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A county in context

Introduction

This book is about the landscape of the county of Hertfordshire. It explains the historical processes that created the modern physical environment, concentrating on such matters as the form and location of villages, farms and hamlets, the character of fields, woods and commons, and the varied forms of churches, vernacular houses, and great houses with their associated parks and gardens. But we also use these features, in turn, as forms of historical evidence in their own right, to throw important new light on key debates in social, economic and environmental history. Our focus is not entirely on the rural landscape. Most Hertfordshire people, like the majority of their fellows elsewhere in the country, live in towns and suburbs, and these too – although often created relatively recently – are a part of the county’s historic landscape and have a story to tell. The purpose of this opening chapter is to set the scene, explaining some of the physical contexts and broad patterns of historical development which form the essential background to the more detailed studies presented in the chapters that follow.

Covering a mere 632 square miles (1,638 square kilometres), Hertfordshire is one of the smallest counties in England and – with a population in 2011 of over 1.1 million – among the most densely populated. In some ways it is one of the less remarkable, with no coastline, no very dramatic ranges of hills, no extensive heaths or wetlands. Lionel Munby, writing his seminal *The Hertfordshire Landscape* in the 1970s, suggested – perhaps a little unfairly – that ‘no stranger would think of holidaying here.’¹ In fact, as Munby’s text itself makes clear, the county has much to detain the student of history, archaeology and, above all, landscape history, not least because, in landscape terms, there is so much variety in a small compass: for Hertfordshire is a county of remarkable contrasts. Today much of it is urbanised, or suburbanised, and substantial areas of the south now form, in effect, a continuation of London. But the west, and especially the east, can still boast extensive stretches of ‘unspoilt’ countryside which display a rich variety, ranging from the beech woods of the Chilterns through the intimate, almost secretive clayland countryside around



Figure 1.1. View of the beech woodland of Berkhamsted Frith in the rolling landscape of the Chiltern Hills north of Berkhamsted.



Figure 1.2. The intimate boulder clay landscape of east Hertfordshire south of Braughing: the village of Standon nestles in the valley of the river Rib, surrounded by wooded hills.

Braughing and the Hadhams and the ancient coppiced hornbeam woodlands west of the Lea valley, to the sweeping panoramas of the chalklands near Royston, Baldock, Hexton and Tring (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). None of these fine landscapes is peculiar to the county itself, however. In all directions different arrangements of fields and settlements, woods and commons flow without interruption into neighbouring counties. The phrase ‘the Hertfordshire landscape’ is, to a large extent, meaningless.

In part this circumstance reflects the fact that the county's boundaries are strangely arbitrary and largely unrelated to natural topography. To the east Hertfordshire is separated from Essex, along most of its boundary, by the rivers Lea and Stort, but the configuration of soils and landforms to either side is virtually identical in character. The county's long northern boundary very roughly follows the line of the Chiltern escarpment and, until the end of the nineteenth century, included the parishes of Kensworth and Caddington and part of Studham (all now mainly in Bedfordshire).² But two marked 'salients' reach out onto the level plain of the Midlands to the north, one containing the parishes of Tring and Puttenham and the other, to the north of the town of Baldock, made up of Hinxworth, Ashwell, Radwell, Bygrave, Caldecote and Newnham.³ The other boundaries follow no natural feature at all, seeming to pick their way through the landscape in an arbitrary manner. Until boundary changes in 1965, they included another marked 'peninsula' extending out into Middlesex to the south, embracing Totteridge, East Barnet and Chipping Barnet.⁴ As the authors of the *English Place-Name Society* put it in their volume for the county, published in 1938, 'There can hardly be a county in southern England which is more obviously artificial than Hertfordshire.'⁵ But such things are not so much a problem as part of Hertfordshire's interest. Embracing as it does varied countrysides which extend beyond its boundaries, it provides a particularly good opportunity to study the kinds of factors which have shaped neighbouring but contrasting landscapes.

A focus on this essential diversity of Hertfordshire's landscapes structures much of what follows and serves to some extent to distinguish our book from its great predecessor, Munby's *The Hertfordshire Landscape*, published in 1977. That book, while certainly recognising the complex variety of Hertfordshire's landscapes, nevertheless adopted a more thematic and chronological approach, discussing the physical environment of the county as a whole as this developed through successive periods, rather than concentrating on the different experience of its constituent parts. Munby's book is now more than 35 years old, moreover, and much research has taken place – into Hertfordshire specifically, and landscape history and archaeology more generally – which has served to challenge or at least modify some of its main conclusions. Some of the most important new work has appeared over the last decade: notable examples include Ros Niblett and Isobel Thompson's remarkable synthesis of the archaeology and history of St Albans, Julia Crick's publication of the charters of St Albans Abbey, the new *Historical Atlas* edited by David Short, and the impressive synthesis of the county's geology recently edited by John Catt.⁶ In the chapters that follow we draw extensively on these works and on other research which has been produced over the last few decades by a wide variety of local historians, archaeologists and others. But, while presenting and interpreting the very latest work, this book does not purport to be a final and definitive statement on the county's landscape history. Such a thing does not and can never exist. New discoveries and new approaches will always undermine or modify old orthodoxies and, if this volume remains as relevant in 35 years' time as Munby's does today, we would both be very pleasantly surprised.