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Introduction

Whittlebury, in Northamptonshire, lies at the heart of what used to be the royal forest of Whittlewood. The village pub is called ‘The Fox and Hounds’ and nearby a handsome sign has the name ‘Whittlebury’ surmounted by a depiction of fallow deer. This juxtaposition illustrates how central hunting has been to the locality. The sign represents the reason for the forest’s existence: the preservation of the king’s deer for hunting. The name of the pub speaks of the local importance of foxhunting in later centuries. This book is concerned with the transition from deer hunting to foxhunting, and the manifestation of that transition in a changing landscape. It focuses on Northamptonshire because that county contained the archetypical landscapes of both the old and the new forms of hunting.

Northamptonshire is perhaps more often thought of as an area of classic Midland open-field systems and parliamentary enclosure, but it contained no fewer than three royal forests. Whittlewood, Salcey and Rockingham originally formed part of a band of forests running from Oxford in the south to Stamford in Lincolnshire in the north (Figure 1.1). From the time of the Norman Conquest to the early modern period these Northamptonshire forests went in and out of favour as royal hunting grounds, but the machinery of deer preservation continued regardless. Of the venison supplied to Charles I for Christmas 1640 by far the largest consignment came from Rockingham Forest; the next largest came from Whittlewood, which tied for second place with the New Forest.¹

By the nineteenth century the sport of hunting had been totally transformed. Foxhunting had replaced deer hunting in terms of both popularity and prestige; where the royal forests had once been the prime hunting grounds, this mantle was now worn by the grassland of the ‘shires’. The great and the good hunted the fox in east Leicestershire, Rutland and west Northamptonshire (Figure 1.2). To hunt anywhere else was to hunt in the ‘provinces’.²

1. P.A.J. Pettit, *The royal forests of Northamptonshire: a study in their economy 1558–1714* (Gateshead, 1968), pp. 3–17; J.C. Cox, *The royal forests of England* (London, 1905), pp. 78–9.
2. R. Carr, *English foxhunting: a history* (1976; London 1986), pp. 68–71; E. Griffin, *Blood sport: hunting in Britain since 1066* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2007), pp. 126–40.

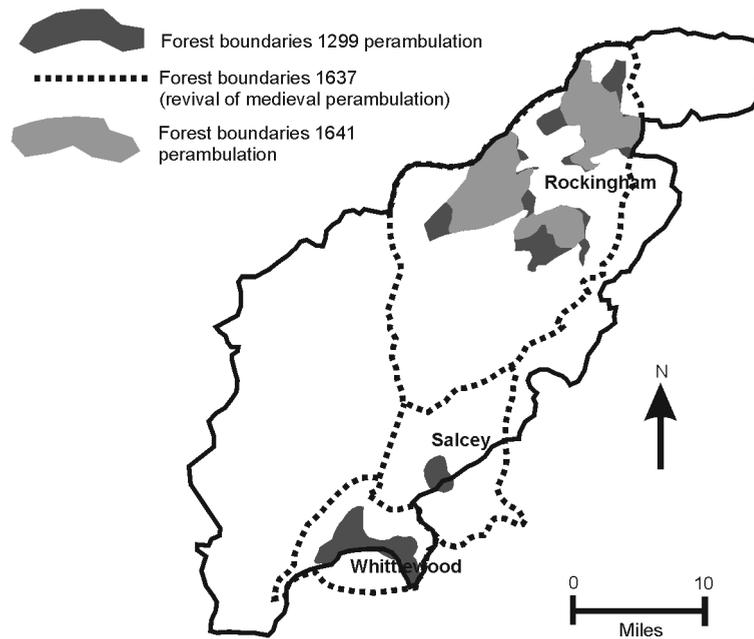


Figure 1.1 The Northamptonshire forests.

Hunting, of either the deer or the fox, was a sport that was intimately connected with the landscape. Both variations required suitable habitat for the preservation of the prey animal and the terrain across which to chase it. The traditional explanation for the decline of deer hunting and the rise of foxhunting has cited change in the landscape with an argument that could be generally summarised thus: forests, the traditional hunting preserves, came increasingly under pressure from 'improvement', which usually meant disafforestation, enclosure and even ploughing up for conversion to arable; and the wooded parts of the forests came to be regarded more highly for the economic potential of their timber reserves than for their provision of habitat for deer. The deer population was the victim of these two developments, and both hunting and preservation became concentrated in deer parks in the course of the sixteenth century. The aftermath of the Civil War saw greater depredations on deer herds as parks were broken and raided. According to some sources this was a blow from which the deer population never recovered and, subsequently, when the nobility and the gentry once more turned their attention to hunting, deer were somewhat thin on the ground. An alternative prey had to be found, and the fox fitted the bill on several counts, one of the

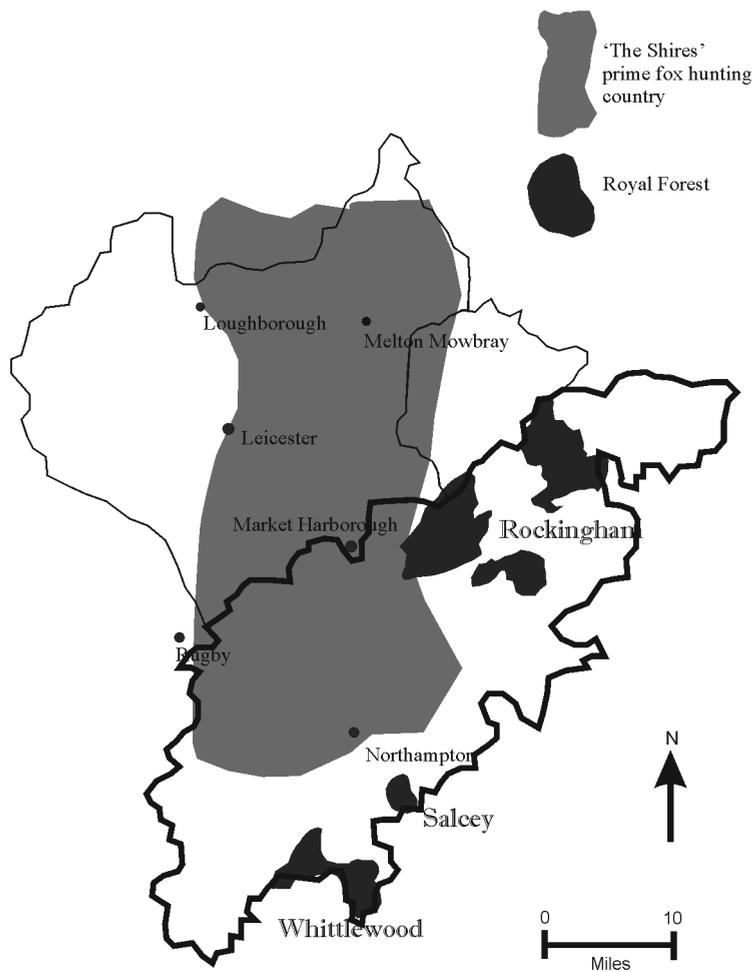


Figure 1.2 'The Shires' hunting country.

foremost being that it could be pursued at speed on near-thoroughbred horses across the enclosed pastures of the Midlands.³

One of the primary aims of this book is to question this account of the hunting transition. While there are few surviving figures for deer population in

3. The earliest rehearsal of this argument that I have found is in W. Scarth Dixon, *Hunting in the olden days* (London, 1912). This is repeated in later works: Carr, *English foxhunting*, pp. 22–4; D. Landry, *The invention of the countryside: hunting, walking and ecology in English literature, 1671–1831* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 5–6; M. Brander, *Hunting and shooting: from earliest times to the present day* (London, 1971), pp. 55, 60–61. Griffin, *Blood sport*, pp. 108–10.

the Northamptonshire forests, those that do exist illustrate a recovery in deer numbers following a mid-seventeenth-century crisis,⁴ a pattern that is repeated for other forests across the country.⁵ Even without taking into account the number of deer that were kept in deer parks, if the will to hunt deer remained there were certainly still deer to hunt. But, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, to talk of ‘hunting’ invariably implied foxhunting. If the growth of the new sport was not due to declining deer populations, its real causes still require investigation, including an examination of what was happening in the landscape in this period and what effect this had on the transition from one form of hunting to the other. If deer hunting simply ‘went out of fashion’ why was this so, and what made foxhunting such an aspirational pastime? In attempting to answer these questions, this study examines the landscape of the forests and parks of Northamptonshire over the period from 1600 to 1850, as well as looking for other developments that may have helped to effect the change, such as the growth of horse racing as a sport and the consequent revolution in the types of horse bred in England. The investigation of these subjects covers a wider geographical area.

Why is it important to investigate the transition in hunting practices? For a great many years there was a tendency to consider the agricultural and landscape history of this period overwhelmingly in economic terms. Some historians followed nineteenth-century agriculturalists in concentrating on ‘improvement’, sharing a belief in the continued progress towards perfection. While this approach has been questioned by more left-leaning historians, they still tended to think primarily in terms of economic ambitions: landscape changes were motivated by the desire to make money, or at least the desire to flaunt it once made. Accordingly, the royal forests in the early modern period have been largely ignored, and when they have been considered it has been as an anachronistic backwater in chronic decline. Little or no attention has been paid to the forests in the context of a hunting and recreational landscape.⁶ Similarly, any effects that the rise of foxhunting as a sport

4. Although Whittlewood was reckoned to have been particularly hard hit by depredations of deer population, in 1828 it was still estimated to have a stock of around 1500 and could support the taking of some 120 bucks and 110 does per year. NRO, Grafton archive: G3982.
5. E.P. Thompson gives figures for Windsor Forest that show that, while deer levels never regained their pre-Civil War numbers, they had certainly recovered significantly by the eighteenth century owing to both breeding and restocking. E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and hunters: the origin of the Black Act* (London, 1975), pp. 55–6.
6. In his foreword to B. Schumer’s *Wychwood*, H. Fox traced three main phases in woodland historiography. The first was primarily concerned with the history of royal forests, and, in particular, their legal and administrative aspects, and ranged from Manwood’s *Treatise of the Forrest Lawes* in 1598 and continued through to Cox’s *Royal forests of England* in 1905. The next phase, arising in the 1950s and 1960s, had historians concentrating on woodland as a negative type of land use, as a resource to be ‘destroyed, tamed, converted into “more profitable” use’. Fox considered Hoskins and Darby to have been the most notable proponents of this view. The third phase, to which Schumer’s work belongs, emphasised the management of woodland and

had upon the shaping of the landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been largely ignored.⁷

Increasingly modern society is reconsidering land use and deciding how to balance the needs of food production and recreation. We are in the process of changing from a mindset of ownership, exclusion and exploitation to one of access and preservation. In short, we are beginning to think of the English countryside not only as a factory but increasingly as a leisure resource.⁸ Hunting with dogs is now banned (although it remains a contentious issue). Perhaps it is now possible to put aside moral judgements of the sport and consider the impact that it has had on the landscape over the centuries. Whether we approve or not, the hunting of deer and of foxes has been an important part in the recreational life of the nation which extended, as we shall see, beyond the social elite. The time seems right to examine the historical relationship between preservation, leisure and the landscape in the context of one of its most widespread recreational uses: hunting with dogs.

its preservation as a valued economic resource. Fox had Pettit's *Royal forests of Northamptonshire* as part of this tradition, with Rackham as its most prolific contributor. B. Schumer, *Wyckwood: the evolution of a wooded landscape* (Charlbury, 1999); Cox, *Royal forests*; Pettit, *Royal forests*; O. Rackham, *Trees and woodland in the British landscape: the complete history of Britain's trees, woods and hedgerows* (1976; London, 2001); O. Rackham, *Ancient woodland: its history, vegetation and uses in England* (London, 1980).

7. Finch has questioned the disregard of the role of foxhunting in shaping the Midland shires in two fairly recent papers: J. Finch, 'Grass, grass, grass: fox-hunting and the creation of the modern landscape', *Landscapes*, 5/2 (2004), pp. 41–52; J. Finch, 'Wider famed countries: historic landscape characterisation in the midland shires', *Landscapes*, 8/2 (2007), pp. 50–63.
8. For a wider discussion of rights of access and new ways of using the landscape, see M. Shoard, *A right to roam* (Oxford, 1999).