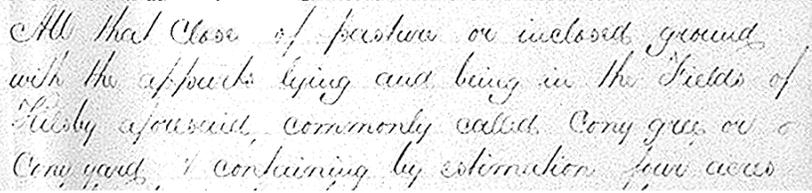


## Rabbitting On: Kilsby's Medieval Warren

As I mentioned in the last issue, the recent generous loan by the Invernizzi brothers of the documents for the Cowley Estate in Kilsby are a real treasure-trove of information about Kilsby (and Barby too), sometimes going back over 400 years. I have now finished sorting and cataloguing the hundreds of documents that form the main part of the archive, and the contents are neatly filed away in 21 big box-files. I have also digitally photographed the entire archive, which makes it a great deal easier to carry out research on the mass of documents (some of which are tiny scraps only a few inches in size, whilst others consist of huge multi-sheet parchment documents about 3 feet square and are very unwieldy to spread out and read).

Exploring this mass of new information will take ages, but some interesting aspects have already come to my attention – and in this issue I will write about just one of them: the medieval rabbit warren.



All that Close of pasture or inclosed ground  
with the appurtes lying and being in the Fields of  
Kilsby aforesaid, commonly called Conygree or a  
Cony yard, & containing by estimation four acres

### The Conygree

One of the piles of documents in the Cowley Estate archive deals with 4 fields (or 'closes' as they are called in the old documents) along the A5 on the north side of Kilsby, referred to in the documents as "The Bretches and the Conygree, or Cony Yard". They are shown on the map later in this article, and a brief mention of the Conygree in the Cowley deeds is shown above. The documents show that they belonged in the early 1700s to the Hollis family of Kilsby, who sold them to their neighbours the Odey family, from whom they passed to John Cowley when Kilsby's medieval 'ridge and furrow' Open Fields were enclosed by Act of Parliament in 1778.

It is significant that this land was already enclosed prior to the Parliamentary enclosure – in other words, these are "old enclosures" dating from a much earlier period. I was intrigued by the names 'Bretch' and 'Conygree', which certainly sounded medieval; but my usual standby the Oxford English Dictionary had no definition for 'conygree' – the nearest that I could find was "*cony-garth: a rabbit warren*" and "*conygrate: a corruption of cony-garth*". It looked promising ... but it was not the definite proof that I was seeking.

So I did some further research – and at length I discovered 'Conygree' in an rare copy of a long-obsolete handbook for gamekeepers published in London in 1740, where it is clearly defined as "a rabbit warren" (see the two extracts from the handbook, illustrated alongside).

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*Where Warren is extinct, or not.*

### Game-Law :

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### The Medieval Warren

This was progress! – I now had positive identification of a specific close of land as Kilsby's medieval rabbit warren. But since this probably does not mean a lot to modern readers, I had better explain the meaning of this find.

Many sources state that the rabbit was not an original native of Britain and that they were introduced by the Normans – though historians now believe it was the Romans who first bred them in England, so perhaps we should say "re-introduced by the Normans". On a medieval manor, the rabbit warren was a piece of land reserved for breeding and preserving rabbits, or coneyes as the adult rabbit was called in the early Middle Ages. During the mid 1300s the word warren came to be used more and more, and by the 1500s the term was a common reference for a rabbit preserve.

In the medieval and post medieval periods rabbits were kept for their meat and fur. The meat was considered a delicacy and therefore was mainly reserved for rich men's tables; a recipe collection from about 1390 lists various rabbit recipes prepared and cooked for King Richard II, and in 1525 there is an inventory for a high status wedding which includes an entry for '21 dozen conies' – evidently that was some party! Rabbit fur was used in medieval times as a popular trimming for clothing, and later for trimming gloves.

The number of rabbit warrens increased steadily during the late 1300s and 1400s, and they began to move down the social scale and into the domain of the local gentry. It has also been suggested that after the Black Death (1348) rabbit warrens became an extra source of income that required less labour and could be carried out on marginal lands, which again added to the increase in warren numbers.

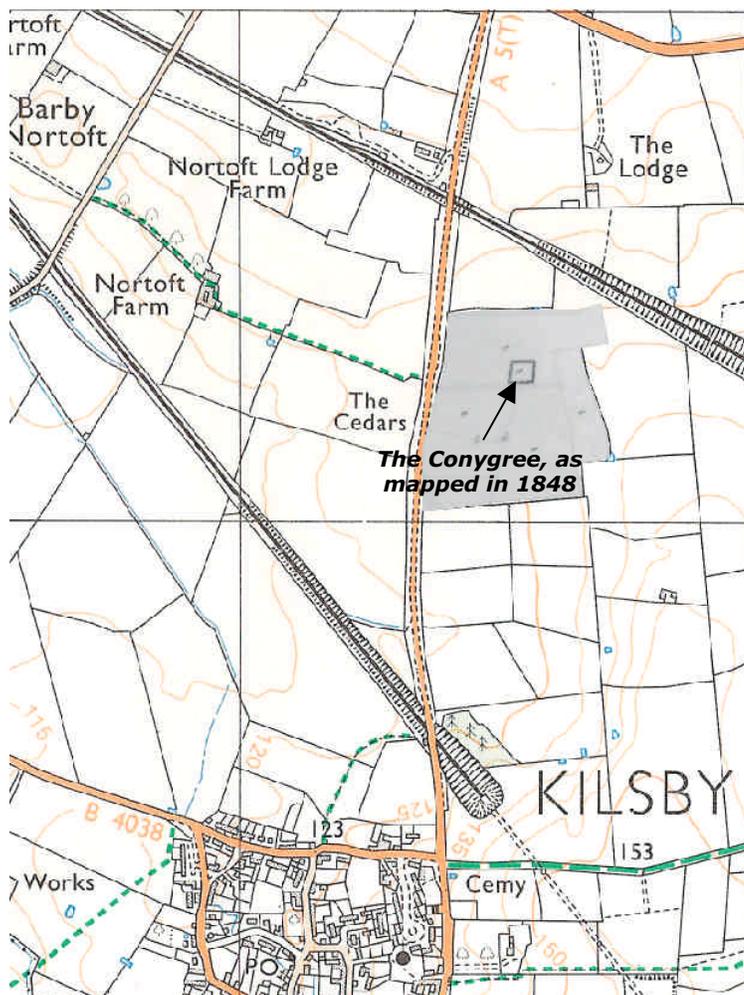
We can therefore put a provisional date of about 1300-1400 to Kilsby's manorial rabbit warren. It would have been established and maintained by the lord of the manor, to ensure a steady supply of meat on his table throughout the year. Ordinary villagers would have been forbidden to take rabbits from the warren, on pain of a severe fine (or worse), or even to disturb them when they strayed on to their nearby farmland; we can only guess at the muttered oaths as they watched the lord's rabbits eating their crops.

Incidentally, this time period coincides with the development of Kilsby following the rise to power of William de Kildesby (Keeper of the Privy Seal to Edward III in the 1330s), of whom I have written in previous articles; and in another previous article I described the rich new floor of Penn tiles donated to Kilsby church in about 1390 – one of only two such instances known in this county – so it is apparent that Kilsby was at that period a village of some status.

Interestingly, the Kilsby Tithe Map of 1848 actually shows a small square close at exactly the location referred to in the deeds and documents (see alongside, imposed on top of the modern OS map for clarity). Is this the only accurate recorded map of Kilsby's medieval warren?

### Physical Form and Location

A conygree or 'rabbit-yard' typically took the form of a series of 'pillow mounds'. These were pillow-like, oblong mounds with flat tops,



frequently described as being 'cigar-shaped', and sometimes arranged like the letter E or into more extensive, interconnected rows. Often these were provided with pre-built, stone-lined tunnels. The preferred orientation was on a gentle slope, with the arms extending downhill to facilitate drainage. The soil needed to be soft, to accommodate further burrowing.

By chance I took some photographs when the large hole was excavated in the A5 in 2011, to make way for the new bridge for the railroad that now links the DIRFT sites; and as it happens, that hole was dug fairly close to the site of Conygree Close. You will not be surprised to learn that the subsoil at that location is extremely sandy – one of the very few sandy locations in the parish within our otherwise dense clay soil, and the perfect location, in fact, for a rabbit warren. We can also note that the Lord's rabbit warren was established close to the edge of the village's cultivated land, near to the village commons (which were further down the slope, at the north end of the parish).

Gren Hatton  
January 2013