

The Place-Names of Hertfordshire

A REVIEW BY PETER HUNTER BLAIR, M.A.

RESEARCH FELLOW OF EMMANUEL COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

ANYONE who undertakes to review a volume of place-names¹ must do so knowing that his task will not be an easy one. Such a volume contains evidence on many different subjects and over a long period of time, so that the reviewer does better to admit the limitations of his own knowledge and confine himself to those matters with which he professes to have some acquaintance. He must, in other words, select topics rather than attempt to cover the whole field. He cannot read the book from beginning to end because it contains material in an undigested form which calls for long and careful study not only of the single volume in question but also of the place-names in the neighbouring counties, a point of particular importance for the county of Hertfordshire because, as the editors remark, hardly any county in southern England is more "obviously artificial" (p. xiii), a fact which is clearly reflected in the different political and ecclesiastical connections of the area within its boundaries. The open downland of the north represents the outer fringe of the country in which the Mercian and Middle Anglian kingdoms had their origin, and it contrasts strongly with the wooded nature of much of the rest of the county which, in its eastern part, contained the foremost city of Roman Britain and, in its western part, reveals traces of having once been a part of the English kingdom of Essex. The work of the *English Place-Name Society* is now reaching a stage which makes it possible to study the evidence of place-names not confined within the often artificial limits of a single county, and the publication of the Hertfordshire volume is particularly welcome because it brings nearer completion the evidence for the whole of the south-eastern midlands.

¹ *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, by J. E. B. Gover, Allen Mawer F. M. Stenton. English Place-Name Society, volume XV, pp. xliii. + 342, 5 maps. Cambridge University Press, 1938. 18s.

The penetration and occupation of Hertfordshire by the Anglo-Saxons did not take place at an early date. This negative conclusion is established by the evidence of archæology as well as of place-names, for Hertfordshire almost alone among the counties on the eastern side of England is lacking both in heathen cemeteries and in place-names of archaic type, as a glance at the distribution of these features in the Ordnance Survey map of Britain in the Dark Ages will readily show. In passing, the name Barley, perhaps to be connected with O.E. *byrgen*, meaning "burial place" (pp. 173-4), may be noted, though significantly enough it is the name of the most north-easterly parish in Hertfordshire, near the Heydon ditch and not far from the early Cambridgeshire cemeteries. Similarly one may note Highley Hill, in Ashwell parish, which in the fourteenth century was *Nylowe*, "probably a compound of *nigon*, 'nine,' and *hlaw*, hence 'nine barrows'" (p. 153), Bygrave (*aet*) *Biggrafan* "by the entrenchments" (p. 155), and Arbury Banks, from O.E. *eorð-burh*, "earthwork" (p. 153), though these are not all to be interpreted as referring to Anglo-Saxon antiquities. The existence of two names of the *-ingas* formation—Braughing and Tewin—serves only to point the contrast with other counties, Essex, for example, having some thirty. This alone suggests the possibility of some British survival, and when other evidence is considered it may be thought that the editors have not unduly emphasised the importance of the early forms of the river-name Beane. A tenth century annal in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calls the river *Bene ficcan*, of which the second element is considered to be "closely related to, if not identical with, the British adjective represented by the Welsh *bychan*, 'little'" (pp. xv and 1). If this interpretation is correct one must infer that the British language continued to be spoken after the English occupation of the county. In view of the importance of this name some discussion of the first element, instead of a mere reference to Ekwall's *River Names*, would not have been out of place, the more so as Bengoe and Bennington appear to contain the same element (cf. pp. 215 and 121). The rarity of Celtic

names is no positive argument against the survival of a British population. This much has already been learnt from the other volumes of the *English Place-Name Society*. It has been remarked before that the Anglo-Saxon name of York—*Eofofrowic*—would never have been suspected as anything but a purely English name but for the chance that earlier British forms are on record, and one may suspect that, in a similar way, behind many apparently English names, there may lurk earlier British names which can never be recognised. A famous Hertfordshire name does in fact lend some support to this suspicion. Hatfield first appears in English history as the meeting place of a synod in 680. Bede records of this synod that it was held *in loco, qui Saxonico vocabulo Haethfelth nominatur* (Ecclesiastical History, bk. IV, ch. 17), and though he does not record what its name was *lingua Brettonum*, he gives at least a suggestion that it was known by some name other than the English *Haethfelth*. It is tolerably certain that Verulamium has not yielded all its evidence on the question of British survival. This is not the place in which to discuss Dr. Wheeler's interpretation of the "Grim's Ditches," but a reference to Bede's account of the martyrdom of St. Alban ought not to be omitted (Ecclesiastical History, Bk. I, ch. 7). The source of this account is not known, but the continuity of tradition which it reveals must surely imply a continuity of occupation from Romano-British to Anglo-Saxon times.

The northern part of Hertfordshire is traversed by a route of great, though not yet fully determined, importance for the early period of Anglo-Saxon history. Across a strip of comparatively open downland lying between the upper waters of the streams which flow southward to the Lea and Thames and those which flow northward to the Ouse runs the Icknield Way, and in this area are a number of place-names of great interest. The name Hitchin preserves an ancient tribal name *Hicce*, which is found in a document in origin probably dating from the seventh century and commonly known as the Tribal Hidage. In this document the *Hicce* are mentioned next in order after the *Gifla*

nised. A famous Hertfordshire name does in fact lend some support to this suspicion. Hatfield first appears (gen. plur.), whose name is preserved in that of the Bedfordshire river Ivel (cf. *The Place-Names of Beds. and Hunts*, p. 8), and before *Wihthara*, *Noxgaga* and *Ohtgaga* (all gen. plur.). These last three in company with several other names in the document have not yet been identified, but whether or not any of them should be sought in the modern county of Hertfordshire, the identification of the *Hicce* with the county round Hitchin shows clearly enough that the connections of this country were with the Mercian and Middle Anglian peoples of which so many traces have been found near Cambridge. One of the most remarkable features revealed by the distribution maps at the end of the volume is the concentration of names in *-tun* in this very area. Thirteen out of a total of rather more than twenty for the whole county lie in the north and no less than eight of these within a mile or two of Hitchin itself. It would be rash to pronounce upon the age of this type of name, but, though it is not of the oldest strata of English place-names, *tun* has already the meaning of a community of persons in the seventh-century Kentish laws. Not far to the west of Hitchin across the county boundary lies Limbury, to be identified as the most northerly of the four towns mentioned in the famous annal 571 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (cf. *The Place-Names of Beds. and Hunts.*, pp. 155-6). One is greatly tempted to explain the concentration of *-tun* names as representing the farms and villages of the *Hicce*, though whether or not they indicate a more peaceful state following the much disputed battle of 571 it would perhaps be unwise to say. Amongst these names in *-tun* are Bearton Green, from O.E. *byrhtun*, "farm belonging to the burh of Hitchin" (p. 9), Charlton, from O.E. *ceorlatun*, "farm of the 'churls'" (pp. 9-10), and Pirton, from O.E. *pirige tun*, "pear-tree farm" (p. 21). Two other interesting names bear on the different activities of the people in this area, though they are first found in rather late sources. Wain Wood, in the parish of Ippolitts, adjacent to Hitchin, has a fourteenth-century form *Weyngdene*, which the editors take for *weohingadene*, *wigingadene* meaning "valley of the heathen worshippers" (p. 14), and

Sperberry Hill was *in campo de Speleburwe* at the beginning of the thirteenth century and is interpreted as "hill of speech" (p. 14). Several other Hertfordshire names emphasise the Anglian connections of parts of the county. Ickleford, a parish name in the half hundred of Hitchin, preserves the same early name as Ickleton in Cambridgeshire, i.e. Icel, and with it may be compared Offley and Pendley in which the famous names Offa and Penda are found. The first element in Hemel Hempstead is connected by the editors with the name of an old district called *Hœmele*, which, they say, is probably related to O.E. *Hamel*, referring perhaps to the broken and uneven character of the country (pp. 40-41). They seem to have overlooked the occurrence of a personal name *hemele* or *hœmele*, which is found as the name of an early Mercian bishop in the ninth century MS. Vespasian B. VI., in the later MS CCCC 183 and in Symeon's *History of the Kings* under the year 765.

Northern Hertfordshire apart, the rest of the county was in many places thickly wooded, but while admitting that the distribution of forest and open land may have had considerable influence on the English occupation of the area which now comprises the county, it is all too easy to look at a map on which the areas of forest have been "restored" and then to set those same areas on one side as being places in which no man would live so long as there was room elsewhere. This tendency to overestimate the deterrent effect of forest on habitation can be partially corrected by considering the several important Roman roads which cross Hertfordshire. Ermine Street and Watling Street are joined by a road running north-east from St. Albans through Welwyn to Braughing, and here, at a place with a name of archaic type, no less than five Roman roads meet. Whatever may have been the attitude of the Anglo-Saxons to the decayed Roman cities—and one can well understand why they preferred building their houses on fresh sites rather than on the top of the accumulated rubbish of an earlier time—it is hard indeed to believe that they did not use, and use extensively, the ready-made system of communication

which the "giants" had bequeathed to them. Two names in Hertfordshire, Hare Street (pp. 151-2), used of Stane Street, the Roman road which enters the county at Bishop's Stortford whence it runs to Baldock, and *Hereweeye*, an alternative name for Ermine Street at Standon (p. 6), embody O.E. *here*, "army," and refer to one important use to which these roads were put. Furthermore, if the Tribal Hidage testifies to some kind of an organised community near Hitchin in the seventh and possibly earlier centuries, other sources show central and southern Hertfordshire to be the scene of important events in early English history. Hatfield (*Haethfelth*, "heath-covered open land," p. 126) and Hertford ("Hart ford," p. 225) were the meeting places of synods in the seventh century, and what seems to be good tradition assigns the foundation of St. Albans to the eighth century. Essendon, the name of a parish adjacent to Bishops Hatfield, has as its earliest form *Eslingadene*, pointing to O.E. *Eslingadenu*, "valley of the people of Esla" (pp. 223-4), which seems to be not far removed from a name of the -ingas type. We are thus forcibly reminded of the probable existence of some kind of political and ecclesiastical organisation in central and southern Hertfordshire of which all traces have been lost.

Hertfordshire was never extensively settled by the Scandinavians, although for legal and administrative purposes it did become a part of the Danelagh. The treaty of Alfred and Guthrum determined the Lea as the boundary between English and Danes, and although after its reconquest at a later period the southern part of this Danelagh came to form the English earldoms of East Anglia and Essex, there can be no doubt that there was always a strong element of Scandinavian social and administrative custom in all the counties that lie east of Watling Street, whether or not the Scandinavian population was great. The westerly extension of Scandinavian influence beyond the limits of Watling Street is proved for Hertfordshire by two of the most interesting names in the whole of the county, the hundred name *Dacorum* and the parish name Tring. *Dacorum* is the genitive plural

of *Daci* used of the Danes in medieval times because of a legend that certain tribes from Dacia had migrated to Denmark (p. 25), and Tring possibly represents the O.N. *ðriðjungr*, "third part," which is familiar in the ridings of Yorkshire and Lindsey (pp. 25-6). In Domesday Book Tring constituted a hundred in itself, composed of the present parish of Tring and several of the neighbouring parishes, but this hundred of Tring covered a very much larger area than a third of the present hundred of Dacorum. On the other hand the original hundred of Dacorum may have been much larger than the modern one (p. 26). The part played by the riding in English administrative history has not yet been determined, but the system it represents is typically Scandinavian. Thirds, quarters, sixths and eighths are found in Scandinavia, while in England, apart from the riding, there is some evidence for the existence of "ferthings" or fourths in Norfolk and Suffolk. There can hardly be any doubt that in the case of Yorkshire, as well as of Lindsey, the term is to be interpreted in a strictly mathematical sense whereby some larger unit was divided into three parts, but the question of Tring, if the connection with O.N. *ðriðjungr* is correct, raises other problems. Of what was Tring the third part, if indeed it was the third part of anything?

The most important evidence about the riding in England is found in the laws of Edward the Confessor, sections 30 and 31. Section 30 contains the following curious sentence:—

Euerwichesscyre, Nicolescyre, Notingehamscyre, Leircestrescyre, Northamtunescyre, usque ad Watlingestret et VIII ultra Watlingestret sub lege Anglorum.

The section which follows draws a distinction between two sets of custom, e.g., 30, 1 says that what the English call hundred, the above mentioned counties call wapentake: again section 31, 1 says that what the English call hundred, the others (*isti*) call wapentake, and what they (*illi*) call three hundreds or four or more, the other (*isti*) call riding (*threhing*). Now it is generally supposed that in section 30, quoted

above, *Anglorum* is a mistake for *Danorum*. Professor Chadwick has suggested that in the counties which are cited by name we have a trace of a smaller Danelagh representing that part of the country which was subject to Scandinavian law in the time of Edgar and Ethelred II.² But if this is so, is there any need to substitute *Danorum* for *Anglorum* in section 30? The contrast which is made in the following sections between *isti* and *illi* surely refers to the contrast between the five counties which are named and the eight beyond Watling Street which are not named. These eight probably included Hunts., Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambs., Beds., Herts., and Essex. The eighth perhaps was the district formerly dependent on Stamford. These are the counties which had been reconquered by the end of Aethelstan's reign and which formed the English earldoms of East Anglia and Essex. May we not therefore suppose that *sub lege Anglorum* refers to *VIII ultra Watlingestret* and not to the five counties which are named? The omission of Derbyshire, where we have the wapentake, from the list is curious and so also is the inclusion of Northamptonshire where the hundred is found. But so far as concerns Northamptonshire there is evidence that it remained under Danish rule at least as late as 932. It is possible therefore that within the area which was subject to heavy Scandinavian occupation there is a distinction between a northern part always subject to Scandinavian laws and a southern part which, after its reconquest by the English kings in the tenth century, became subject to English law, probably with a strong admixture of Scandinavian. Ethelred's third code of laws, which seems to be an embodiment of purely Scandinavian custom, refers specifically to the court of the Five Boroughs, and Cnut II, 71, 2 and 3, distinguishes between Wessex, Mercia and East Anglia on the one hand, and the Danes on the other.

It seems possible that this duality within the Danelagh may be reflected in the nature of the riding. Edward the Confessor 31 refers to the riding as the third part of a province, but in Edward the Con-

² *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions*, 199-200.

fessor 31, 1, there is the statement that what the English call three, four or more hundreds, the others (i.e., the Danes) call *riding*. Now there is a considerable amount of evidence for the holding of meetings of groups of hundreds, notably in the *Historia Eliensis*. It may therefore be found that the term *riding* is used in two senses: first in a strictly Scandinavian sense as the third part of some unit and secondly as a name applied, probably under Scandinavian influence, to groups of hundreds and not necessarily with any mathematical significance. I do not know if there is evidence to show that the hundred of Tring was ever one of a group of hundreds which commonly met together, but this second meaning of the term *riding* perhaps contains the clue to a proper understanding of the administrative significance of the place-name. The problem depends partly on what we are to think of the hundred. There is no positive evidence that the hundred existed as an administrative unit before the time of Edward the Elder, and it is not unlikely that as such it came into use under Scandinavian influence.

A more leisurely study of the Hertfordshire place-names may be expected to yield evidence on many important problems of which only a few have been discussed here. Some sixty pages of the volume are devoted to a collection of minor and field names, a collection for which the editors acknowledge their debt to the work of schools, and this in a county in which the commonest place-name element is O.E. *leah* is of great value, for the conversion of vast areas of forest into land which could be tilled was, after all, the greatest material achievement of the Anglo-Saxon period. This process may not have advanced so far in Hertfordshire by the time of the Norman Conquest as in some other parts of England, but there can surely be no better evidence on the problem than the names of the fields into which the forests were turned. Even the modern field names have not escaped the attention of the editors. The few that are complimentary—Fill-pockets, Lucky Piece, Paradise—contrast with the many that are not—Hopeless Hoppet, Labour in Vain,

Ragman's Dell, Small Beer and the like. In conclusion one cannot avoid a comment on what is perhaps the most remarkable name in all Hertfordshire. None would have guessed that the seemingly innocent Baldock is no other than Baghdad.