

Rabbits in Australia

Who's the Bunny?

BY MARK KELLETT

When rabbits were brought to Australia in the earliest days of settlement, they were regarded as a luxury food and there was no way of foreseeing the damage they would inflict on the Australian landscape. In fact, at first, rabbits were surprisingly difficult to breed – until an enterprising squatter arranged to import a particularly hardy wild strain.

IN 1859 the wealthy squatter Thomas Austin had a problem. Like many of his peers, he had risen from modest beginnings to the 'squattocracy' by farming sheep and he saw himself now as part of Australia's landed gentry. He was planning the stately mansion of Barwon Park, where he and his family could live as they believed upper-class English ladies and gentlemen would.

However, gentlemen in the mother country enjoyed 'shooting' as a sport and no suitable game was available on the plains around Barwon Park, so Austin decided to import some. One of the various typically English animals he settled on was the rabbit. Declaring that "The introduction of a few rabbits could do little harm and might provide a touch of home, in addition to a spot of hunting", Austin had his nephew, William Mack, bring 24 rabbits to Australia on the clipper *Lightning*.

The European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) is native to the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa. A number of these Spanish wild rabbits were brought to the Royal Park in Guildford in Britain around the turn of the 13th Century to provide luxury food for the royal family. But those rabbits showed a peculiarity that centuries later would also be seen in Australia. Although their reproductive capacity is legendary, they are sedentary and territorial, and vulnerable to many types of predators. These limitations do not make them good colonists. Henry III's practice of giving breeding pairs to guests spread them to many parts of the kingdom, but only in coastal regions were escapees able to establish feral populations. They remained confined to the coastal regions until the nineteenth century, and the pleasures of hunting and eating them were restricted to the gentry by formidable game laws. Others took to breeding

rabbits selectively under domestication, and eventually several domestic breeds appeared, among them the British silver-grey which was valued for its pelt.

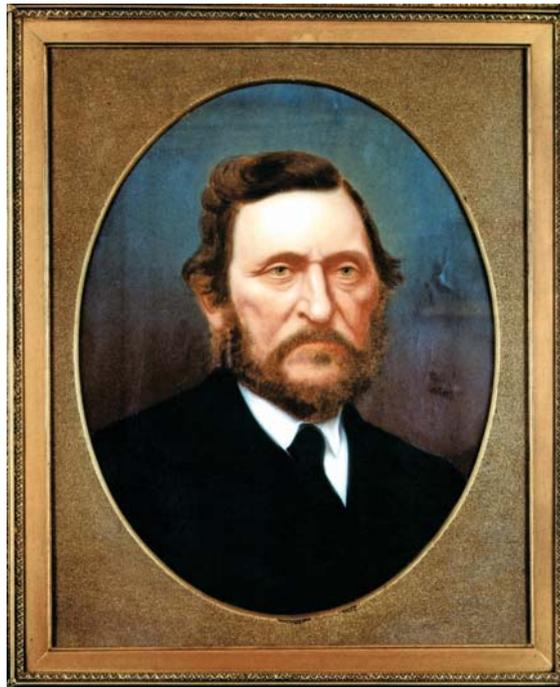
Austin was not the first to bring rabbits to Australia. For as long as Europeans had settled in Australia, they had brought rabbits with them. Descriptions of early importations of domesticated rabbits suggest that they were usually British silver-greys. There were five rabbits among the pathetically small collection of livestock brought to feed those who travelled with the First Fleet. As might be expected for an animal reserved for the gentry, three of these belonged to Governor Philip, and the other two were owned by officers of the detachment.

Other free settlers imitated their rabbit-keeping and demand for rabbits increased. At around the turn of the century, the Reverend Samuel Marsden tried to establish a warren

near his property at Parramatta but he left them unpenned. When many of them were killed, a dog belonging to George Caley, a botanist and protégé of Joseph Banks, was blamed. It triggered a row between two of the colony's founding fathers. By the 1820s many residents of Sydney were breeding rabbits around their homes but, though they must have escaped frequently, they failed to colonise the surrounding district.

By this time, rabbits were colonising Tasmania with rather more success. How or when they arrived there is unknown but in 1822 the domesticated rabbit population attracted the attention of the Surveyor-General, George William Evans. Some must have escaped and, unlike their relatives in Sydney, succeeded in colonising the surrounding land. Some five years later the *Colonial Times* and *Tasmanian Advertiser* reported rabbits "running about on some large estates by thousands". However, the lack of comment in and after this report suggests that they were not then regarded as pests.

The growing sea-traffic to Tasmania led to a number of Bass Strait islands being colonised by rabbits. The waters



As well as his role in the introduction of rabbits to Australia, Thomas Austin was also the first to import Lincoln sheep. His wife, Elizabeth, founded the Austin Hospital in Melbourne. Image courtesy of Barwon Park.

of Bass Strait were treacherous, and had claimed many ships. Castaways on these islands had depended on the seasonal presence of mutton-birds for survival. As a more permanent food supply, rabbits were turned loose on a number of islands. For example, in 1836, a sealer introduced rabbits to a

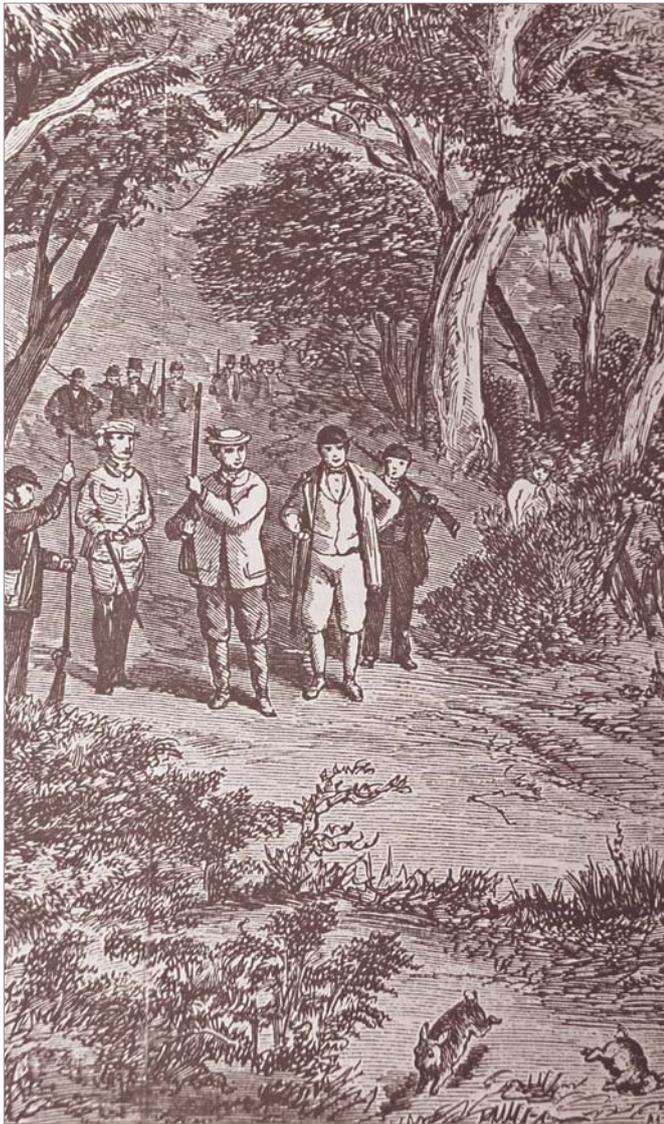
small island off Wilson's Promontory. They flourished in such numbers that in 1842 the crew of the visiting HMS *Beagle* named it Rabbit Island. They themselves had introduced rabbits to the uninhabited Deal Island only weeks before, and were much cheered by the capacity of rabbits to colonise such desolate places. Later, Rabbit Island would be regularly visited by whalers in search of food and sport.

In Melbourne also, rabbits provoked disputes between the colony's founders. John Pascoe Fawcner's party brought Tasmanian rabbits with them to John Batman's "place for a village" in 1836, as the Henty brothers had done when they founded Portland. No sooner had he turned them free than they were shot by a Mr Bullett, one of Henry Batman's men. This incident, with others, caused a row between Fawcner and Batman that was ultimately

settled in one of Melbourne's first cases of arbitration. Though Fawcner was not compensated for the destruction of his rabbits, the arbitrator noted that "some hasty expression of Mr Batman's may have led Mr Bullett to destroy the rabbits".

Barwon Park, Winchelsea, built for Thomas and Elizabeth Austin in 1869 after the royal visit, replaced a less imposing bluestone house. Austin did not have long to enjoy living in it as he died in 1871 at the age of fifty-six.





A rabbit shoot at Barwon Park.

Evidently someone brought rabbits to Melbourne afterwards, for within ten years a feral population in the settlement found the raised foundations of the Police Office a particularly pleasant place to live. But, like the Sydney population, they were restricted to the town and its immediate surrounds.

Rabbits were first reported in South Australia in 1837. It is not known whether they were turned loose through carelessness or as part of a deliberate introduction, but once free they colonised the surrounding countryside rather more successfully than in any other location on the mainland. Two years later sailors were regularly visiting Point Sir Isaac on the Eyre Peninsula to hunt the swarms of rabbits that now lived there.

Rabbits were also introduced to inland areas, though their success was as varied as that of the European settlers. In 1863, Albrecht Feez was warned never to return to New England, New South Wales, as the descendants of the rabbits that he had turned loose in 1854 were rendering the best land unusable. By contrast, Captain McLauchlan's efforts in 1854 to introduce rabbits to his property on the Upper Loddon in Victoria were frustrated by quolls, which relished newly weaned kittens.

In general, only a few of the early introduction attempts could be considered even partially successful. It is probable that this difficulty in colonising was attributable both to the Australian landscape and to the rabbits themselves. The land around the early settlements was often heavily forested, a type of country not favoured by rabbits. The native inhabitants of these forests, including goannas, various birds of prey, quolls, dingoes and aborigines, would have taken rabbits as enthusiastically as the colonists, convicts, cats and dogs. Slow and docile domestic rabbits would have been poorly equipped to deal with the problems. Though this may explain the success of rabbits of domestic stock colonising southern islands, which had few trees and often no carnivores to threaten them, it leaves unexplained their success in Tasmania, which was heavily forested and in which lived many of the same predators, with Tasmanian devils and thylacines to boot. It seems that some combination of geographical, ecological and perhaps even sociological factors kept rabbits of domestic stock from colonising the mainland.

The 24 rabbits that Austin brought to Australia on the *Lightning* were very different from those used in the early introduction attempts. They were mostly wild rabbits from the feral populations in coastal England (William Mack had only been able to trap 18 wild rabbits, and made up the number with silver-greys). When all arrived alive and well at his estate of Barwon Park in the spring of 1859, Austin was overjoyed. He turned 13 of them loose in the tangled scrub by the Barwon and set about rearing the remaining 11 in paling-fenced paddocks under the watchful eye of a gamekeeper. It is not known how well the early feral rabbits fared, but they were augmented some three years later when floodwaters washed away the fences, allowing some of the domesticated population, now thousands strong, to escape.

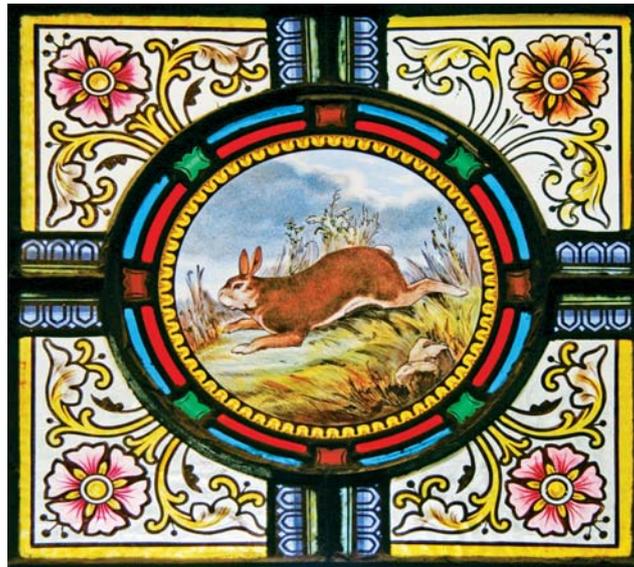
By this time Austin was holding his first rabbit-shooting parties, and by 1865 he had developed an efficient routine. On the previous day the gamekeeper would scythe down a large clearing in the long grass by the river and later, during the night, block the entrance to every burrow he could find. Early next morning the guests would arrive, each with a small retinue of farm hands, and were provided with an elaborate breakfast. As the sport began, the farm hands, wielding sticks, would form a line in the long grass, while the guests with their shotguns settled by the clearing. At Austin's signal, the farm hands would move slowly forwards. The terrified rabbits, forced to hide in the shelter of the grass, fled from their noisy advance into the clearing. Caught out in the open, they were easy targets. By the time the shooters retired for luncheon, 'bags' in the hundreds were not uncommon.

Meanwhile, wild rabbits were breeding or being bred in a number of other places in Australia. Many of these populations were founded by breeding pairs given by Austin to his friends, as Henry III had done in England six hundred years earlier. Others arose from wild rabbits imported independently from England, though few who did this boasted of it to the press as loudly as did Austin, or would later admit to having done so when the rabbit's destructive effects became apparent.

Wild rabbits shared the same colonising strengths and limitations as the domestic rabbits introduced earlier. Thomas Holt bred wild rabbits on his property near

Sydney in the 1860s; some of them escaped and spread to neighbouring properties. Though this feral population became, in Holt's own words "a perfect nuisance", it did not spread far beyond it, suggesting that the factors that kept the domestic rabbits contained remained in force.

In South Australia, however, wild rabbits thrived just as the domestic ones had. It is not known how they got to Australia, but it has been suggested that they were not descended from Austin's population. If this is so, Austin cannot be blamed exclusively for the damage rabbits went on to cause, as it was the South Australian rabbits that spread to the Mallee and the Riverina, where some of the worst damage occurred.



The popularity of rabbit shooting amongst wealthy landowners is reflected in the stained-glass windows of Rupertswood mansion, formerly the home of the Clarke family in Sunbury.

Why did some of these later importations succeed so spectacularly where previous efforts had failed? Certainly rabbits of wild stock were

better suited to colonising than those used previously. However, the Australian landscape itself was now more favourable for the rabbit. Thick stands of forest had been cleared, leaving stretches of the open country favoured by rabbits. Native predators had been shot and poisoned with such enthusiasm that they could now make little impression on rabbit numbers. Imported predators like dogs, cats and foxes were in the early stages of establishment themselves. Human predation was at first discouraged by legislation patterned on the British game laws, though this changed when the rabbit's destructive capacity became apparent.

Austin's rabbit-breeding enterprise's greatest honour was bestowed in 1867 by Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh. The Prince was making a tour of the Empire in command of the frigate, HMS *Galatea*, and his visit to Australia, the first by a member of the royal family, was the subject of considerable excitement. Commenting on "the delightful novelty of finding rabbits in such abundance in Australia", the Prince paid a visit to Barwon Park during his tour. At a rabbit-shoot that evening, Prince Alfred's party killed hundreds of rabbits. Reports of the bag vary considerably, but it was large enough for Austin to describe his royal guest as a "dead shot" and for the resulting gift of rabbit meat to the people of Winchelsea to be dubbed "Rabbit Royale". The Prince wound up staying for another shoot the next day, delaying his arrival at a civic reception in Colac.

It is said that the Prince returned to Austin's estate for yet another shoot at the conclusion of his tour in 1869. By this time, rabbits were wreaking havoc. Farmers were cursing Austin as escapees from his property ate out their best land. In vain they surrounded their land with high stone walls and trenches filled with scrap metal and broken bottles. Demand for ferrets and rabbiters skyrocketed. The price of Western District land fell to half of its original value. Austin had succeeded far beyond his early expectations. Rabbiting had become the "perennial pastime, half sporting,

FENCE OR FOLLY?

By the turn of the century, rabbits had overrun the colonies of Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, and were probing the borders of Queensland and Western Australia. The government of Western Australia, despite the size of the colony, decided to follow the other Australian colonies and fence most of it off.

In 1896, Arthur Mason was sent on a five-month fact-finding mission to determine the extent of the rabbit infestation and the likelihood that a fence might contain them. When he returned, having nearly perished in the rugged waterless country, his findings were the subject of a royal commission, after which surveyor Alfred Canning (later famous for surveying the Canning Stock Route from the Kimberley to the WA goldfields) was sent to select a route.

Begun in 1901, the rabbit-proof fence (actually three fences, containing successively diminished areas as the rabbits advanced) was one of most massive undertakings in Australia up to that time. They were post-and-wire fences, with posts made from local timber or from iron,

linked with three wires, on to which wire mesh was fastened. When all 3,256 kilometres were completed in 1908 at cost of more than £300,000, it could claim to be the longest fence in the world.

The fences were patrolled by boundary riders under the Chief Inspector for Rabbits, Alex Crawford. After horses, bicycles and motor cars were stymied by the harsh terrain, the boundary riders turned to camels. When it was realised that it was difficult to examine a fence from the back of a camel, the boundary riders used camel-drawn buggies.

Crawford and his boundary riders worked in vain. By the end of World War I rabbits had penetrated all three fences, just as they had fences in other parts of Australia, and for much the same reasons. Such was the scale of the fence that it was unlikely that the boundary riders could detect and seal breaches before rabbits crossed them. In spite of the time, effort and money expended on the Rabbit Proof Fence, the 1920s saw rabbit plagues in Western Australia.



Evidence of the devastating effects of rabbits on the landscape, Sofala, NSW.

half utilitarian". In 1868, pressured by complaints from neighbouring farmers, Austin constructed a wire-netting fence around his property. But, like many fences after it, the rabbits had already escaped by the time it was completed.

From the 1870s thousands of men across Australia's pastoral lands were employed as rabbit trappers to control the plague. So bad was the problem in New South Wales in the 1880s that the government offered a bounty on dead rabbits, but in 1887 were forced to withdraw it for fear of going broke when claims were made for more than 25 million scalps. Some landholders resorted to poison, killing many native birds and animals in the process, while others released cats to catch the rabbits, which soon themselves became feral pests, preying on wildlife and newborn lambs.

In the Western district, rabbits left the land degraded but usable. The drier bush or grasslands of much of inland Australia, however, were reduced to wastelands, useless to farmers as well as disastrous for native flora and fauna. Rabbits became the staple diet of many Australians, canned and later frozen rabbit meat was sent to Britain, and rabbit pelts were used to make felt hats. However, the returns from such efforts to exploit the vermin amounted to no more than about a tenth of what the

land might have yielded without them. Fencing, shooting, poisoning, trapping and introduced predators, not only failed to make any impression on rabbit numbers but as often as not disrupted native ecology. Biological controls pioneered by CSIRO, such as myxomatosis (1950) and calicivirus (1995), were more successful, though they were less so in drier country and their effectiveness has been slowly eroded by the development of disease resistance, requiring constant efforts to maintain an uneasy control stalemate.

Heritage Touring

Barwon Park Mansion is a National Trust property located 3 km to the north of Winchelsea, off the Princes Highway between Geelong and Colac in Victoria. The 42-room bluestone mansion with its stables remains largely in original condition, and features a magnificent central staircase leading to an upper floor adorned with elaborate pillars and arches. The house is open from 11.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. on Wednesdays and Sundays, Tel: (03) 5267 2209.

When faced with a disaster, everyone seeks a scapegoat, and the odium of introducing rabbits to Australia has fallen on Thomas Austin. However, this is at least to some extent unjustified. Since rabbits had lived in Britain and more recently Tasmania for years without being recognised as a pest, it seems unfair to accuse Austin of stupidity for not realising that they would become so in mainland Australia.

Further, if it were stupidity, it was not confined to Austin. For almost a hundred years, throughout Australia, many people worked hard, with a persistence that in other circumstances would have been commendable, to introduce rabbits to this country and to provide the conditions for their success. It was not always easy, but they succeeded spectacularly.

Acknowledgments

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