

# SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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## The Medieval Park at Little Walden

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Deer parks were an established landscape feature in medieval Essex. It has been stated by Oliver Rackham that about 160 medieval parks were known to have existed within the county at different times which represents one to every 9.6 square miles. 'They were thicker on the ground than in any county except Hertfordshire'.<sup>1</sup>

Within a radius of ten miles from Great Hallingbury on the west side of Hatfield Forest and the king's park of Hatfield Regis on the east side, there were at least 30 parks. To include Little Walden Park, the focal point has to be moved northwards from Hatfield Forest to Thaxted and the radial area increased from 10 to 12 miles. Within that circle there are records in existence of 35 medieval parks – a similar number to that shown in the first calculation (see Appendix 1).

In recent years there has been an awakening of interest in the history of these deer parks previously largely dismissed as not very interesting or worthwhile. They increased in number after the Norman Conquest but particularly so in the 13th and 14th centuries. That said, the earliest known deer park in England was not of Norman origin. At Ongar there was an enormous Great Park equal in size to Hatfield Frost and mentioned in a will of 1045. It was described as a 'deerhay' (*dehage*) and clearly had Anglo-Saxon origins.<sup>2</sup>

The first question that comes to mind is how to define a medieval deer park? One definition could be – a privately owned enclosure for keeping deer surrounded by a fence or pale, created largely as a status symbol and a display of conspicuous consumption. However, there were more practical reasons for setting up deer parks. Firstly, it was to produce a supply of venison which in the medieval world held a special place in the culture of the times as it was reserved for consumption only by high-status members of the population. Legally it was never sold but was often presented as a gift. A second reason for owning a deer park was to provide hunting facilities for the owner and his guests, but it should be

noted that much, maybe the majority, of the hunting was in fact carried out by employees of the park who were acting on the instructions received from an absentee owner. There are no known records of actual hunts at Little Walden although it is quite evident that deer were kept there. The absence of any records of actual hunting occasions in the park is in no way unusual, for it seems that it was only in royal parks that sometimes records were made. A third reason for creating a deer park was to supply timber for buildings and wood for fuel. In many parks this was an important economic contributor to the enormous costs involved in owning and managing a deer park. While the above three reasons for owning a park were the main considerations there were sometimes opportunities to establish a rabbit warren (*coneygarth*) as the skins, especially black ones, were valuable and the meat sought after. Fish ponds could also sometimes be created, making a welcome contribution to diets especially on feast days. Finally it was possible to let out part of the grassland for grazing by other livestock, especially cattle owned by tenants and others who could be charged a fee (*agistment*).

Little Walden Park had been established at an unrecorded date, but before 1263 – the earliest date we have for the park.<sup>3</sup> An inquisition reported the breaking of the pales around the park by peasants who were possibly angry at having lost their 'pannage rights' in the woodland now enclosed within the park. 'Pannage' is fully described by Oliver Rackham in the following way:

Pannage properly refers to driving pigs into woods between Michaelmas and Martinmas (7 October to 19 November in the modern calendar) to fatten. It was widely accepted that even on wood-pasture commons where grazing was free, the lord of the manor was entitled to a payment (*avesage*) for the acorn crop in the years when it happens.<sup>4</sup>

The history of Little Walden Park is closely associated with the fortunes of the de Bohun family, who were the lords of Walden and the owners of the park. Humphrey de Bohun, 3rd earl of Hereford and 2nd earl of Essex, had a stormy relationship with King Edward I. The king deprived him of all his estates and titles including that of the high office of Constable. The seizure was completed after de Bohun's death, in 1298. This means that the park would have passed into royal hands together with the rest of the manor of Walden.<sup>5</sup>

De Bohun's son, another Humphrey, had married the king's daughter, Elizabeth of Rhuddlan. The king pursued a policy of marrying his daughters without dowries to members of the English higher nobility and insisting on a marriage settlement which potentially might diminish their power and increase that of the Crown. The result was that the estates and titles were settled on the couple jointly, with succession passing only to the earl's children. If the earl died childless before his wife, the earldom of Hereford and Essex would then pass to the Crown together with the high office of Constable.

Edward II succeeded his father in 1307 and ruled as an extremely unpopular monarch. He soon fell out with his brother-in-law Humphrey de Bohun, 4th earl of Hereford and 3rd earl of Essex who, together with other barons, eventually rebelled. The king mounted a campaign to put down the rebellion and in January 1322 de Bohun was killed at the battle of Borobridge. Earl Humphrey died a rebel and traitor and all his lands and estates that had been restored to him once again fell into the king's hands. This Humphrey de Bohun had a large family and his second son John, while still a minor, had been married to Alice, daughter of the earl of Arundel, and when on reaching adulthood he was restored to his father's estates and titles. As his lands had been neglected since the forfeiture of 1322 he was given assistance by the king to restore them. Later this John de Bohun was knighted for his services in the Scottish campaign of 1327 but suffered from ill health for the remainder of his life. He died in 1336 after which his estates were inherited by his daughters.<sup>6</sup>

One of the daughters named Mary had married Henry Bolingbroke, earl of Derby who in 1399 became Henry IV. As a result of his marriage the manor of Walden eventually during the reign of Henry VI became vested in the Crown Estates. It was not to be in private hands again until the manor was granted by Henry VIII to Sir Thomas Audley, the Lord Chancellor in 1538.<sup>7</sup>

Members of the de Bohun family at various times owned the Essex manors of Writtle, Hatfield Broad Oak, Harlow, Debden, Quendon, Great Baddow, Fobbing and Hallingbury. They also owned Hatfield Forest but, as was customary, the deer within the forest remained in the sole ownership of the king. In 1360 William de Bohun was given permission to hunt in the forest.<sup>8</sup>

Medieval parks were commonly set up at some distance removed from the manorial headquarters which in this case were located in the centre of Walden on Berryhill, where the manorial hall had been built within the outer bailey of the castle. Little Walden Park was located at the extreme northern point of the parish and shared a boundary with the adjoining manors/parishes of Hadstock and Great and Little Chesterford.

The actual park site lay at some 300 feet (100.5m) above sea level and was on a flat plateau interfluvium between the Cam river to the west and the Bourne stream to the east, both waterways flowing northwards. In this part of Essex, while the lower slopes tended to be chalky, free-draining, easily-cultivated land, the higher hilltops were generally covered by a heavy clay soil (the till) and carried a woodland vegetation with many large trees: land that was difficult to clear and cultivate but ideal for a deer park. Woodland and wood pasture were essential elements for a successful deer park. John Manwood, the Elizabethan authority on

forests and parks, wrote the following about them: 'it must be stored with great woods or coverts for the secret abode of wild beasts and also with fruitful pastures for their communal feed'. The fruitful pastures were open grassland but still retaining pollarded trees and at the time were known as '*laundes*' (Old French).

The nearest settlements were to the south of the park at Ravenstock Green (now Ravenstock Farm) and some others existed at Burntwood End. Their cultivated lands would have been largely unaffected by the creation of a park.

Little Walden Park was quite large for a medieval deer park, thought to have been about 360 acres (145.7 ha) in extent. Parks varied in size from a few acres, say 50, to others such as the royal park at Havering, Essex which extended to over 1300 acres (526.10 ha).

A survey was made at Little Walden in 1336 which tells us something more about the layout of the park, which was owned at the time by Sir John de Bohun mentioned above. What is described is illuminating:

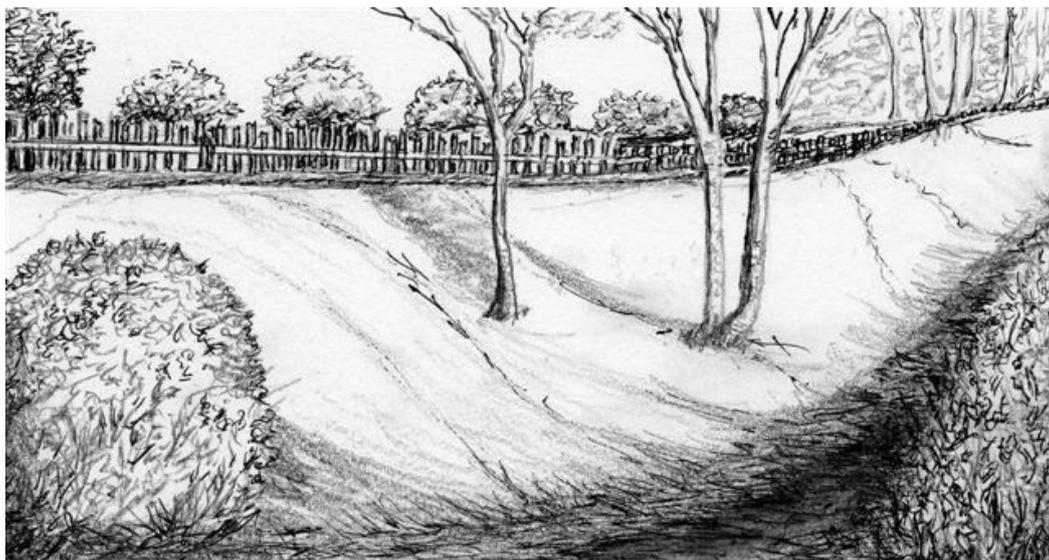
A park containing two leagues in circuit and it is divided into 17 quarters in which 10 acres of underwood can be sold every year worth £4 at 8s an acre. The pasture is worth nothing because of the multitude of deer [overstocked?]. The nuts when they happen are worth 12d.<sup>9</sup>

The first point to note is that there was no possibility of gaining an income by letting out some of the grazing (*agistment* payments) due to possible overstocking of the deer. The second point to note is that this was a compartmented park. In order to achieve a high level of timber management, about 50 per cent of medieval parks were compartmented. It follows also that it must have had costly internal fencing to protect the coppice regrowth for up to nine years after felling. The survey says that there were '17 quarters' or compartments (the same number as Hatfield Forest) allowing for ten acres to be cut and sold each year. The emphasis therefore in this description is placed on wood production being an important factor rather than on any other aspect of the park management. Seventeen compartments were necessary because the coppice stools took 17 or 18 years to produce sufficient underwood to make felling or cutting again worth while. In other words, the coppice felling rotation was based around a 17-year cycle. After felling the whole 10-acre coppice had to be protected from grazing and browsing by the deer for at least nine years by the erection of a temporary deer-proof fence – a considerable expense which would possibly use some of the wood produced from the coppice. After nine years, regrowth would be able to withstand any grazing and browsing and at that stage the fence could be removed and used elsewhere or as firewood.

The area in the park managed under this regime was 170 acres out of the 360 acres total. Each year this brought in £4 at eight shillings per acre. This small contribution to the cost of running the park was in today's money worth probably £2,000 per annum (based on the medieval penny being worth £1 in 1988).

Some provision for supplementary winter feeding had to be made in addition to 'browse' (leafy foliage cut from tree side branches and left on the ground) so hay was usually bought in and stored for which a hay-barn was required to ensure dry storage. Winter starvation caused by overstocking and inadequate winter nutrition were common problems in parks which were poorly managed.

The park perimeter was protected by a wooden fence known as the pale made from cleft oak uprights set in the ground and secured to a horizontal rail. Normally this timber construction was about four feet high. It was set-up on the top of a wide bank created from soil thrown up from an internal ditch. Some banks mentioned by L.M. Cantor were up to 30 feet wide.<sup>10</sup> The combination of the internal ditch and the pale made it impossible for deer to jump over it and escape from the park.



**Sketch depicting the typical internal ditch and pale in a deer park. Many medieval banks have eroded over the years into the ditch and the paling has long since rotted away or been removed. *Illustration by Megan Ridgewell.***

The combined costs of digging the ditch and building the pale were considerable and only affordable by the very wealthy. Feudal unpaid labour services were sometimes used for this work. Readers will remember that the pale was broken into in 1263 and there are records of two further 'park breaks' in 1323 and 1342. It is likely that many other 'park breaks' went unrecorded. They were normally caused by poachers stealing deer.<sup>11</sup>

Most large and medium-sized parks were managed by a parker, a senior figure in the manorial organisation. He should be a man who thoroughly understood deer husbandry and the management of the park grazing and coppicing. He would also be expected to account for all sales of wood and timber sold from the park. Cromarty records several occasions when timber from the park was used at the manorial site on Berryhill in Walden. These are shown below:

- July 1388 – 14 oaks cut down in the park for repair to the manor house.
- July 1405 - 2 oaks cut in the park for making a table for the guesthouse in the hall.
- September 1417 – 8 oaks cut for the repair of the great chamber in the hall attached to the manor.
- No date – 5 cartloads of firewood cut annually in the park for the 5 manorial servants.<sup>12</sup>

There is one other reference recorded by Lord Braybrooke in his *History of Audley End* (1836) which is of interest and is shown below.

Cole mentions that timber was brought from Walden park for building Kings College Chapel, tempore Henry VII, no charge being made except for felling and carriage. (*Mss. Cambridge Coll. See Braybrooke, endnote 13.*)

The roof of the first six bays had been completed with oak and lead at an earlier date. The final completion of the chapel was achieved by 1515. It should be remembered that the park was in royal hands during this period.<sup>13</sup>

The parker would have lived at the lodge and it was the centre from which he ran the park. There do not appear to be any early records of the exact site but it is safe to assume it was in the centre of the park where in later years the park farm was established. This site is shown on later farm maps.

It was important that from the lodge the parker was able to see most of the park and therefore an elevated position was chosen. This same site would have been used for a succession of lodges built and demolished over time and replaced by new structures. As there are no early records of the park lodge at Little Walden, it is fortunate that following an extensive archaeological investigation at Stansted Park, we can build up some sort of a picture of what probably existed at Little Walden. Stansted Park was in existence in 1185. The evidence from Stansted can be summarised by the following. A floor plan of 9mx5m, earth-fast posts forming the walls, clad with wattle and daub panels and a floor simply of beaten earth with a central fireplace. The hall itself would have been open to the roof. This represents a fairly typical domestic structure of the period. There appeared to be evidence of a roughly rectangular fenced

enclosure surrounding this building, and within this area and outside it there was evidence of smaller structures, maybe housing livestock belonging to the parker, and other storage buildings. In total then we have something akin to a small farmyard with a house for the parker.<sup>14</sup>

As time passed some of these rudimentary lodges began to be replaced or improved as owners sought locations and buildings for entertaining their families and friends. This movement towards greater sophistication and comfort began quite early in the reign of Edward III (1327-1377).<sup>15</sup>

While we have no records of the early lodges at Little Walden, we do have something about later ones. Braybrooke writing in 1836 records the following: 'a large substantial building of brick of ancient character but need not be more particularly described'. He does add, however, that 'there is an extensive view from the top of the house'. This certainly sounds like a later brick-built lodge with a viewing platform from which hunting in the park could be watched.<sup>16</sup> Monteith also mentions the old hunting lodge when referring to the park as it was in 1529.<sup>17</sup> According to William Addison writing in 1953, 'a mid-17th century house that still retained some original panelling existed in Little Walden Park though much of this was removed at sometime to Great Chesterford Park'. This building was probably later converted for use as a farmhouse after disparking at Little Walden but the panelling was too valuable to be discarded in a farmhouse.<sup>18</sup>

We now come to the types of deer kept in medieval parks. Red Deer, an indigenous species, were not well adapted to living within the confines of a park and by 1400 had been largely replaced by the imported fallow deer. Their original home was the Levant and it was from that region that they were taken to Sicily. When the Normans conquered the island between 1060 and 1080 they found that the Islamic parks contained these fallow deer. All the evidence of importation into Britain points towards Sicily as being the place from which the Normans brought them by sea to England where they became established in significant numbers by the 12th century.<sup>19</sup>

Parks were sometimes stocked or restocked by forest-bred deer. Fallow deer from Hatfield Forest were the local source of supply. Between 1231 and 1263 deer were sent on the orders of Henry III to a number of Essex parks including Clavering, Writtle, Hallingbury and Havering. They were also sent to parks in Suffolk some 30 miles distance and into Hertfordshire.<sup>20</sup>

As stated above much, maybe the majority, of park hunting was carried out by park staff working under the direction of the parker and a huntsman both of whom were also employees. This hunting was conducted for food collection mainly and the resulting venison was

normally salted and packed into barrels and sent away to wherever it was required. The park deer had to be managed like any other livestock project which included culling to remove old and no longer productive stock and the removal and replacement of older males (bucks) to prevent inbreeding. An owner of a park regarded the deer he owned there as an asset from which he expected to take venison in reasonable quantities for his own household's needs. It was eaten on special occasions and when entertaining. As a park was regarded as a status symbol the owner was able to indulge in 'seigneurial' hunting if he so wished and had the time and inclination to do so. As explained above, the de Bohuns were closely involved with royalty and as Constable the earl was expected to accompany the king during periods of warfare and at other times when he was travelling. In addition to being the earls of Essex they were also the earls of Hereford and had land and manors in that county as well. So how much time they were able to devote to Little Walden Park and more generally to the manor of Walden is a moot point. Some manorial lords only appeared every two years in any one manor, leaving the administration to staff working under the manorial steward while the owner lived a largely peripatetic life.

How then was hunting conducted within the confines of a park? Any idea of participants galloping around, keeping up with a pack of deer hounds chasing alarmed deer crashing into and breaking the pale and internal fences, is surely fanciful in a park of only 360 acres, much of it fenced coppices. It is generally agreed by most authorities on the subject that the 'bow and stable' method was employed when hunting in parks (Figure 4). The deer were rounded up quietly if possible by mounted huntsmen assisted by hounds who moved the deer forward to an ambush of archers hidden in the woodland – the stable – or to a standing constructed for use by archers. Should the purpose of the hunt be to capture live deer, possibly for transporting elsewhere, then nets (the toils) were suspended from trees and the deer became entangled and then could be safely handled. Deer are not generally domesticated in the same way as farm livestock and especially heavy red deer can be dangerous when alarmed.<sup>21</sup>

We have no record of the number of deer kept at Little Walden Park which may have varied considerably from year to year. We do know, as stated above, that the park was approximately 360 acres in total compared with a much larger royal park at Havering of between 1100-1300 acres. In the 13th century it was reputed to hold 500 deer. The 360 acres at Little Walden, under similar management, would hold then approximately 150 deer maximum. Again the 500 deer at Havering produced only a modest 40 fallow deer for venison per year, so the number that could be harvested at Little Walden was 15-20 per year. About 10% of a deer herd could be taken on a sustainable basis each year. This represents a fraction of the meat consumption of an aristocratic or gentry household.<sup>22</sup>

I now come to the later years of the park. According to Cromarty, the park was leased out in 1529.<sup>23</sup> This arrangement continued until 1539 when, following the suppression of the Abbey of Walden their lands were granted to the Lord Chancellor, Thomas Audley and he was raised to the peerage as Baron Audley of Walden in the same year. Thus the park became part of what was to become the Audley End Estate. There are lease documents in the Essex Record Office, the earliest 1528/9 and the last dated 1672.<sup>24</sup>

Queen Elizabeth I visited the park on her second visit to Audley End in 1578 and in preparation 'two shillings was spent for "mendynge" the way at Little Walden Park'. The Queen had a reputation as a great hunter, especially in her younger days but there does not appear to be any evidence that she actually participated in any hunting on that occasion. She may have been entertained to an 'alfresco' meal before departing en route to Norfolk.

At the time of the partition of the estate in 1753 Little Walden Park, by then a leasehold farm, was awarded to the earl of Bristol and became part of his possessions around Great and Little Chesterford. It continued to be in the hands of successive earls for many years, but was sold in the 19th century and became a freehold property.

During the Second World War, Little Walden Park farm was requisitioned for the construction of a Class A airfield, operational from 1943 by the American Ninth Airforce Bomber Command and was used until February 1945. It was returned to civilian use in May 1958, after which the land was split up between five local farms. Sadly any remains of the old deer park would have been totally destroyed when the airfield was constructed, including of course most or all of the remaining woodland.<sup>25</sup>

This brings us to the end of the Little Walden Park story, but not to the end of local parks. Towards the end of the 17th century new ideas were emerging for the creation of 'landscaped parks' to provide a setting for the grand estate house and so the park lived on into the 18th century and beyond.

In this article I have attempted to recount the long history of this medieval deer park which functioned as such for some 300 years and was finally 'disparked', probably in the 17th century. I have made use of a variety of secondary sources which mainly record isolated incidents of historical and landscape interest. My hope is that Little Walden Park will become better known and understood as an important part of our local history.

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**Appendix – see next page**

## Medieval parks within a 12-mile radius from Thaxted

<b>LOCATION OF PARK name where known</b>	<b>EARLIEST <u>KNOWN</u> RECORDED DATE</b>	<b>SURNAME OF OWNER at date shown</b>
Stansted	1185	Mountfitchet
Little Hallingbury	1199	?
Takeley 'Sceteparc'	1206	St John's Abbey
Clavering in Langley	1208	Grasso/de Nevill
Hatfield Regis	1232	Crown/de Breus
Bardfield – Great & Little Lodge	1237	de Clare
Stebbing 'Porters'	1237	de Ferrers
Great Hallingbury	1238	de Nevill
Great Waltham – 'Litterly Park'	1242	de Bohun
Hempstead	1246	de Waterville
Panfield	1246	de Crewes
Little Walden	1263	de Bohun
Great Canfield	1263	Montfitchet
Castle Hedingham – Great Park	1263	de Vere
Castle Hedingham – Castle Park	1263	de Vere
Castle Hedingham – Little Park	1263	de Vere
Thaxted – Southfrith	1271	de Clare
Thaxted – Oldefrith	1271	de Clare
Chrishall	1285	de Pinkney
Little Easton Little Lodge	1300	de Loveyn
Little Easton Little Park	1300	de Loveyn
Little Easton Great Park	1302	de Loveyn
Great Chesterford	1303	Bigod
Aythorpe Roding	1310	de Ferres
Great Sampford – 'Stanley'	1314	de Hanningfield
Gosfield	1314	de Botetout
Pleshy Great Park	1320	de Bohun
Ugley – 'a wood le park'	1327	Ref:Hunter, J. IPM VII85
Henham Lodge	1328	Fitzwalter
Hatfield Broad Oak – 'Broomshambury'	1332	de Bohun
Finchingfield – 'Justices Hall'	1341	Gifford/Clare
Great Dunmow	1341	de Bohun
Thaxted Little Park	1377	de Clare
Barnston	1389	de Berners
Bocking	1427	Dorewood

<b>OTHER PARKS</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>REFERENCE</b>
Chickney	?	Cook, Brown & Phillpotts (see endnote 14, Map of parks and forests in the Stansted area Figure 10.1, p. 228.
Elsenham	?	Ditto
Little Canfield	?	Ditto
Radwinter Park Farm	?	Evidence is in the name – most Park Farms refer to former parks.

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