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Introduction: Medieval parks of Hertfordshire

MEDIEVAL PARKS HAVE LONG BEEN a subject of interest to landscape historians: once common features in the countryside, most parks ceased to exist centuries ago and yet many have left a variety of clues which enable landscape enthusiasts to determine where they used to be and thus to establish a link with the past. Parks created between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries bore little resemblance to the modern concept of a park, which could encompass everything from the beautifully designed landscape park of the eighteenth century through Victorian municipal parks to a twenty-first-century theme park. Our perception of what made a park in the Middle Ages has developed as new research has been published and it now seems that the notion of what constituted a park did not remain constant, even during the medieval period itself.

Central to the study of medieval parks is the question: what were they for? The traditional view – that they were the playgrounds of the wealthy, who spent their days on horseback hunting deer – has been seriously undermined by a lack of documentary evidence and the discovery that most parks were far too small to accommodate such activity. Nevertheless, the primary motivation for creating a park in the medieval period seems to have been the rearing and management of deer. Hunting for recreation was certainly enjoyed by the social elite in the largest parks but most deer were killed by professional huntsmen and parkers to provide a regular supply of venison for the park-owner.[1] 'Venison was the food of the rich, eaten on special occasions and given as a mark of particular favour', and owning a park was an indicator of high social status.[2]

In addition to being a status symbol, however, parks were functional economic units in the countryside. Many smaller parks were more venison farm than hunting park but they could also be managed to produce a regular supply of timber and wood, and to produce revenue from the leasing of grazing (agistment) and pannage rights. Parks were typically created by enclosing part of the manorial waste – the uncultivated land on the margins of the manor – a process which enabled a medieval lord to take control of important (and dwindling) resources of woodland and pasture, usually to the detriment of his tenants, who relied on the same resources for fuel and for grazing their livestock.[3]

Records of recreational hunting in Hertfordshire's parks are extremely rare – in fact the only two known examples occurred in July 1362, when the Black Prince permitted 'the bishop of Wircestre and Master John de Stretelee to take two bucks of grease' in Berkhamsted park, and in the mid-fifteenth century, when Queen Margaret of Anjou signalled her intention to hunt in Ware park by instructing the parker there to preserve the stocks of deer for her exclusive use.[4] Two earlier queens, Isabella and her daughter, Joan of Scotland, are known to have visited the parks at Almshoe and Maydencroft near Hitchin on consecutive days in July 1358 but there is no record of what they did there.[5] Given the advanced years and delicate health of Queen Isabella (she died just a few weeks later), a hunt on horseback seems unlikely. Such a hunt could, perhaps, be inferred from the record that in October 1295 Joan, Countess of Pembroke, was joined at Hertford castle by her pack of hunting dogs.[6]

Records of hunting by professional huntsmen are equally rare. In the summer of 1298, during a vacancy in the see, Edward I ordered that a hundred fallow bucks should be taken in the parks of the bishopric of Ely, salted, dried, packed in barrels and delivered to his larder in York.[7] Whether any of these deer were

1. J. Birrell, 'Deer and deer farming in medieval England', *Agricultural History Review*, 40 (1993), p. 122.

2. T. Williamson, 'Fish, fur and feather: Man and nature in the post-medieval landscape', in K. Barker and T. Darvill (eds.), *Making English landscapes* (Bournemouth, 1999), p. 93.

3. Birrell, 'Deer and deer farming', p. 112.

4. M.C.B. Dawes, *Register of Edward the Black Prince, part 4* (England) 1351–1365 (London, 1933), p. 458; C. Monro, *Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou* (London, 1863), p. 91.

5. E.A. Bond, 'Notices of the last days of Isabella, Queen of Edward the second, drawn from an account of the expenses of her household', *Archaeologia*, 35 (1853), p. 462.

6. C.M. Woolgar, *The great household in late medieval England* (New Haven & London, 1999), p. 193.

taken in the Hertfordshire parks of the bishopric, at Hatfield or Little Hadham, is not recorded. In 1315 Edward II sent his professional huntsmen with their dogs to take deer in the park at Standon to provide venison for the next sitting of parliament at Westminster.[8] The abbot of St Albans, Thomas de la Mare, kept huntsmen and falconers on his staff in the second half of the fourteenth century, but no records of their activities in the abbey's parks appear to survive.[9]

It seems likely that hunting in parks took on a greater significance during the later Middle Ages, perhaps because there were so few wild deer remaining in the countryside, and a new style of hunting developed, more suited to the confines of a park, whereby deer were driven towards stationary bowmen waiting in a 'standing'.[10] This method of hunting may well have been popular in Hertfordshire's parks, but no evidence for it has been found before the sixteenth century. The gentler art of falconry was practised in the county's parks and has left slightly more evidence in the documentary record, if not in the landscape itself.

The visual relationship between the park and residence of the owner also changed during the Middle Ages. Early parks in Hertfordshire were generally distant from the residence, but in the fifteenth century houses commonly came to be sited within parks.[11] It is possible that the value of a park as a status symbol increased in the later Middle Ages – especially for those who had bought their way into the landowning classes.[12] On the other hand, some park owners seem to have focused on increasing income from their parks in the form of agistment or from sales of wood.

Parks, then, were multifunctional spaces and the emphasis placed on the different functions varied from park to park and shifted over time. One feature of parkland which remained relatively constant during the period, however, was its ecology. Most parkland comprised a complex mosaic of trees and pasture, maintained by grazing animals and by the pollarding of trees and coppicing of woodland. Many parks existed for several centuries and incorporated a remarkably rich and diverse range of habitats.[13] Only tiny fragments of Hertfordshire's once extensive parklands have survived to the present day – including, for example, some exceptional ancient pollarded hornbeams in a surviving area of pasture in Ware Park – and one of the objectives of this study has been to identify and record those fragments in the hope that they might be afforded extra protection in the future, perhaps forming the nuclei of local habitat restoration projects. The extensive wood-pastures of the past have all but disappeared from the county's countryside and any attempt to restore or recreate them, for the benefit of people and wildlife alike, should be encouraged.

Hertfordshire – a parky county?

At the end of the sixteenth century John Norden wrote of Hertfordshire, 'This Shire at this day is, and more hath beene heretofore, much repleat with parkes, woodes, and rivers'.[14] His map of the county (1598), together with the earlier map by Christopher Saxton (1577)[15] and the county history by Sir Henry Chauncy (1700), formed the basis for Evelyn Shirley's 1867 historical survey of the county's parks, in which he described 31 'principal' parks.[16] Several of these, however, were post-medieval in origin and, of the six deer parks he listed as existing in Hertfordshire in 1867, none was wholly medieval in origin, although those at Hatfield, Knebworth and Moor Park (Rickmansworth) probably incorporated parts of their medieval antecedents. James E. Harting, writing in 1881, drew upon the historical research of a wider range of antiquarians and was able to compile information on 44 deer parks in the county, of which ten were extant and about half had medieval origins.[17]

Nearly a century later Lionel Munby described Hertfordshire as 'a county of parks' and found evidence for about 40 medieval 'hunting parks or game preserves'.[18] Leonard Cantor's 1983 total of 44 medieval parks for Hertfordshire was derived, for the most part, from state records such as the Close, Charter and Patent Rolls and inquisitions *post mortem* (most of which were gleaned from the Victoria County History).[19] Oliver Rackham considered Hertfordshire 'the most parky county of all … with ninety known parks', but the source of this figure is a puzzle.[20]

7. *Cal. Close 1296-1302*, pp. 170 and 175.

8. *Cal. Close 1313–18*, pp. 140–1.

9. W. Page (ed.), *A history of the county of Hertford*, 4 (VCH, 1971), 4, p. 396 citing *Gesta abbat*. iii, pp. 390 and 400; Cott. MS. Nero, D vii, fol. 22d.

10. R. Almond, *Medieval hunting* (Stroud, 2003), pp. 82–3.

11. L.M. Cantor and J. Hatherly, 'The medieval parks of England', *Geography*, 64 (1979), p. 79; S.A. Mileson, 'The importance of parks in fifteenth-century society', in L. Clark (ed.), *The fifteenth century V* (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 23–5.

12. S.A. Mileson, 'The sociology of park creation in medieval England', in R. Liddiard (ed.), *The medieval park: new perspectives* (Macclesfield, 2007), pp. 21, 23.

13. I.D. Rotherham, 'The historical ecology of medieval parks and the implications for conservation', in R. Liddiard (ed.), *The medieval park: new perspectives* (Macclesfield, 2007), pp. 79–91.

14. J. Norden, *A description of Hertfordshire* (Ware, 1598, reprinted 1903), p. 2.

15. J. Norden, *Hartford Shire* (1598); C. Saxton, *Hartfordiae Comitatus* (1577).

16. E. Shirley, *English deer parks* (London, 1867), pp. 79–81, citing H. Chauncy, *The historical antiquities of Hertfordshire* (London, 1700).

17. J.E. Harting, 'Hertfordshire deer-parks', *Transactions of the Hertfordshire Natural History Society*, 2 (1881), pp. 97–111. In addition to Chauncy, he cites N. Salmon, *The history of Hertfordshire* (London, 1728); R. Clutterbuck, *The history and antiquities of the county of Hertford*, 1–3 (London, 1815–27); J.E. Cussans, *History of Hertfordshire*, 1–3 (London, 1870–81).

18. L.M. Munby, *The Hertfordshire landscape* (London, 1977), p. 131.

19. L. Cantor, *The medieval parks of England: a gazetteer* (Loughborough, 1983), pp. 38–9 citing *VCH*, 2–4.

20. O. Rackham, *The history of the countryside* (1986; republished London, 1997), p. 123, citing Munby, *Hertfordshire landscape* (but Munby makes no such claim).