

RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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Above: Ancient woodland – bluebells flourish amongst pollarded hazel (see page 4).

Rats

Rats inhabit everyday phrases like ‘rat race’. They are capable of taking on the very worst of human qualities and plague our thinking in urban myths about their proximity to us/our proximity to them.

Today, it is estimated that about 5% of sewers have rats inhabiting them, 3% of city homes have rats near them (only about 0.5% inside them), but in rural areas around 40% of farms have them. When, in 2012, the BBC’s Charlotte Pritchard interviewed Dr Dave Cowan, then lead of the Food and Environment Research Agency’s wildlife programme for the Radio 4 programme, *More or Less*, he estimated (based on farm survey data) that there would be about 90 rats in and around the agricultural buildings of a typical farm, which came to roughly seven million country rats (in contrast to 3.1 million city rats). Farm rats today are therefore a significant problem.

Rats have been present on British farms, however, for a very long time. As described by Richard Lovegrove, country rats were killed, from the sixteenth century, under the auspices of various ‘vermin’ directives aimed at protecting grain. From the late nineteenth century Rat & Sparrow Clubs rewarded their competitive members by the rat tail. For the Victorians, ratting was an established, unsentimental and ongoing part of farming practice; woven into the local economy as a seasonal necessity complimenting the regular and necessary work of the expert rat-catcher. Rat catchers traditionally had a very good knowledge of rat behaviour, based on experience, and utilised that knowledge to manage catching. They even kept live rats for show (to advertise their skills) and for sport in town. By the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century there



Rats and Flour Sack by C. Tudor (1945) Reproduced by courtesy of Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Lakeland Arts Trust, Kendal, Cumbria

was therefore a long-established body of material on tackling rats, often published by the Incorporated Society for the Destruction of Vermin and aimed directly at farmers and other specialists. But, rats do not always succumb to human management, which means that there have been moments when the topic of farm rat control has hit the national stage as a much larger problem.

In 1910, East Anglian country rats were suspected of carrying bubonic plague and it was this 1910 outbreak in England that led ultimately to a new bounty being placed on their tails. A well-known pest for farmers, it brought the country/farm rat to wider (urban) public attention as something more than a distant and picturesque rural nuisance, or subject of boyhood vernacular sport.

Letters were sent to *The Times* and the subject came to the attention of the Royal Institute of Public Health and of Parliament. The local authorities, under direction of the Local Government Board and with advice from the Board of Agriculture, issued an Order requiring the local sanitary authorities to exterminate the rats and preventing them from entering property. The Lister Institute sent staff to Suffolk to examine the rats and ‘their special flea parasites’. Dr Martin, the then Director of the Institute who led the investigation, had previously been Chair of the Advisory Committee of the India Office on Plague. Therefore, though in 1910 this was not deemed a matter for direct/centralised state intervention, the possibility of plague and the associated risk posed by the movement of rats

Professor Karen Sayer looks at the history of rat control since the 18th century and suggests that it was a concern for the destruction of food supplies that led to government involvement.

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