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## Chapter I

### Parks and Landed Estates in Hertfordshire

**H**ERTFORDSHIRE IS A SMALL COUNTY, but it contains many parks that were represented on printed maps from the late sixteenth century to the present day. Parks here are not typical of those in England as a whole; most are smaller than in other counties and, in addition, they have changed hands and been altered more frequently than those elsewhere. From 1500 to 1880, the creation and expansion of parks was closely related to the increasing size of landed estates, a process which stopped short of forming estates more than 60,000 acres in extent. The Cecils were the only Hertfordshire family to attain a leading position among the nation's great landowners, and the only family to have owned estates in the county for more than four hundred years. Few other families held their estates for more than three generations. Because of its closeness to London and Westminster, Hertfordshire attracted many ambitious and acquisitive newcomers: members of parliament, nabobs, bankers, brewers, churchmen and senior military officers all sought to enter the elite by climbing the property ladder. Most bought and sold estates in rapid succession, but, during their occupation, they left their distinctive marks on the landscape. After 1880, the destruction and adaptation of parks was linked to the reduction in the number and size of landed estates. As the size of estates diminished, the rate at which parks changed hands accelerated.

The central idea behind this book develops an idea put forward by Lawrence and Jeanne Stone for the period from 1540 to 1879. The

Stones related sizes of country houses to the status of landowners and the extent of their estates,<sup>1</sup> estimating the sizes of houses using a variety of sources, including the hearth tax returns of 1662–73 and Jan Drapentier's engravings of twenty-seven houses owned by gentry families, illustrated in Henry Chauncy's *Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire*, 1700.<sup>2</sup> They also drew upon later county histories by Nathanael Salmon and Robert Clutterbuck which traced descents of manors; John Edwin Cussans and the *Victoria County History*, which in addition followed lineages of mercantile and professional families.<sup>3</sup> The Stones discussed the acquisition of estates by inheritance, marriage and purchase, and explained losses of estates through failures to produce heirs or through debts. Their aim was to elucidate connections between enlarging estates, building houses and joining the ruling elite. In 1992–3, J.T. Smith examined architects' drawings and contemporary illustrations, including over 100 sketches of houses made by H.G. Oldfield in the 1790s and drawings of sixty houses made by John and John Chessell Buckler in the 1830s. These drawings enabled Smith to trace the rebuilding, extending and refacing of country houses to make room for owners to perform new public duties and provide accommodation for household servants.<sup>4</sup>

Instead of relating sizes of houses to sizes of estates, I have examined the relationship between sizes of parks and sizes of estates. Parks were enlarged when their owners had money to spend and their estates expanded. They were altered when heirs succeeded or newcomers bought them. In order to match changes in the number and area of parks with changing fortunes of landowners, it has been necessary to trace the names of owners and occupiers of parks represented on county maps at different dates. John Warburton's map of 1725 and Dury and Andrews' map of 1766 are especially valuable because they inscribed names of owners on the face of their maps. Lists of subscribers, prepared for John Oliver's map in 1695 and A. Bryant's map in 1821 identified many owners of parks. At other dates, it has been difficult to find owners' names. Studies by the Hertfordshire Gardens Trust, directed by Anne Rowe and edited by Tom Williamson and Richard Bisgrove have provided detailed information about individual parks and their owners.<sup>5</sup> Maps present a succession of period pictures

of the changing size and character of parks that have been created and altered by a succession of landowners.

The most distinctive feature of sixteenth-century parks was their outer palings, whose primary purpose was to enclose herds of deer. The right of lords to enclose land for private enjoyment conflicted with the rights of commoners to graze sheep and cattle and gather winter fuel on waste lands and commons. The privilege claimed by lords to preserve deer and other game as their exclusive property was widely resented and closures of roads and paths across parks were regarded as infringements of ancient rights of way. When lords rebuilt their seats within park pales, they withdrew from village communities. To administer rural society, Tudor monarchs more than doubled the number of justices of the peace. Magistrates were given wide powers to maintain law and order; they were directed to organise relief for the poor, the old and infirm and were made responsible for repairing roads and bridges. Parks and new country houses thus became seats of local government. Representing two sides of the division between rulers and ruled in the late sixteenth century, John Norden, the map-maker, rejoiced at the presence of thirty-one parks in Hertfordshire, while William Harrison, the topographer, rebuked owners for not converting parks to productive uses, such as growing corn or grazing cattle.<sup>6</sup>

In the early seventeenth century, the number of parks decreased, some being reclaimed for agriculture, others falling into disrepair. At some places, herds of deer were replaced by cattle, sheep and horses. Other parks were transformed into ornamental grounds with large gardens and attractive layouts of trees and lakes. Magnificent renaissance gardens were created at Theobalds, Hatfield, Moor Park and Gorhambury. During the Civil War, many parks were plundered and estates confiscated, and, after the restoration of Charles II, owners struggled to regain their lands and rebuild their houses. A few had enough money to transform old parks into extensive formal gardens but, for most owners, recovery was slow. John Seller's map of 1675 showed only twenty-one parks in Hertfordshire; John Oliver's map of 1695 showed thirty-five and thirty-four appeared on John Warburton's map of 1725.

Landowning families entered into strict settlements in order to secure estates for themselves and future heirs, so that a member of each generation in turn would hold the land as tenant-for-life. Brides brought dowries, while younger children and widows were given portions. The system was widely adopted after 1660. Settlements favoured families that produced a succession of male heirs and settled estates were enlarged by acquiring lands offered for sale on the open market.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, great estates were able to consolidate their gains and spend fortunes on building and laying out spacious landscape gardens: Dury and Andrews' map of 1766 shows forty-five empaled parks and thirty-four large gardens. While old-established families created large landscapes, many newcomers laid out smaller pleasure grounds, the size and appearance of parks corresponding with the social hierarchy among landowners.

Drawings prepared during the Napoleonic wars by the Ordnance Survey for the first edition one-inch map showed 153 places tinted or stippled as parkland; and in the course of the nineteenth century parks in Hertfordshire reached their maximum extent, covering 7.5 per cent of the surface area on Bryant's map of 1821 and 7.3 per cent on the Ordnance Survey six-inch maps of 1863–81. Some parks shrank a little but many continued to increase in size as planting programmes initiated by earlier generations were extended. A final stage was reached in the enclosure of commons and closure of rights of way to enlarge park boundaries, while conflicts over game preservation remained unresolved at the end of the century. Socially, owners were more isolated from villagers and their own servants than at any time since 1500. The growth of large estates culminated just after the middle of the century. The *Return of Owners of Land* in 1873 recorded that seventy-nine owners of more than 2,000 acres held 48.4 per cent of the surface of the county. Owners of the largest estates possessed all the largest parks and, proportionately, owners of smaller estates owned smaller parks. Victorian parks and small ornamental grounds exhibited a great variety of styles, their chief characteristic being novelty.

The decline of parks began about 1880 with the onset of a deep agricultural depression which led to farm rents in Hertfordshire falling by 40 per cent between 1874 and 1898. As the value of land declined,

landowners had to rely on urban property and investments in commerce and industry to pay for the upkeep of parks and country houses; a few decided to cut their losses and sell to developers. During the First World War, some park owners and their heirs were killed and a few houses and parks were badly damaged by wartime occupants. After the war, low rents and high taxes forced many to sell up; some parks were converted into golf courses, a few were taken over as municipal parks and others were built over. In 1932–3 the fifth edition one-inch Ordnance Survey map showed 165 parks in Hertfordshire, eighty-four fewer than in 1863–81. The proportion of the surface area of the county occupied by parkland decreased from 7.3 per cent in 1863–81 to 6 per cent in 1932–3. In the interwar years, the population of Watford and other towns, the volume of road traffic, and the number of people travelling to London by rail all increased. Hertfordshire was thoroughly urbanised. A few concerns were expressed about the spread of suburbia but little was done to prevent unsightly developments and no steps were taken to save parks.

During the Second World War agriculture revived whilst parks and country houses suffered serious damage. Plans to control rural land use were implemented after 1945, creating a green belt around London, protecting sites of outstanding historic or scientific interest in Hertfordshire and neighbouring counties. The preservation of parks was left in the hands of private owners, most of whom could no longer afford to maintain them out of income from greatly reduced estates. Some parks and country houses were acquired by hotels and golf clubs, and some were adapted as colleges, schools and other institutions, but others continued to be demolished.

### Notes

1. L. Stone and J.C.F. Stone, 'Country houses and their owners in Hertfordshire, 1540–1879', in W.O. Aydelotte, A.G. Bogue and R.W. Fogel (eds.), *The dimensions of quantitative research in history* (London, 1972) pp.56–123; L. Stone and J.C.F. Stone, *An open elite? England 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984).
2. H. Chauncy, *The historical antiquities of Hertfordshire* (Bishops Stortford, 1826).
3. N. Salmon, *The history of Hertfordshire* (London, 1728); R. Clutterbuck, *The history and antiquities of the county of Hertford* (London, 1815–27), 3 vols;