

Rabbit warrens in Farnhill and Kildwick

Rabbits were introduced into this country by the Normans in the period after the conquest, as a source of meat and fur. They were housed in warrens built into natural or artificial earth banks. No medieval manor house was complete without its own rabbit warren.

The Farnhill Hall warren

If you've ever come into Farnhill from the A629, over the stone bridge and towards Farnhill Hall, you might have noticed a very large number of rabbits in the field just below the Hall – particularly on a summer's evening. This is in strong contrast to the field on the opposite side of the road, which has a very sparse rabbit population.

There is very strong evidence, in fact, that the field adjacent to Farnhill Hall was actually the site of the rabbit warren for the old medieval hall, which probably stood on or close to the site of the current building.

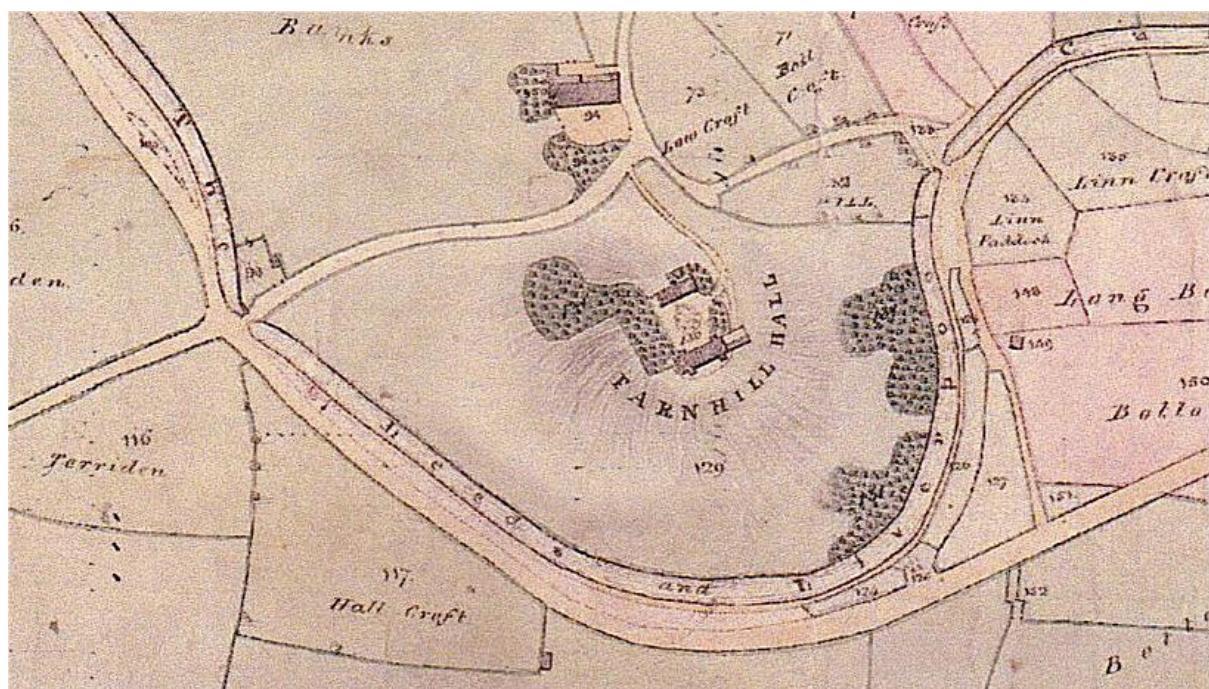


Fig 1: Part of the 1838 Farnhill Township map

Figure 1 shows part of an 1838 map of Farnhill, specifically the area around Farnhill Hall. The scene hasn't changed all that much. The map shows what is now the A629 from Skipton (coming in at the top left corner), the bridge over the canal, and the road running past the Hall.

A particular feature of this map is that it shows names for most of the fields. Old field names are often very useful in determining land usage.

The field surrounding Farnhill Hall isn't named on the map but, like all the others, it is given a number. These numbers appear in a separate document which lists owners / tenants and the tithe value of the land. It is this "Tithe Commutation" document that provides the evidence for the location of the Farnhill Hall warren: field number 129 is called "Coney Garth".

Coney – is a little-used name for a rabbit

Garth – derives from an early English word meaning yard or garden

Evidence for a warren in Kildwick

So, if there was a medieval rabbit warren in Farnhill, was there also one in Kildwick ? The answer is almost certainly "Yes" but where it might have been is not clear.

For much of the medieval period, the manor of Kildwick was owned by the monks of Bolton Priory who would have made their living farming and managing the land around Kildwick Grange.

Evidence for a rabbit warren on land belonging to the monks comes from a legal case brought by the Prior in 1371:

The Prior of Boulton v. John, son of Cecily de Sighlesden [Silsden], for taking hares, rabbits, pheasants and partridges in the Prior's free warren at Kildwyk.¹

In fact, the same John appeared in court no less than three times in one year on the same charge !

The use of the term "free warren" needs to be explained. A "free warren" was a privilege given by the king (in 1371 this would have been Edward III) allowing an individual rights over game on a particular piece of land. The case outlined here is for poaching on land where the rights to the game belonged to the Prior.

So this is not specific documentary evidence for a rabbit warren, but the fact that the charge involved the taking of rabbits suggests that they may have been kept within the "free warren".

Or perhaps, by 1371, the rabbits had already escaped and were living wild on the lands managed by the Prior ? That would make them like their modern-day descendants, who make free with almost everything I plant in my garden.

¹ From "Notes on the Religious and Secular Houses of Yorkshire", Volume 17 of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series.