

Ninety Years of Standing Up for Hertfordshire's Countryside: the History of CPRE Hertfordshire

1. Setting the Scene: London and Hertfordshire in the 19th century

CPRE Hertfordshire celebrates its 90th Anniversary this year (2018). It was founded following a conference on regional planning held in the county in November 1928. CPRE nationally had been set up two years earlier at a time when loss of countryside to the rapid growth of urban areas had become a national issue.

Hertfordshire's history is, not surprisingly, dominated by its neighbour London, seen here from Stanstead Abbots 20 miles away, although historically the old county of Middlesex lay between the two areas.

Despite rapid population growth in the 20th century Hertfordshire is still 80% rural. It's possible to walk in open countryside within 15 miles of Westminster in the most southerly parts of the county.



Compared to other world cities, London has remained remarkably compact. Los Angeles for example is said to cover an area with a diameter equal to the distance from Cambridge to Brighton. London's population of 8.75 million is accommodated in an area which is only 6% of the area taken up by 10.25 million Los Angeles inhabitants.

How that came about is a fascinating story, involving persuasion and persistence rather than power, with many unsung heroes and campaigns lost as well as won. To celebrate CPRE Hertfordshire's 90th anniversary we plan to publish a series of articles about our history on this website.

This is the first, describing how the county's rural economy was vital to London, until the railways broke that link and facilitated the spread of London outwards.

Hertfordshire: a county of small towns

Historians have described Hertfordshire as 'a county of small towns', without resources such as coal which fuelled large-scale industrial development elsewhere. Its useful natural resources included clean spring-fed streams and in some areas soils especially suited to growing cereals, in particular barley. London needed to be fed and Hertfordshire was well-placed to supply food for the human population, as well as for the many animals housed in London until the 20th century. Until significant improvements in transport allowed faster movement of goods and people London's size was restricted: most inhabitants walked to work and fresh food needed to be produced within a day's wagon journey from the centre of the city.

Hertfordshire attracted royalty and the wealthy, who came out from London to build their country houses where the air was held to be clean and sweet. The parks surrounding many such houses influenced later transport developments. Hertfordshire was thought to be beautiful by

commentators who appreciated its trees, woods and hedges. William Cobbett in his 'Rural Rides' describes a journey through the county in 1822, in which he praises the quality of both the trees and the land, which he calls 'the very best corn land we have in England'. Coming into the county from London, he saw that as far as Watford the crop grown was almost all hay. Soils were improved by dung, 'night soil' and soot, all brought from London. Arable land, orchards, pasture and hay meadows supplied the London markets, especially from the south and west of the county.

London's larder

In the west of the county from the 18th century cereals, clover and turnips were grown to feed sheep and cattle reared for the London market. Watercress was grown along the county's chalk streams from the end of the 18th century and production developed rapidly in the 19th century, especially when railway transport provided a quick means of sending the crop to London.

In southern Hertfordshire by the middle of the 19th century the heavier clay soils mostly grew grass for the hay crop. Until railway transport meant that milk could be brought into London quickly, most of London's milk was produced by cows housed in the capital. From the 1880s dairying dominated the south of the county, combined with root crops grown for feed.

The railway also influenced the location of market gardening, which arrived in the Lea Valley in 1883. The land in London previously used for this purpose was built up with houses. By the 1930s the Lea Valley had the largest area of glasshouses in England.

Hertfordshire's industries: focussed on agricultural products

Much of the county's industry before the 20th century involved the processing of produce from the land. In the east and north soils on the boulder clays left by an ice sheet over 400,000 years ago grew excellent cereals, especially barley. Malted barley is an essential ingredient in beer production, and from the 16th century Ware was the pre-eminent malting centre in England.

So heavy was the wagon traffic carrying barley to Ware along the Old North Road that the road was frequently impassable until improvements were made in the 18th century. At Wadesmill just north of Ware, in an often-wet valley bottom, the road was particularly bad. Here in 1663 the first turnpike gate in the country was set up to collect tolls to contribute to maintaining the road (see photo left). Other road turnpikes followed, managed as trusts, which gradually improved conditions, although not straight away. The historian Ralph Thoresby, whose diary has survived, used the Old North Road between Hoddesdon and Ware in 1680 and commented on its poor condition due to 'the depth of the cart ruts'. The diarist Samuel Pepys travelled the same road in 1688, noting: 'the ways are mighty full of water so as hardly to be passed'. Thoresby, again on the Old North Road near Ware in 1695, saw people swimming to escape flooding on the road. One person even drowned!



As roads improved coach travel boomed, swelling the number of inns in towns on the coaching routes through the county. The businesses were further enhanced by the great increase in mail coach traffic from the 1780s. In the 19th century John McAdam, surveyor for many of the county's turnpikes, revolutionised road building by inventing 'macadamisation', carefully layered rocks and gravel bound together firmly. As railways spread through Hertfordshire in the 19th century, tolls from road users declined so much that in 1888 the turnpike trusts were wound up.

The river Lea was improved after 1739, and again after 1767, making it navigable up to Hertford. The river Stort was also improved in the 1760s, establishing Bishop's Stortford as another malting centre. In 1880 there were 107 malthouses in Ware, 34 in Bishop's Stortford and 20 in Hertford: able to supply London brewers by river, as well as local brewers. In London beer was safer to drink than water until relatively modern times. Other malthouses scattered throughout the county also supplied the local market.

Using the power of water and wood

Each of the county's rivers supported water mills, used to grind corn and for saw milling and fulling (a process to finish woven woollen cloth). There were silk throwing mills in towns like Watford and Tring, where silk thread was finished into a state ready for weaving. In the 19th century paper making became established in the Gade, Colne and Chess valleys, its market the expanding newspaper industry in London and a growing government bureaucracy. Early paper mills, which pulped rags to make the finished product, were set up in former corn mills. By 1810 John Dickinson was operating a mill on the Gade at Apsley with his own paper-making process, and later expanded to further factories at Kings Langley and Croxley. Eventually much of the lower Gade valley between Hemel Hempstead and Rickmansworth was occupied by industrial development, except for the areas around Cashiobury (now known as Cassiobury) and The Grove, whose owners the Earl of Essex and Lord Clarendon refused to allow any development, including railways.



Another significant local industry was the production and use of wood, (the produce of coppicing or pollarding) and timber (from larger single-stemmed trees). A number of tree species grow well in the county, and hornbeam is especially common, particularly in the south and east. Hornbeam was the fuel of choice in the malthouses, but also much in demand for the London firewood market. It was often turned into charcoal which was lighter to transport and had a higher calorific value. Hedges were a major sources of fuel as well, with trees coppiced or pollarded as they were in the woods. In the county there were often narrow wooded strips, perhaps 30 to 40 feet wide, called hedgerows or hedge groves, and many still survive. The dominance of hornbeam is almost certainly the result of the species being deliberately selected due to its value. The photo (left) is of derelict hornbeam pollards in Bayford Wood, with old hornbeam coppice in the background.

Wood turning also flourished in the county, especially in Cheshunt in the east and Berkhamsted in the west. In Berkhamsted the species of choice was beech which was widespread in the Chilterns woods. Another significant industry, straw plaiting, became widespread in the 19th century in the west and north of the county. Since it mainly employed women and girls, often working in their homes, this gave a welcome boost to rural incomes. At its height in the third quarter of the 19th century plaiting employed nearly 13,000 people in the county, 94% of them female. The plait was sold in plait markets in several of the county's towns, and there were hat factories in places like St Albans, where in 1914 over 1,000 people were still employed in straw-hat making and the last factory in the town closed in 1937.

Changes in agriculture

In the 1870s agriculture nationally became depressed, greatly affected by cheaper imports, especially of grain, arriving from new areas of production like North America. Bad weather caused

the worst harvest of the century across the country in 1879, one of a series of poor harvests. Even as the weather improved there was no recovery for agriculture, and the blame was directed at the national preoccupation with industrialisation, which allowed foreign competition in food crops to have a huge impact.

In Hertfordshire the area of arable land declined and cereal growing was confined to lighter soils, a decline only reversed by the World War Two 'dig for victory' campaign. Permanent grass replaced cereals, as dairying moved out from London from the 1880s, remaining an important industry until recently. In some places agricultural land, abandoned altogether, reverted to woodland, as occurred in the Wormley area.

Two enclosure movements affected the county in the 19th century. Almost all the open fields, once managed in common on a strip system, had disappeared by 1900, with just a few surviving into the 20th century at Hitchin, Bygrave, Wallington and Clothall. Many commons were also enclosed, leaving former commoners without the resources to scratch a living from a few grazing animals and the right to collect fuel. Fortunately some commons large and small did survive and are now an important wildlife and recreational resource.

Population growth

In the first half of the 19th century Hertfordshire's population grew by 72%, to nearly 170,000. Much of the growth was in areas served by the new Grand Junction canal, which opened in 1805, and the rapidly expanding network of railways. Berkhamsted, Hemel Hempstead, Watford, St Albans, Hitchin, and the lower Lea Valley towns all grew at this time. The growth was in part due to the expansion of existing local industries including malting, hat making and paper manufacturing, while the availability of cheaper coal carried by canal and later by rail created new industries like gas production. The photo (above) shows the canal near Watford.



In the 1850s and especially in the 1860s as commuting became more common, more rapid population growth occurred in those areas in the south of the county closest to London. In the 1870s and 1880s Hertfordshire was still, by today's standards, a county of small towns, with only St Albans, Hertford, Hitchin and Watford exceeding a square kilometre in extent (the equivalent of today's Redbourn or Wheathampstead which we regard as large villages).

London: increasingly crowded

In the 19th century London's population grew fourfold to reach 4 million by 1900. There was a great deal of immigration from abroad and from elsewhere in the country. In the earlier part of the century areas like Paddington, Bayswater, Kensington, Belgravia, Pimlico, Mayfair and Bloomsbury were developed on previously open countryside, mostly with terraces of houses. Meanwhile in St John's Wood houses were built as detached and semi-detached villas with walled gardens, popular with wealthier families wanting to escape the more congested and less healthy central areas. Poorer people were crammed into back-to-back terraces in districts like Hackney, but there were also better quality 'artisan' cottages built in places such as Battersea.

Some people escaped altogether and became the first commuters: even in the 1820s William Cobbett noted that it was possible to live in Brighton and travel to work in London by coach (albeit for a very short working day). Early in the 19th century most Londoners continued to walk to work, or use cheap river transport provided by steamboats. The wealthier travelled around the city by coach or on horseback. The first regular horse-drawn bus ran along the Marylebone Road in 1829 and soon such buses were reaching more distant areas like Hammersmith and Greenwich, but fares were too high for the working classes.

Although railway building began in the 1830s, until the 1860s very few Londoners travelled to work by train. The early railways built out of London were intended to be long-distance routes, bringing coal and manufactured goods to the capital, and allowing people to travel throughout the country. On the line from Euston the first stop was 11 miles away at Harrow. In the 19th century 5% of London's built-up area was taken up by railways: more than 100,000 people were displaced, mostly from the poorest areas and with no choice but to be crammed into other poor property, increasing overcrowding. The railways also allowed fresh agricultural produce to be carried over greater distances, thus breaking London's essential link with its immediate rural hinterland. Cows gradually disappeared from the capital: half of London's milk arrived by rail in 1870, virtually all of it by 1900.

Commuting and cars

Commuting by train began in the 1850s and gathered pace in the 1860s. At this date workmen's trains were introduced with special low fares on the line running into Liverpool Street. As a result the first finger of development extended out from London into Edmonton and Walthamstow. In other parts of London the railways also stimulated huge expansion of the suburbs built out into what had been open countryside. Four railway bridges over the Thames were built in the 1860s to bring people into the City and the West End. The first underground line opened in 1863 and electrification at the end of the century meant it became cleaner and deep tunnels became practical. The underground, trams and buses all improved transport within London from the new railway termini.

Trams were introduced into the suburbs in the 1870s but use of horses was expensive. The first electric tram ran in 1901 and trams continued to provide transport until 1952. Buses were transformed by petrol engines from 1899; they replaced horse-drawn buses entirely by 1911.



Five principal railway lines were built across Hertfordshire in the 19th century from London termini, and a sixth was added when a line reached Cuffley in 1910: further progress was slow and the passenger service as far as Hertford North only opened in 1924. The photo (left) is of Soper's Viaduct just to the south of Cuffley. There were also numerous branch lines. Most commuters still lived close to railway stations, creating a huge growth in the number of smaller houses built in these locations.

By 1906 400,000 passengers commuted daily into London from its suburbs and all the counties around.

A new era of road use began with the first motor car registration in London in 1895. A year later cars no longer had to follow a man on foot with a red flag and the speed limit was set at 14mph. This was raised to 20mph in 1903, where it remained until 1930, when all speed limits were abolished. Private motor car ownership was more widespread after 1920, when the first petrol filling stations appeared: this meant that commuters no longer needed to live close to railway stations.

The slums remain

Meanwhile there remained an arc of slum tenements stretching from Finsbury through Shoreditch and Stepney and over the river to Bermondsey and Southwark. London remained a major manufacturing centre and the new docks (the first opened in 1802 across the north side of the Isle of Dogs) were also large employers.

The nationwide agricultural depression towards the end of the 19th century resulted in a decline of one quarter in the area of England and Wales under grain production. There was widespread rural depopulation in areas where arable land dominated, such as East Anglia, as unemployed farm workers drifted into London and other major cities.

At the same time, in London the number of births greatly exceeded deaths. The wealthier classes were able to move to the new suburbs or out into the towns served by the new railways, but the poorest were left behind and overcrowding worsened.

In 1889 the London County Council (the LCC) was established: its early action to improve London came in the form of new roads, mainly built through slums just as the railways were, and with a similar effect. The notorious 'rookeries' slums cleared to create Kingsway cost the LCC £4 million, mostly paid as compensation to the slum landowners. Meanwhile the City of London, which before 1840 had no 'office' blocks, had been transformed by 1900 by rebuilding with such buildings. As a result the population of the City fell from 100,000 in 1850 to 27,000 by 1900. There was a similar decline throughout central London.

Ideas for a better world

The LCC was empowered only to clear slums, not to rebuild. In the worst areas fewer than 50% of children born survived to their first birthday. A number of people, among them John Ruskin, William Morris and Octavia Hill, proposed solutions to London's overcrowding and relief for those living in terrible conditions, with ideas for new towns in the countryside and preservation of open spaces accessible from the city.

Meanwhile, there was another person who combined his day job as an official reporter in the Houses of Parliament with formulating radical proposals for changing the way in which people lived. This was Ebenezer Howard, who went on to have perhaps the most significant influence on the way urban areas were planned, and how our countryside was protected.

Howard was the son of shopkeepers in the City of London, living where the Barbican is today. Somewhat surprisingly he was sent to boarding school in Suffolk before he was five, and later also attended a school in Cheshunt. After a spell as a clerk in the City he emigrated to America, tried working as a farmer without success and moved to Chicago where he worked as a reporter. By 1876, back in England, he started his job in Parliament which he did for the rest of his working life. Working in Parliament must have made him think about social issues; outside he mixed with radical thinkers like Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw. Confronted by conditions in London, in 1898

he published an alternative view of how cities and towns could be planned, in his book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. Four years later he published a revised version with a new title: *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*.

Howard saw himself as a practical person as well as a thinker. He tried to improve the way a typewriter worked, and invented a shorthand typewriter, 'The Phonoplayer'. In 1899 his determination to see his ideas put into practice led to the founding of the Garden City Association. In 1903 the first steps were taken to establish the first garden city with the purchase of land in north Hertfordshire, at Letchworth. This was followed by the second, at Welwyn, after the First World War. Not long before he died in 1928 (Sir Ebenezer by now), he hoped that the profits from the sale of his Phonoplayer might fund the establishment of a third garden city.

So as the 20th century arrived, conditions were in place for London's overcrowding to be relieved by spreading out into its surrounding countryside. There was the means to travel and to transport food over much longer distances. The rapid spread of car ownership and rural electricity supplies made it possible to live beyond the network of public transport: this freedom to live in more rural locations had a significant impact in Hertfordshire only after the First World War. As a result Hertfordshire's population doubled in the first half of the 20th century, a rate of growth five times that of the country as a whole.

How that growth didn't overwhelm the county's countryside is the subject of further articles.



It's possible to walk in open countryside within 15 miles of Westminster in the most southerly parts of the county: on the Hertfordshire Way near Letchmore Heath.

