folkonwight

Island Folk History

Adapted from *Cock & Bull Stories: Animals in Isle of Wight Folklore, Dialect and Cultural History* (2008), by Alan R Phillips

HARES & RABBITS

Romano-British leaping hare brooch. Courtesy of Isle of Wight Heritage Service

It is generally accepted that hares were a species native to the Island from prehistoric times**;** the hare was certainly sacred to the ancient British – Boudicca released one before leading her men against the Roman cavalry – and the Island has its own find of a beautiful Romano-British hare brooch from an Anglo-Saxon grave on Bowcombe Down: the body of the hare is divided into three sections, each with a different colured enamel – red, blue and green – and the brooch was already three hundred years old when it entered the grave.

Over time, however, the hare's star waned and it came to acquire a sinister reputation, featuring in many stories of witchcraft and transformation. The Isle of Wight was no exception regarding such beliefs, and witches were long feared and implicitly believed in. The story survives of an old lady who lived at Hale Common and who was reputed to have turned herself into a hare, and needless to say it was again Squire Thatcher who pursued her with his harriers. She only escaped by disappearing through the keyhole of a door! In 1923 Frank Morey reported on a taxidermist's case containing a white-faced hare which had been shot at Niton in 1795; the hare appeared to have been in the Kirkpatrick family for 128 years. A label attached to the case read: "This curiously marked hare... had been repeatedly coursed, but had always succeeded in beating the greyhounds, and this fact, coupled with her strange appearance, led the Niton people to believe that she was a witch".

Despite the hare's antiquity, however, in contrast to rabbits – whose numbers exploded from the medieval period in the coverts and brakes – hares remained comparatively scarce until introduced by the Captain of the Island Sir Edward Horsey in 1574, as Sir John Oglander informs us: "Sir Edward procured many from his friends to be brought in alive, and proclaimed that whosoever should bring in a live hare should have a lamb for him: by his care the Island was stored".

A late-18th century hunting party near East Cowes, probably harriers. Watercolour by Thomas Rowlandson. Courtesy of Isle of Wight Heritage Service

Hare hunting grew in popularity and we know that by 1752 John Mitchell of St Cross, Newport, kept a pack of harriers. In 1812 William Jacobs of Chale Farm ran his harriers sixty miles: only five horses were in at the finish. By 1819 two rival packs were in existence: Squire Thatcher of Wacklands, and Sir Worsley Holmes of Newport House; then Harvey's Crockford Harriers started up in 1820. The sport is of course commemorated in the name of the well-known 400-year-old Hare & Hounds public house at Downend.

Albrecht Dürer - Hare, 1502 (Google Art Project)

'Jack hare' was the local name for a male hare, and 'monkey', unlikely though it may seem, a dialect word for 'young hare', which appears in *Great monkey lands* in Whitwell parish, i.e. 'the land where the young hares are seen', and local people have often watched them playing in this field. 'Laa' signified giving a hare a good start before the dogs: 'Ghee 'er good laa'. Farmer Brown, tenant at Dunsbury Farm, Brook, in the early 20th century would sow parsley in with the corn in the spring: hares were partial to the parsley and this would attract them to the fields ready for the coursing in the autumn, after the corn had been cut.

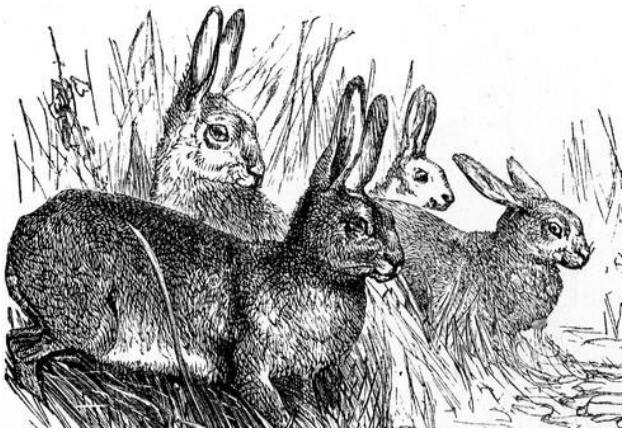
Haslett Farm near Shorwell is the contracted version of a name which was once Hareslade, or 'the valley frequented by hares'. The name is doubly interesting because it was adopted in the 13th century by Robert Carpenter, who upgraded his family name to Robert of Hareslade and kept a manuscript handbook which is now in the possession of Cambridge University, where it is of considerable interest to medieval scholars.

RABBITS

WARRENERS & POACHERS

The traditional view that rabbits were first introduced to Britain by the Normans appears to have been superseded by recent archaeological evidence of rabbit bones excavated in Romano-British contexts. But many traditional beliefs associated with the hare in turn brushed off onto its cousin; amazing as it may now seem, like the hare, the rabbit came to be seen in the late medieval period as a sinister witch animal.

None of this however prevented the animal being bred on the Island in huge quantities, especially from the Middle Ages. The word 'rabbit' itself was reserved for the young animals, while the parents were referred to as 'coneys', the term most prevalent in the medieval period. An account of 1225 for the manor of Bowcombe is in fact one of the earliest in Britain to mention rabbits: among the expenses we find the wages of the coney-keeper, and the sale of 200 rabbit-skins. Numerous similar records follow, and the Island rapidly gained a reputation for a high rabbit population through the absence of the fox and the wolf; a fact which is further evidenced by the prevalence of 'warren' in place-names such as Headon Warren and archaeological finds of pillow-mounds, or medieval rabbit-warrens.



In 1243 King Henry III ordered 80 rabbits from two bishops' warrens in Hampshire and 100 from the Isle of Wight, most likely Swainston, which was then owned by the bishops of Winchester. In fact, towards the end of the 13th century the latter were receiving 6s. 8d. in annual income (a significant sum then) from their 'coney-garths' – rabbit enclosures walled in with stone – at Swainston.

Quarr Abbey was granted 'free warren' for its grange at Compton by Edward I in 1283. The greater part of the manor of Thorley was once a warren, and in 1292 Isabella de Fortibus, the ‘Lady of the Isle’, gave a fifth part of its coneys to the Prior of Christchurch. Subsequently, King Edward III bestowed the office of Warrener of Thorley and Wellow on a certain Walter White, and at this time the warren was producing 500 rabbits per annum, fifty for the tithe and the remainder sold at tuppence a head for the benefit of the King. In 1326 John de Glamorgan was granted free warren in Brook and Mottistone, there was a rabbit warren on the coast at Freshwater, and a free warren was also mentioned in the manor of Afton in 1343.

Parkhurst Forest seems to have supported one of the earliest commercial warrens in Britain and also provides some of the earliest references to the theft of rabbits. In 1255 Roger the forester arrested some poachers in the forest, hunting with greyhounds for rabbits, and they were fined two shillings, though they may well have had more important game in mind! And when a group of poachers armed with bows and arrows were surprised by two warreners on Geoffrey Roucle's land at Brook one midnight in November 1384, a violent confrontation ensued and one of the poachers, Thomas Smythe, was wounded in the forehead and subsequently died.

There was a small grove of rabbits at Kern Farm, Alverstone, in 1398, and in 1408 Quarr Abbey granted John Garston all the rabbits on the manor of Arreton to the south of the road from Standen to Haseley. Then in 1441 Lewis and Alice Meux of Kingston Manor were granted free warren for deer and coneys in Kingston and Shorwell and licence to enclose 300 acres of wood and pasture there: this is undoubtedly the origin of the name Warren Hill in the Kingston area.

In 1445 Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, issued an order from Carisbrooke Castle for Thomas Roucle, a farmer in the manor of Freshwater and no doubt a relation of the Geoffrey Roucle already mentioned, to send two cartloads of coneys to Devizes Castle at a cost of 36 shillings. In 1491 eight brace of rabbits were paid by the tenant at Combley as part of his rent to Quarr Abbey. By *c*.1560 century a 'coneyman' was visiting the Island once a week to buy rabbits for the London market and doubling up as a postman at the same time, taking back letters for the mainland.

CATCHERS & CLAPPERS

Rabbit man. Courtesy of Guildhall Library, City of London

The demand for rabbits had not abated even by the 20th century. In *Put Out The Flag: The Story of Isle of Wight Carriers*, Derek Sprake updates us thus: "The need to control rabbits in the countryside provided those who lived there with a good income... and a good trade existed with many carriers buying them from their customers... Between 1936 and 1939 [Arthur Sprake] bought over 36,000 rabbits, all trapped in the Chale, Atherfield and Chillerton areas, and they were sold to a trader in Newport... The rabbit catcher would wait at his gate with his rabbits strung up onto a pole, carried over the shoulder, with their hind legs slotted together". The trade came to an end, however, when myxomatosis killed off most wild rabbits in the 1950s, and they became less acceptable as food. In the 1920s and 30s there

were five people in the Bowcombe Valley whose sole job was catching rabbits: this lasted until World War II, then afterwards there were none.

A rabbit's burrow was known as a 'berry' or 'bury'; a 'mesh' was the run of a rabbit or hare through a hedge; whilst a ‘squot’ was the shallow hole a rabbit or hare makes in the ground. By contrast, a ‘pop hole’ still refers to a concealed exit from the burrow, usually out in the field, by which a rabbit makes its escape when being pursued by ferrets, weasels or stoats. Some fields on the Island with rabbit burrows were known by the name *Clappers*, from the Middle English word *clapere*, meaning ‘rabbit warren’: the use is much wider than the Island. Particularly intriguing was the local use of the word 'rabbit' itself as a mild kind of oath or expletive: "Od rabbit the bwoy!"