March 2026: March hares and Easter bunnies.

We occasionally see rabbits in the both the upper and lower churchyards, but mainly they are in neighbouring fields. And while I've not seen any hares in the steep field at the back of the upper, old, churchyard, they have been seen in the field by the lower churchyard and are common down in the valley.

Archaeologists have found brown hare bones dating to the pre-Roman Iron Age, and, unlike the native mountain hares that are still seen in Scotland and, very rarely, the Peak District, it's thought brown hares were deliberately introduced to Britain in the fifth to third centuries BC, at around the same time that chickens were introduced. The skeletons of both were carefully buried intact, with no signs of being cut up or being eaten. Indeed, Julius Caeser wrote of the British, in '*De Bello Gallico*' (his account of his wars in Gaul and Britain), 'they do not regard it lawful to eat the hare, and the cock, and the goose; they, however, breed them for amusement and pleasure. The climate is more temperate than in Gaul, the colds being less severe'[1]. Genetic studies suggest British hares likely came from northern Europe, as they are most closely related to those in the Netherlands and Denmark.

Although the Romans hunted and ate hares, the British seem to have maintained a more respectful attitude to these animals, seeing them as free spirits, mystical and semi-divine – completely understandable if you've ever met one face-to-face on a misty March morning. The Icenian queen, Boadicea, according to the Greco-Roman historian Lucius Cassius Dio, ended her speech that led to the famous anti-Roman revolt by letting 'a hare escape from the fold of her dress; and since it ran on what they considered the auspicious side, the whole multitude shouted with pleasure'.

Thomas Sternberg in his 'The Dialect and Folklore of Northamptonshire (1851), writes about hares' feet as a cure and preventative for the 'rheumatiz' while 'the bone of a hare's foot… mitigateth the cramp'. He also claims that 'the running of a hare along the main street of a village forebodes a fire in the immediate vicinity'.

Anyhow, one theory is that it is the pre-Roman association of hares and chickens – and their eggs - with spiritual matters that led to the two being linked together, and eventually with Easter. At least until rabbits got in on the act.

Rabbits, are relative latecomers, and were introduced from southern Europe, especially Spain, for food and fur by the Romans, but died out and had to be re-introduced nearly a thousand years later by the Normans and their descendants, who brought over farmed ones from their French estates.

[1] Thus putting the lie to a later text, '*Asterix chez les Bretons'*, which scandalously claims that the weather in Gaul is better than here in Britain.

At the eastern end of the upper churchyard, if you peer over the wall and through the trees, you might just make out lumps and bumps in the fields, from a long-lost medieval manor house. Although very little of the house itself is left, the large 'pillow mounds' nearer the churchyard wall are medieval rabbit warrens linked to the manor house. Indeed, Manor Farmhouse across the road used to be called Warren Farm. Warrens were needed because these rabbits didn't do well in the English climate. They were an expensive luxury that needed to be protected from the environment, and guarded from medieval poachers, and the man-made warrens often had moats and manned guard houses – you can see some of the remains of these too in the field. You had to be seriously rich to have had both rabbit warrens and fishponds like those in Gretton. These rabbit castles with their armed guards led to the idea that rabbits, although in reality delicate, rather fancied themselves as royalty, and medieval manuscripts often have 'marginalia' pictures of militaristic killer rabbits, riding dogs and beating up people.

Like the Romans, the Normans and their descendants also kept rabbits for meat and fur, and, under medieval religious rules, the babies had the 'advantage' of being classed as fish so could be eaten on Fridays and throughout Lent.

The geographical journey taken by rabbits is mirrored in their various names over time: until Victorian times rabbits were known as coneys, from the Norman French *conis* / *coniz*, derived from Latin *cuniculus* meaning a tunnel, although it's also thought (the Romans definitely thought) that this originally came from Iberian-Celtic for a 'little dog'. The word 'rabbit' emerged in the 14th century and was originally the term for a baby coney, probably from the northern French word *robète*, meaning something little. The word bunny doesn't arise until the late 16th century, first as a Scottish word for a rabbit or squirrel.

Place names with 'coney' (originally rhyming with money), 'warren', 'clapper[2]', 'pillow' and 'burrow' are often associated with old rabbit farms. However, Bunny, the village in Nottinghamshire, has nothing to do with rabbits.

[2] A pile of stones around a rabbit burrow. *Clapier* is the modern French word for a rabbit hutch.

As well as Gretton's rabbit warrens, there were several other 'coneygrees' at nearby Harringworth, Deene Park and East Carlton; and Rushton's Triangular Lodge – for all its religious symbolism – was theoretically built as no more than housing for the warrener responsible for Thomas Tresham's rabbit farm. It is apparently referred to as The Warryner's Lodge in old documents from the Rushton estate. Northamptonshire and Rutland have loads of medieval and early modern documents recording both protecting rabbits and warrens, and, especially later, attempts to wipe out any that escaped before they did too much damage to crops.

However, it was several hundred years before rabbits escaped and adapted to English habitats, a development that led to their crashing in value (and class) and quickly becoming pests. This eventually led, in the late 1950s, to the deliberate introduction of myxomatosis, a flea -transmitted disease originally from South America. The virus caused a more than 90% mortality in European rabbits, and a massive crash in rabbit populations in the 1960s. I remember walking to primary school and seeing young rabbits staggering out of hedgerows and dropping dead, literally at my feet. To this day regular epidemics keep the British rabbit population at about half of what it was in the early 1950s. What's more, the disease has also been detected occasionally in hares, suggesting some strains of the virus might not be as host-specific as is generally thought.