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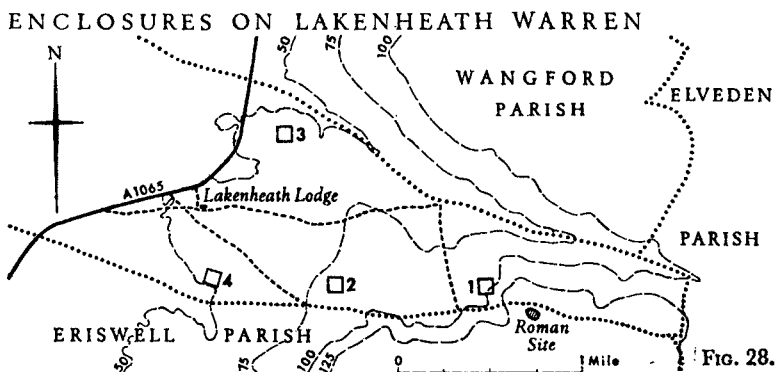
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EARTHWORK ENCLOSURES ON LAKENHEATH WARREN, WEST SUFFOLK

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During work for the Nature Conservancy on Lakenheath Warren, one of the writers (G.C.) noted four rectangular earthwork enclosures there. In the summer of 1970 two of these were planned for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) (by C.C.T.), and a small excavation carried out on one of them.

Lakenheath Warren is a large area of some 2,300 acres extending S.E. across the Breckland from Lakenheath village on the edge of



the fens. Since 1942 nearly half of the western portion of the Warren has been occupied by an airfield but the rest is still largely open heathland. The whole area is underlain by chalk but this is covered by deposits of glacially derived clays and gravels, while large areas are in turn blanketed by wind-blown sand ranging from a few inches to several feet in depth.¹ The open part of the Warren is dotted with the remains of man's activities. Most of these are modern and include building sites, bomb-aiming markers and countless shell and bomb craters, all dating from the two world wars. In addition there are long strips of land ploughed in 1961-2. Mixed up with all these are a number of much older features including the four enclosures under review here. These enclosures appear to be randomly placed (Fig. 28), three near the southern

¹ R. M. S. Perrin, 'Soils' in F. Briers, ed., *Norwich and its Region*, B.A.A.S. Handbook (1961), pp. 44-50; A. S. Watt, 'Studies in the Ecology of the Breckland IV', *J. Ecol.*, xxviii (1940), pp. 43-8.

edge of the Warren and one near the northern boundary. There is no apparent correlation with the distribution of soil types. All the enclosures are of similar size and appearance and all are extremely difficult to see except in ideal conditions of low vegetation. However at least one other person has recognised their existence.²

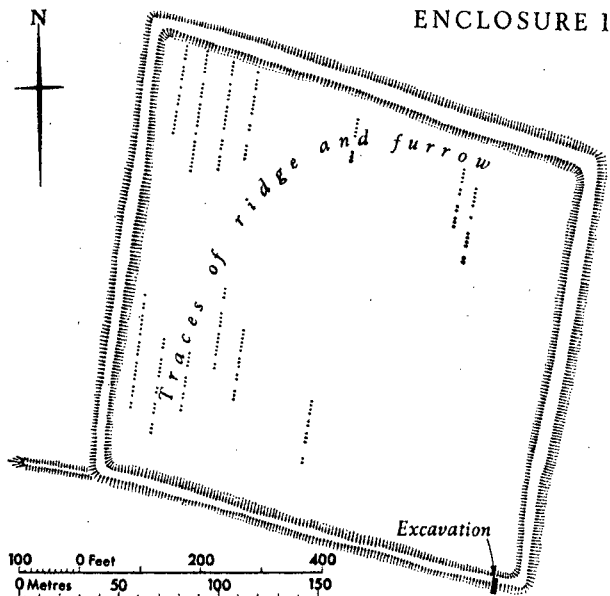


FIG. 29.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Enclosure 1, (TL 776801) (Fig. 29), lies on the side of a broad, open, dry valley. It consists of a slightly trapezoidal area of about 11 acres, bounded by a broad, low bank 30 to 50 feet wide and not more than 2 feet high. There is a distinct difference between the profile of the bank on the north and south sides and that on the east and west. On the east and west the bank is of normal rounded symmetrical form, though the west one has a steeper inner edge, probably formed by north-south ploughing which has produced a negative lynchet. The north and south sides have slightly asymmetrical profiles with a sharp outer slope and a long gradual inner slope. This has probably been produced by north-south ploughing using the banks as headlands. There is no trace of an entrance into

² Watt, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

the enclosure. The interior is flat with very slight traces of low ridge and furrow, orientated north to south, indicating ploughing at some unknown date. At the S.W. corner a low narrow bank runs S.W. for 120 feet and then fades out.

A small trench 20 feet long and 3 feet wide was excavated in the south side near the S.E. corner in an attempt to date the enclosure. The position was chosen because it was the nearest point to the known Roman site 400 yards to the S.E. just outside the Warren in Eriswell parish. It was hoped that there might be sherds of

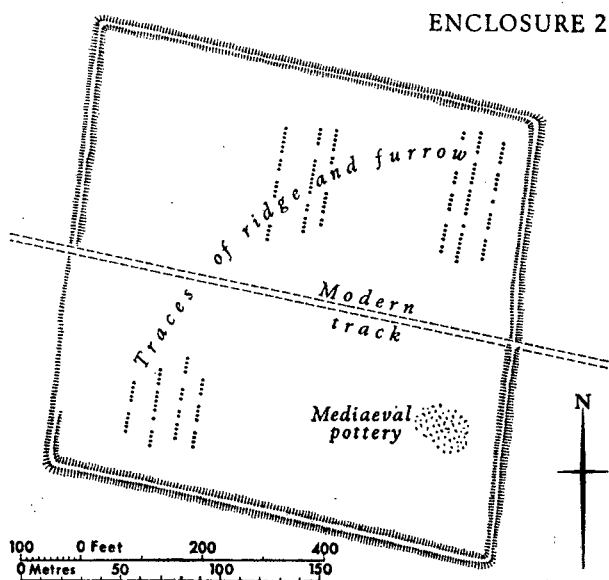


FIG. 30.

pottery from this settlement stratified in some relationship to the enclosure. In the event this was not so and no finds whatsoever were made. The bank appeared to be composed entirely of sand, small flints and lumps of chalk. The latter had been dug out of an adjoining ditch of which no trace exists on the ground but which was proved to have been at least 2 feet deep.

Enclosure 2, (TL 763801) (Fig. 30), lies on almost level ground. It is again slightly trapezoidal and covers some 11 acres. Its surrounding bank is only 25 to 30 feet wide and little more than 1½ feet high. The north and south sides are slightly asymmetrical in profile suggesting that they have been used as headlands. No external ditches are visible nor are there any entrances though a

modern track cuts across the enclosure. Slight traces of ridge and furrow can be detected in the interior. Some small sherds of medieval pottery, probably 12th to 13th century in date, have been picked up on the surface near the S.E. corner. This pottery may have no connection with the enclosure.

Enclosure 3, (TL 759814), lies near the north edge of the Warren on land sloping gently S.S.E. It is almost square and covers about 15 acres. Its surrounding bank is 20 to 25 feet wide and up to 2 feet high with a clear outer ditch 12 to 15 feet wide and 1 foot deep. The whole of the north side and the north ends of the east and west sides are extremely difficult to trace owing to extensive damage by a wartime bomb-aiming point and a thick vegetation cover. The bank forming the south side has an asymmetrical profile. No entrances can be identified. There are slight traces of ridge and furrow orientated north to south in the S.W. corner.

Enclosure 4, (TL 753801), lies on gently sloping ground S.S.E. of Lakenheath Lodge near the southern edge of the Warren. It is slightly trapezoidal and covers about 12 acres. The surrounding bank is 20 to 25 feet wide and up to 2 feet high. There is no indication of an entrance but a number of later tracks cross it.

DISCUSSION

These four enclosures, and there may in fact be more still to be discovered, are so similar that it is probable they are all of the same date and for the same purpose. On form alone it would seem likely that they are medieval or later and the remains of ridge and furrow as well as the asymmetrical profile of some of the banks indicates that they have all been ploughed at some time. This is supported by observations made by Watt who noted that the soil within the enclosed areas is slightly softer than elsewhere and though the flora is the same as outside there is an altered abundance of the species.² While no means conclusive the lack of entrances might suggest that the enclosures were constructed for the cultivation of a special crop and not to contain animals. However any original entrances could have been easily blocked and obliterated by subsequent ploughing. This indicates that the enclosures may have been constructed for the protection or control of some kind of animal and only later ploughed. In the absence of any real evidence as to their date and function by archaeological means the assessment of these enclosures must be based on an examination of the medieval and later land-use of the Warren.

Lakenheath Warren was held by the Prior and Convent (later the Dean and Chapter) of Ely throughout the medieval period and indeed until 1870, as of their Manor of Lakenheath. During this time the main uses of the Warren appear to have been to provide

grazing for sheep, cattle and rabbits, and also to provide bracken and other herbage for cutting. Of these the one least likely to have produced the enclosures is the cutting of bracken etc., though the villagers of Lakenheath certainly had such rights by the 17th century and presumably for many centuries before.³ Earthworks perhaps resulting from the storage of cut bracken are known but these so-called bracken stacks are usually small rectangular raised platforms.⁴ There is no record of enclosures being connected with this type of activity.

The enclosures could have been constructed for either sheltering or confining sheep and/or cattle during the medieval and later periods. Again by the mid-17th century the Warren was used to pasture the 'Common Great Cattle' as they were known as well as 2,040 sheep.³ Various types of sheep and cattle shelters have been noted by a number of writers all over the British Isles though these usually take the form of embanked crosses.⁵ Medieval and later sheep folds surviving as rectangular earthwork enclosures are well-known in the chalklands of Wessex and elsewhere but these are usually much smaller than the enclosures under discussion, often covering less than 1 acre.⁶ Documented sheep enclosures too were apparently equally small. One on the 'Common Heath' at Fulbourn in Cambridgeshire which was actually enlarged in 1374 was then still only 30 feet long and 26 feet wide.⁷ At a much later date and closer to Lakenheath, folds, bounded by thick turf banks, were constructed around 1800 at Elveden to provide shelter for the flocks at lambing time. These were then ploughed and planted with potatoes. They were however only 80 yards square.⁸ The large areas covered by the enclosures on Lakenheath Warren make it unlikely though not impossible that they were used merely for penning cattle or sheep, but they could have been used for providing extra feed for the sheep. According to the leases of the Manor Farm of 1516 and later nine acres of rye could be sown for feeding the ewes of the Manor Farm flock during the winter.⁹ Whether this rye

³ Bury & West Suffolk Record Office (B.W.S.R.O.), 1065, Copy of the Verdict of the Homage of the Court Baron and Court of Survey, 1649.

⁴ R.C.H.M. (Eng.), *Westmorland* (1936), p. xxxv.

⁵ A. Allcroft, *Earthworks of England* (1908), p. 554; J. A. Mortimer, *Forty Years Researches . . . in East Yorkshire* (1905), pp. 388-96; R.C.H.M. (Eng.), *Herefordshire* 1 (1931), p. 227.

⁶ H. Ramm, 'Survey of an Earthwork at Kingsterndale', *Derby Arch. Jour.*, LXXVII (1957); C. C. Taylor, 'Late Roman Pastoral Farms in Wessex', *Antiquity*, LXI (1967), pp. 304-6; P. J. Fowler, J. W. G. Musty and C. C. Taylor, 'Some Earthwork Enclosures in Wiltshire', *Wiltsh. Arch. Mag.*, LX (1965), pp. 52-74.

⁷ Peterhouse College, Cambridge, Archives, Misc. Medieval Deeds, 15 April 47 Edward III.

⁸ A. Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Suffolk* (1804).

⁹ B.W.S.R.O., 1065, Lease of Lakenheath Manor, 1516; Ely Diocesan Collection (E.D.C.) in Cambridge University Library (C.U.L.), 2/4/1, f. 34v., 1562.

and perhaps other winter feed was grown within the enclosures or elsewhere in the parish is unknown but the leases also specify that the lessee of the Manor Farm had to maintain the ditches of what are described as the 'closes upon Coneywarren' and 'omnes clausuras sup. cunicularum'. These may have been the enclosures under review and used for the cultivation of winter feed for the sheep but there is no proof of this. Other crops might also have been grown here and the sheep folded on them. Certainly there appears to have been ploughing within the Warren in the 16th century by the lessee of the Manor Farm. A passage in the 1516 lease which has been transcribed with great difficulty by a 19th century copyist indicates this. According to Mrs. D. M. Owen it may read: 'and if the aforesaid William, William and Thomas should propose to plough and sow, each of them shall be given permission by the lord or the farmer of the warren, and they shall not strew . . . in any place so as to destroy either the burrows or the feeding grounds of the rabbits'. This ploughing could well have been within the earthwork enclosures either specifically for the production of sheep feed or unrelated to sheep. However once again there is no certainty in the matter and both the closes on the Coneywarren and the ploughing might refer to other areas in the Warren or on the edge of it. There is also contemporary evidence of ploughing on nearby Warrens. At Brandon and Eriswell the Warren Farmers were permitted to 'plough, ear and put in tilth' heath and warren.¹⁰

During the Napoleonic Wars parts of almost every rabbit warren on the Breckland were broken up and cultivated. The site of these temporarily cultivated areas can be located by the shelter belts which were planted and which are shown on the 1st Edition of the O.S. maps. However while there is no such evidence for Lakenheath, ploughing may have been confined within the enclosures during this period of national emergency.

Perhaps the most important use of the Warren from at least the 14th century was for keeping rabbits. The Warren was one of an almost continuous series of warrens which ran from Mildenhall through Brandon to Thetford. Most of these were established in the second half of the 13th century though in the case of Lakenheath the right of Free Warren had been granted in 1252.¹¹ Certainly rabbits were being kept on the Warren by 1300 for in the description of the site of a murder in Eriswell one of the bounds is given as the Prior of Ely's *cunicularum*.¹² The Prior and Convent did not themselves farm their estates at Lakenheath and the lessee's under

¹⁰ Elveden Hall Archives, Elveden Collection, J3, Lease of Eriswell Hall Farm, 1665.

¹¹ P.R.O., C.53/44.

¹² P.R.O., K.B. 27/162

tenant was usually a working warrener. It appears that the numbers of rabbits kept on the Warren gradually increased over the centuries. By analogy with Brandon Warren 3-4,000 rabbits may have been killed annually by 1400.¹³ In 1649 the breeding stock alone on Lakenheath Warren was set at 4,500 rabbits¹⁴ and rose to between 6,000 and 7,000 by 1738.¹⁵ During the 18th century the rabbit population is estimated to have been 15 per acre, probably the highest number it ever reached. As a result of these high numbers there was insufficient feed for the sheep. There is evidence that the Manor's sheep rights were unlet and there were only about 1,000 sheep on the Warren during the period 1736-1804.¹⁶ During the 19th century rabbit numbers declined largely owing to the rising importance of the Warren as a game reserve.

It is therefore possible that the earthwork enclosures on the Warren may be connected with the keeping of rabbits. Enclosures specifically for keeping rabbits are well-known during the medieval and later periods and some have been described in the literature.¹⁷ However many of these actually enclosed either specifically constructed mounds or prehistoric burial mounds which were intended for the rabbits to burrow in. The lack of such mounds in the Lakenheath Warren enclosures might suggest that they were not used for this purpose, although subsequent ploughing, if such it is, could have easily destroyed them. On the other hand artificial mounds may not have been necessary in this particular warren due to the soft sandy soils of the area. It is therefore at least a possibility that the enclosures were constructed for the containment of breeding rabbits at any time during the long period when these animals were kept on the Warren. But if this explanation is correct the fact that the enclosures have been ploughed indicates that they must have been subsequently used as arable plots. The Warrener might have cultivated small areas of land to provide winter feed for the rabbits. This is possible though the documentary evidence is very slight. As well as the 16th and 17th century Manor leases, a series of Warren leases from 1562 to 1715 survive and these contain certain details

¹³ B.W.S.R.O., Copy of Brandon Compotos Rolls, Bacon MSS.

¹⁴ B.W.S.R.O., 1065.

¹⁵ Elveden Collection, M.14, Leases of Lakenheath Warren, 1738 onwards.

¹⁶ Cambs. C.R.O., R66/24, Allix Papers, 1736-1804.

¹⁷ These enclosures are common but have not usually been recognised. There was one inside the disused castle at Higham Ferrers, Northants., in the 14th century (see R. M. Sergeantson, 'Court Rolls of Higham Ferrers', *Ass. Arch. Soc. Reports & Papers*, xxxiii (1915), pp. 134-5). One of the present authors (C.C.T.) has noted other enclosed rabbit warrens elsewhere, e.g., in Devon on Ditsworthy Warren (SX 585663); in Wiltshire at Winterbourne Stoke (SU 076420) and at Stapleford Conegar (SU 090382); and in Derbyshire (F. G. Simpson and G. A. Auden, 'The Buries Earthwork, Repton', *Arch. J.*, LXX (1913), pp. 83-94).

concerning the feeding of the rabbits on the Warren.¹⁸ The Warrener at Lakenheath had by custom a plot called Conegar Close which was used for growing hay to feed the rabbits in winter.¹⁹ This particular close lay near the village. During the 18th century, as the number of rabbits rose, the Warrener used two other 4-acre closes also near the village to produce extra winter feed. All these closes were on low-lying damp ground capable of producing a good hay crop, unlike the soils within the enclosures. Evidence from a series of law cases during the 18th century makes it quite clear that the Warrener could not enclose even a small vegetable garden without being sued in the High Courts and it is therefore very unlikely that he could have had the use of 50 acres of enclosed land on the Warren.²⁰

CONCLUSION

Since it is not possible to date the construction of the earthwork enclosures on the Warren and in the absence of any conclusive documentary evidence about them, all discussion about their uses must remain conjectural. It is to be hoped that this account of their presence on Lakenheath Warren will prompt a search for similar enclosures elsewhere on the Breckland which may throw further light on the problem.

¹⁸ E.D.C. (in C.U.L.), 2/4/1, f. 35v., Warren Lease 1562; Elveden Collection, Lakenheath Warren Leases, M.1 (1660), M.2 (1665), M.8 (1703), M.9 (1715).

¹⁹ Cambs. C.R.O., R66/24, and cf. B.W.S.R.O., Rex Redux f. 325d, Will of Thomas Crane of Brandon, c. 1661.

²⁰ Cambs. C.R.O., R66/24.