1940s, and at Barnham in the 1930s.

The importance of successful management of a warren was reflected in the

*Left*
Fred White, warrener at Gooderstone and one of the last representatives of his profession in the Brecks, photographed in the 1940s.
warrener being one of the highest-paid of the manorial officials. The role appears
to have been an exclusively male occupation. As well as maintaining the health
and security of the rabbits, the warrener also had to regulate the ratio of bucks to
does and look after the pregnant does and their young. He would engage extra
labour at busy periods and organise the autumn and winter culls, assessing both the
economics of the market and the requirements of his manorial master’s household.
He also had to ensure that the banks and the lodge buildings were in good repair,
the lurcher dogs and ferrets cared for and trained, and the traps and nets fit for
purpose and ready for use.

A legal document of 1750 concerning a dispute on Lakenheath Warren lists
“what is commonly done on all warrens” and includes “Banking making Burrows
mowing The Braks killing moles. Engines Used on the Warren in Killing the
Rabbets Snaring Haying Rounding with Nets and also Digging in Rounds For
Rabbets and also raising here and there a piece of earth to lay on the rains of the
nets when wanted … and also using of Dogs Guns Traps and other Engines as is
Commonly Used To Take and Destroy the Vermin … and also Digging with Ferrits
for Rabbets”.

Maintaining the banks and lodges

Once the banks had been constructed (see Results of the Archival Research) they had
to be maintained and kept in good repair. In 1803, £4 was paid to Robert Smith
& Co for repairing the banks on Broomhill Warren. The 1807 Enclosure Act for
Brandon stipulated that there should be no digging of turves “except for the purpose
of repairing, supporting and mending the banks, walls and fences adjoining or
belonging to Brandon Warren”. At Snarehill, men were paid for banking and for
carting furze (gorse) in 1848 and 1849. When Lord Petre and George Tasburgh
exchanged some land in 1791, the former agreed to “put up and keep in proper repair
a proper pale against rabbits on the whole of the line which is the boundary between
Bodney Warren lands and those of Petre lying in Stanford, Buckenham, Bodney and
Stanton”.

The lodges required maintenance, too. The Register of Thetford Priory,
transcribed by David Dymond, lists repairs to Bodney Lodge in 1499, 1500 and 1509;
to Thetford Warren Lodge in 1514; to Santon in 1499, 1502 and 1503 and to Snarehill
in 1510 and 1537. Even the gates placed where routes entered and left the warren were
not forgotten. The Register of Thetford Priory records that Thomas Polett, smith,
supplied a staple for Snarehill Gate in 1527–28 and eyes and hooks for it in
1528–29.

Caring for the rabbits

Nurturing the rabbits was of course a crucial part of the warrener’s work, as his job
depended upon his being able to produce enough rabbits to meet the demands of
the market and generate the required income. One of the earliest records showing
the degree of care is from the Brandon Competus Roll of 1389–90, which cites “in
maintenance of the coneys in wintertime 60 sheaves, 1 quarter”.

The leases for Lakenheath Warren of 1561 and 1662 mention “the closes upon
the coney warren” and the 1649 Terrier records that crops of dandelion, groundsel
and hay were grown “to support and relieve the said coneys in the time of winter
with … all necessary feedings … the lessee sufficiently to store, nourish and
diligently conserve the coneys”.

A S U R V E Y  B Y  T H E  B R E C K L A N D  S O C I E T Y
In 1722, the tenant of Elveden Warren ploughed up 12 acres and grew turnips, which were grazed by the rabbits until 20 March. The lease for Bodney Warren in 1774 permits the “lop and top” of ash trees, willows and whitethorn to be cut as necessary for feed for the rabbits on the warren during “snow to a depth of 2 inches” and it also allows for tillage of the warren up to 10 acres.

Sheail mentions that “warreners often protected their breeding doe rabbits from predators and the weather by keeping them in wooden hutches called clappers”. He argues that there may have been topographical, regional or even individual warreners’ preferences for clappers or for pillow mounds. Certainly, in areas where the underlying geology makes it difficult to burrow into the ground – as on the granite moors of the South-West or on the limestone hills of the Cotswolds – pillow mounds are common. The rabbits of the sandy Breckland had no such difficulties, so it is possible that pillow mounds were not necessary here. Colin Pendleton of Suffolk County Council’s Archaeological Unit has compiled the Sites and Monuments Records for mounds on Brandon (BRD 082, 110, 195 and 196); Freckenham (FRK – Misc); Mildenhall (MNL 51 and 517) and Wangford (WNG 026) Warrens, but their purpose has not as yet been explained by archival evidence and no documentary references to pillow mounds in Breckland have yet been found.

However, maps of several Breckland warrens show an area named as “the clapper”. Clappers appear to have been separated from the rest of the warren by an internal bank and in all the examples found are adjacent to a perimeter bank. The Methwold map of 1580 names the north-east corner as Northwold Clapper; on the 1699 map it appears as Clapper Piece and the Enclosure Map of 1806 shows it too. On Brandon Warren, in the south-east corner where it meets Downham High Warren, is an area named “the clapper”. The enclosure on Elveden Warren, with bank 1.5 m high and shown on the tithe map as “Elveden Upper Warren”, may be another such breeding area, as may the small square enclosure adjacent to the warren.
banks separating Downham and Thetford Warrens. Written evidence also mentions clappers. The Indenture made at Langford in 1476 between Richard Methwold and John Wright/William Nele (of Methwold Hythe) provides for the lease for five years from the Feast of Candlemas of "the conyger at the downe and Claper Hill and from thence unto Musden Lyng to Shakerswaye". In the land use records of 1706 for Beachamwell, the "Clappcroft" is listed as 40 acres and 3 roods.

An important part of the warreners work was the protection of the rabbits from natural predators such as rats, foxes, stoats and birds of prey. In 1390, six boards were purchased to make a trap for "vermyne" on Lakenheath Warren. William Marshall describes how "the way Norfolk warreners take to destroy eagles, kites and other birds of prey … these birds are shy and suspicious; they like to settle where they can, have a clear view round them for some distance: a naked stump or hillock is their favourite resting place. The warreners, therefore, raise mounds of earth of a conical form in different parts of the warren, and place traps upon the points of those artificial hillocks" (Marshall, Ch 79, p139–141).

Poaching was a constant threat and could present a real danger to the warreners as much as to the rabbits. There were individual poachers, but they also operated in organised gangs, which were often "a deliberate and conscious pooling of experience and resources. They were well organised and ruthless, used their own nets, ferrets and dogs and were armed with an impressive array of weaponry" (Bailey, 1989).

The warrener on Brandon Warren hired three men to protect him against "malefactors of the night" in 1379 and 1380. At Methwold in 1421, men were paid 3s 4d each as a reward for "apprehending malefactors of the night"; in 1425 court officials raided houses in Methwold to catch poachers and the following year the warrener was attacked by a poacher with a cudgel. In August 1440, Robert Myor, weaver; Richard Alyon, shepherd, and John Howes, hosteler, all from Brandon, were caught poaching on Downham Warren. A Thetford gang of poachers, which operated on Downham Warren in the 1440s, had armed themselves with soldiers’ tunics and helmets, bows and arrows and staves.

Punishments for poaching during the medieval period included fines or imprisonment. By the 19th century, solitary confinement, hard labour, public whipping and transportation were being imposed by the courts. At the Quarter Sessions held at Bury St Edmunds in January 1805, G Cross was convicted of stealing a trap and two rabbits from Wangford Warren. He was sentenced to six months solitary confinement and hard labour, and was publicly whipped at Brandon. In 1813, Robert Plum aged 22 and Rush Lingwood aged 18, took a single rabbit from a trap on Hockwold Warren. Plum was transported for seven years and Lingwood imprisoned for two.

Poachers were often supported by "accomplices". In March 1376, the manorial court fined John Gardiner of Langford and William Ram of Brandon for training dogs to poach rabbits. In 1449, Thomas Wymere and Thomas Benyng of Brandon were fined 6s 8d for supplying ferrets to poachers.

**Trapping the rabbits**

The warrener hired seasonal labour to help trap the rabbits, between October and February, when their fur was at its thickest and their meat the sweetest. Ferrets, nets, lurcher dogs and terriers were used; the ferrets were released into specific burrows to drive the rabbits to the surface and into the nets. Purse nets went over individual holes and long nets would cover an entire area, with the lurcher dogs driving the rabbits rather as sheepdogs do sheep. Rabbits were also caught in tip-
traps: pits about two metres deep, lined with flints and with a swivel cover on top, camouflaged with hay. The rabbits would go to feed and then fall into the pit below as the cover gave way.

The Brandon Account Rolls are a very useful source of information about trapping. In 1251, Henry Pie had to supply six coney nets a year, whilst in 1379–80 there is a reference to the purchase of “a net called a hay 30 fathoms long, with cords for the same, for catching coneyes, 6s 8d.”. In 1386–87, 6d was spent on six coney nets, and in 1389, six Baltic boards (pine planks) were bought for making seven traps in the warren, at a cost of 2s 6d.

Both the fieldwork and the archival research have demonstrated that there were specific “trapping banks”, although not every warren has evidence of these. A description of how they were used comes from TW Turner’s Memories of a Gamekeeper:

“A low bank, say 2 feet high, was made as long as thought necessary. This was made of grass sods put one on top of the other, gaps about 15 inches wide being left at not less than 30 yard intervals to make runs through the bank. These gaps were covered with pieces of wood, leaving a hole large enough for a hare or a rabbit to pass through. Then more sods were placed on top of the wood to bring the gaps level with the rest of the bank. After the rabbits had been using the holes for some time and had become thoroughly accustomed to them, traps were set in the holes, the traps always facing the way the rabbits would be coming from. For some nights a lot of rabbits would be taken in this manner, but as soon as the numbers began to fall off the traps would be removed and the whole thing repeated on fresh ground.”

A similar practice is mentioned by the Reverend Munday on Eriswell Warren, where “banks were built diagonally across the warren and traps set in holes in them”. Conversations with ex-warreners have confirmed the use of trapping banks in exactly these ways.

Individual warreners had contracts with London skinners and poulterers as early as the 1370s and the Cambridge colleges were also a ready market for the rabbit meat. The project has discovered details of the trade in skins from King’s Lynn to the Baltic, including for the year 1392 “in the ship of Walter Hake called Christopher of Briel departing 27 May from John of Lakenheath 900 rabbit skins” and “departing the last day of October in the ship called the Goodwill 6 hoods lined with rabbit fur worth 13s 4d”. (Exports to Northern Europe, and customs levied thereon at Lynn. Original source: Public Record Office E122/94/14. Transcription in Gras, pp 527–553).

Account rolls list the numbers of rabbits culled in specific years. From 1380 to 1390, for instance, 9,450 rabbits were culled on Methwold Warren, making a record profit of £80. On Brandon Warren, 3,800 were sold in the same period. When Lakenheath Warren was leased out in the 1520s, part of the yearly rent was 240 rabbits sent to Ely Priory. By 1549, a rabbit could fetch 5d, which was double the daily wage of an unskilled labourer.

The numbers of rabbits culled and the income from the sale of their meat and skins as listed in estate accounts indicates that the highest productivity was from the 1700s onwards. In the 1750s, rabbits were taken to Newmarket in twelve-dozen lots, three or four times a week. In the 1820s, during the autumn months, 200 dozen were sent daily to London from the Breckland warrens. The average annual cull on Thetford Warren in the 1850s and 1860s was in the region of 28,000, while the Snareshill sales particulars of 1898 note an average kill of 8,600 rabbits, producing an
approximate income of about £430 per annum.

The Accounts for the Weeting Estate (Broomhill Warren) give interesting information about the trade in rabbits:

“Memorandum of agreement dated 24 Aug 1802 between James Harvey of Leadenhall Market, dealer in Poultry and Pinder Simpson of Old Burlington St on behalf of Rt Hon Orlando Lord Bradford.

Payment of all rabbits sent from Bradford’s Estates at Weeting and Mundford at following prices, unless a better price is given for rabbits in the neighbourhood of Weeting, in which case Harvey will pay better price.

Thirteen rabbits to the Dozen. Harvey to pay for all expenses & carriage attending them from Brandon

Oct 23 17 day 8–18 doz per day at 10/- a dozen
482 doz total
Oct 24–31 4 day 10–18 doz per day
Nov 17 days 11–30 doz per day
Dec 13 days 3–30 doz per day
Jan 14 days 3–21 doz per day
Feb 8 days 3–14 doz per day
Mar 10 days 7–15 doz per day at 12/- a dozen
Ca 900 doz total”

(NRO MSI 3738 and 3739)

Dealing with disputes

However well the perimeter banks were constructed and maintained, and the rabbits encouraged by additional feeding to remain in a particular area, it was inevitable that some rabbits would escape. At Freckenham, in 1551, rabbits had escaped from the warren on to the common land, to the distress of local villagers, and so the warrener was ordered to block up all the holes they had made there (from Bailey, 1989).

The Survey of Methwold Warren in 1590 contains 25 articles regarding ownership, rights, encroachment of commons and byelaws, and lists all the landholders and tenants by precinct, stating copy of leasehold and the value. Between 1603–34 there was a ongoing lawsuit with the farmers of the warren which seems to have been either because the rabbits were escaping or, more likely, that the warren boundaries were being extended (NRO NAS t/i11/10/48 and NAS t/i1/10/49).

On Mildenhall Warren, in 1730, the adjacent landowner Daniel Gwilt complained that the rabbits were escaping “over the feeble banks” and he obtained a court order forcing the warrener to build a bank extending “from the boundaries of the parish of Little Barton alias Barton Mills South to the Boundaries of the parish of Eriswell North” (WSROB E3/10/9.2).

Other land use on the warrens

Archival research has yielded evidence of the warrens being used for sheep as well as rabbits. Sheep and rabbits are mutually exclusive feeders, sheep being prepared to eat the grey lichens and mosses that are avoided by the rabbits.

Lakenheath had a sheepfold built in 1394–95 at a cost of £8 (Bailey 1989,
and in the 1330s a boy was hired to shepherd the lambs born there. Bodney's sheepcote was repaired in 1525 at a cost of 11s 4d (Dymond, *The Register of Thetford Priory*). At Methwold, in 1595, a “Newe yele” was “newe plowed into the shepecourse and warren”. The Deed of Sale for Eriswell in 1652 lists “All that Heath Ground, Sheepwalk or Sheep Course called the Lodge Flock Ground ... containing by estimate three hundred, three score and eighteen acres, two roods and thirty perches”.

Although there were attempts to enclose some warrens and to improve the land using the new methods introduced in the Agricultural Revolution, these efforts were not always successful. On Tottington Warren, the tenant had to agree to marl (spread chalky clay over the sandy soil to enrich and improve its water-retaining capacity) at 75 loads per acre for the first four years, 50 for the next four and 25 for the remainder of the lease, but still found that the land was too poor to produce a profitable crop. Sheep pastured on marled land had a high rate of aborted lambs and those crops that did manage to grow were quickly eaten by the rabbits! In 1834, the tenant of High Lodge Farm at Eriswell was allowed to abandon 40 acres of “new break land”, an example of the unproductive – and unforgiving – nature of much of the Brecks.

Tree planting became fashionable from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, as a timber yield made economic sense and was helpful in stopping sand-blows from land that was overgrazed and labelled “rabbit-sick”. Plantations were established on warren land and enclosed by low banks, such as those shown on the Cadogan Estate Map of Santon Downham of 1791. The Culford Estate had 302 acres planted between 1793 and 1840, while the sales particulars for the Wangford Hall Estate in 1866 note that there are “about 2,550 acres being at present used as a rabbit warren ... capable of returning good interest on outlay by planting with Larch Firs”. Many estates also planted pine shelter belts in an attempt to prevent soil erosion and sand-blows, and these remain as distinctive and evocative features of the Breckland landscape.

Again, however, the rabbits caused problems, as the records from the Weeting Estate’s Broomhill Warren show:

“*Weeting 20 Nov 1805. The plantations here are so full of hares and rabbits that our crops will be entirely eat up if they are not destroyed in time. They have already injured our turnips very much & if many of them is not destroyed we shall have none left for the food of our sheep and cattle in the Winter and likewise destroying our ensuing crop. And you must be aware that if we loose our turnips in this way ... it will be impossible for us to pay our rents at Lady Day next. We request that you will give us directions for beating the plantations and reducing the number of hares/rabbits which may be found there.*

Robt Jee, Joseph Watson, Thos Dent, Ja Jacob, Robt Harrod.”
Oral History Interviews

One of the most fascinating and critical parts of the project was to capture the memories of those who worked in the rabbit industry, or those of their immediate families, before their knowledge, experiences and insights were lost forever. Project volunteers trained in oral history interview techniques included Mary Cross, Peggy English, Sue Pennell, Barbara Pritchard, Rachel Riley and Teresa Squires.

The warreners

...men with a profound and intimate knowledge of the ways of the wild creatures in whose company they spend so much of their time.

(WG Clarke, *In Breckland Wilds*, 1925)

Oral history interviews have proved invaluable in shedding light on the warrenering way of life, especially as the job of warrener no longer exists as it did when there were commercial warrens to manage. Nowadays, the control of the rabbit population is part of the work of estate gamekeepers. Conversations with them have shown that they use ferrets in exactly the same ways as their medieval counterparts, while the Forestry Commission’s wildlife rangers still depend on tip-traps in some areas of the country, although not in Breckland.

Ex-warreners provided insights into the behaviour of the rabbits and were able to answer many questions about the day-to-day management of their charges. The need to segregate the breeding does was explained – it made it easier to give them extra feed and to ensure that the bucks did not eat the young, once born. It was equally important to maintain an appropriate ratio of ages and sexes, as an imbalance could affect the breeding success rate. The need for trapping banks in different parts of the warren was made clear when the ex-warreners explained how rabbits would feed in one area for a while and then move on to another, all under cover of darkness.

A ferret breeder gave a vivid description of how the ferrets were used to catch the rabbits. Some were muzzled with string and sent down the burrows, making the rabbits bolt into the purse nets held over the holes. Others had a collar around their neck to which a line was attached, marked at two-yard intervals so that the warrener could judge how far into the burrow system the ferret had gone, listen for sounds of the ferret confronting the rabbit, and then dig to retrieve both!

Alice Syzling, aged 97, and her sister, Iris Squires, aged 95, the daughters of Matthew Ladell, a warrener at Croxton, recorded their memories of his work:

**AS:** We remember him ... as soon as we could talk ... he used to be bringing them old rabbits home.
**IS:** Yes, he used to have a pony and cart.
**Interviewer:** A pony and cart? Was that to transport all the equipment? And the rabbits?
**IS:** Yes, he used to have three dogs and some ferrets. They used to take the ferrets with them. And – well, they’d go off then. Well, when they came home they hadn’t always cleaned them, the rabbits.
**Interviewer:** Does that mean gutting them?
**IS:** Yes, then they laid all the legs of one and then they used to put them together like that.
Interviewer: So they'd make a pair, they strung them together?
IS: Yes, they'd make a pair and they used to be on a long pole on the back of the cart.
IS: They used to take them up to Mr Mortimer's [the local farmer] and then Reggie Harding used to come from Norwich.
AS: He had a butcher's shop at Norwich.
IS: He used to come and collect the rabbits every evening and take them to Norwich.
Interviewer: So there were obviously a lot of rabbits?
IS: Yes, no end of rabbits. They used to have a book, you see ... and every evening Dad would sit down and they used to write how many they got. So they always had an account of what they got.
Interviewer: And can you remember how many he got in a typical day?
IS: I wouldn't really know, but he used to have a lot in the cart, didn't he?
AS: He did. I think thirty or forty.
Interviewer: Thirty or forty a day?
AS: Oh, yes. More than that.
IS: More than that, I should think. The width of the cart was full.

Articles in the local press prompted a woman who had worked in Lingwoods rabbit-fur processing factory in Brandon to make contact with the project. Her recollections proved very vivid and included detailed descriptions of the working conditions and how the machines functioned (see p 54 for an excerpt from her interview). Although little documentary evidence has been found to date about the
fur processing factory in Swaffham, the son of a former game dealer there, Colin Dickerson, remembers it as being opposite his father's shop on the corner of Cley Road and Whitsands Road, and being owned by Roughts.

The fur factories

*The extensive warrens … supply the Brandon furriers with immense quantities of skins, the dressing of which gives employment to about 200 females.*

(White’s History, Gazetteer and Directory of Suffolk, 1874)

By the early twentieth century, there were over 8,000 people involved in the fur trade nationally. The two fur factories in Brandon employed over five hundred people between them and there were less important premises in Thetford and Swaffham in the late 1930s. Selective breeding produced rabbits with black or silver-grey fur, both of which were highly prized. Methwold and Wretham Warrens both bred black rabbits, and Thetford Warrens the silver-blue variety, introduced from Lincolnshire in 1837.

In Brandon, Hatters’ Fur Manufacturers and Rabbit and Hare Skin Merchants was set up in 1790 and eventually came into the ownership of the Rought family. Judd Rought had married into the furrier family of Malt in 1805. The other fur factory was Lingwoods, founded in 1870. Both establishments specialised in the manufacture of hatters’ fur for the felt hat trade, both in Britain and for export overseas.

In the 1930s, a section of the St Nicholas’ Works in Minstergate, Thetford, was used for the processing of rabbit skins; it was part of British Rabbit Industries. The pelts were exported to European coat manufacturers, but by 1940 the Second World War had cut off these markets and the business closed.

Entire families, and even three generations of some families, were involved in the processing of the rabbit fur. It was often a local carrier who collected the skins from warreners and took them to the factories for sorting and grading. Men opened up the skins and then pulled and stretched them before leaving them to dry out. The skins, delivered 60 at a time, were then hand-plucked, often by women outworkers in their own homes. Once shearing machines were imported from America in 1915, women – by now working in the factories – could process up to 2,220 skins in a single day. After the fur was cut away from the carcasses, the left-over hair was frayed, thickened and felted. It was treated with acid and mercury, then dried on racks in hot ovens. Employees may have suffered from mercury poisoning, the symptoms of which are similar to those of madness, hence the phrase “as mad as a hatter”. Lung diseases such as silicosis were another hazard, and tetanus a constant threat from open scratches and grazes.

The fur industry generated its own language: 60 skins were known as “a turn”; the quality of the skins was “bests” and seconds” or “racks and suckers”; the non-felting hair was known as “kemps” or “degs”.

Mrs Amy Glenister worked at Lingwoods from 1945 to the 1950s and described the processes involved. An excerpt from her interview follows:

“They had a drying shed there and that’s where my grandfather worked and they used to take the nose of the rabbit and thread it with string so many to a rope and stretch it across and there they used to dry the skins. Then after so long they would take them down and they would bale them sixty to a turn and they would be taken down to what we called the opening shed. It was a long building … and
my first husband worked in there and he all his family worked and his brothers and that worked in there and they would first of all they put the skins in sawdust to soften like more or less cure them. It did smell but it was something you got used to. They used to mix that (naphthalene) with the sawdust and put them all along the walls in stacks for so many days till they softened and then the men would open them up and you would have the four legs and then they would have like a rasp and they would rasp them and stretch them and take all the fat off. Then they'd go be dipped in acid and get again dried then they'd be brought up to us girls upstairs and we used to thread the skins through or the skin used to chop off in strips … and the fur used to come out underneath on to a tray and then you'd stack them up … and then you'd see them start to slip and … somebody would shout "quick Amy" or "quick Chrissy", and you had go take these trays and you'd turn them over on the picking board and you'd pick all the pieces of skin that were left off and then you had to turn them over again and then you would turn the sides in the bottom and heads up, grip them in a ball and then turn them over and that was called a lock and you picked that up and you put that in a bag. I think you had six from what I can remember six of these locks in a circle and the middle one you had seven locks to the layers and they used to go five or six high to a bag and then they were packed down and then they'd go along a line and a man at the end they used to tie the bags up. When they've got enough they used to be put in big bales and the lorries take them down the railway station."

With the passing of the Ground Game Act in 1880, rabbits lost their exclusive and protected status and there was less reason to confine them in warrens. At the same time, cheap imports of rabbit meat and skins began to arrive from Europe and prices locally fell as a result. After the First World War, many Breckland estates became bankrupt because of the slump in agriculture and the impact of death duties. It was then that the Forestry Commission began to buy up land across the region and plant the trees deemed necessary to replace the nation's reduced timber stocks. Since rabbits can cause considerable damage to young trees, a programme of eradication was begun. The fur industry declined further following the arrival of the virus myxomatosis in England in the 1950s. This affected not just the rabbit population – which declined dramatically – but also the quality of the meat and skins, while changes in fashion meant that hats and other fur products were no longer in such demand. The closure of the fur factories, along with the unconnected but simultaneous decline in the flint-knapping industry, had a devastating effect on Brandon's economy in particular.
Conclusion

The Breckland warrens can justifiably be classed as unique in Britain. No other area has such a concentration of medieval warrens, with the added significance in this case of most having originally been owned or leased to monastic institutions. Because of the nature of this ownership, extensive documentation about the warrens survives. This material gives not only foundation dates for the warrens and many of their lodges, but also sheds light on management practices and on the economy of rabbit production. It is such documentation which has enabled the project researchers to establish an unbroken sequence of warren ownership, in many instances from the creation of the managed warren in the medieval period right through to its decline and eventual demise by the twentieth century.

Nowhere in Britain – and arguably in the world – has such a complex and extant system of warren-related earthwork perimeter banks, internal enclosures and trapping banks, and medieval warren lodges as the Brecks. The project has identified comprehensive documentary evidence detailing the materials and construction of these lodges and revealed that many of the lodge sites have a history of continuous occupation through seven centuries, with farmsteads being established on the lodge sites and making use of their building materials when the land ceased to function as a warren.

The project has shown that warrening made a major contribution to the social history of the area and to towns such as Brandon in particular. Recording the memories of those involved in the industry has revealed just how important this social dimension was.

The remarkably extensive material already gathered by the project demands further analysis and investigation, with several key areas of research already identified. These include:

- an archaeological examination to determine the date of construction of the warren banks; whether they were of uniform design and if there is any standardised pattern to the layout of the warrens;

- analysis of the dimensions and building materials of the lodges and the number of lodges in relation to the size of the warren; the repair of the lodges; the significance of “lodge” and “warren house” and the use of the lodges after the warrens had ceased to exist;

- assessment of the management practices on each warren, such as the use of internal enclosures; gated roads; trapping banks and trapping methods; clapper areas; measures to combat poaching and control vermin and natural predators; the stock ratios, breeding and culling of the rabbits; seasonal labour; the markets for the meat and skins, and the profits and losses;

- consideration of the changes in management practices and outputs in the medieval period and after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, when the warrens passed into lay ownership;

- the effects of enclosure on the warrens, including marling, plantations and shelter belts, the impact of the shooting estates and the establishment of the Forestry Commission.
Although these areas of research are for the future, this project has undeniably raised awareness of the warrens of Breckland as a highly significant and historically valuable archaeological and archival resource. On a personal note, I would like to thank all the volunteer researchers for their enthusiasm and dedication and for being such a delight to work with. Their achievements have surpassed expectation and deserve widespread acknowledgement.

In 1629, John Parkinson wrote that “there are many thousand acres of land in this kingdom that Providence seems to have appropriated for the breeding of rabbits”. This project has shown how true this was of the Brecks, where the practice of warrening has had far-reaching implications for subsequent land use patterns, as well as for associated aspects such as ecology. Several of the Breckland ex-warrens are now of national significance for their plants, invertebrates and birdlife.

That the archaeological and archival evidence for the warrens is a unique resource that should be protected and valued for future generations is arguably the most important legacy of this project. Most of all, the evocative presence in the Breckland landscape of the warren banks and lodge sites, supported in the record offices and libraries by a wealth of historical documents, serves to underline what a dominant and defining influence warrening has been on the history and heritage of this unique area.

Anne Mason
Project Manager, The Breckland Society Warrens Project

Left
The eastern perimeter bank of Eriswell Warren, marked by a line of gorse – a relic of the gorse hedges often planted on top of warren banks.
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All primary sources are referenced in the text, with the exception of any listed above.
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- 2 ferret breeders!
- The Forestry Commission, and other local landowners
- English Heritage
"As melancholy as a lodge in a warren."


This view of Methwold Warren Lodge, published here for the first time, is by Newcombe, 1808.
The Breckland Society was set up in 2003 to encourage interest and research into the natural, built and social heritage of the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks. It is a membership organisation which works to help protect the area and offers a range of activities to those who wish to see the special qualities of this unique part of England protected and enhanced.

In 2008 the Society was awarded an English Heritage Regional Capacity Building grant of £12,100 for its Warrens of Breckland Project. This report is a summary of that project’s various components and results.