

THE HICCE

AN ANGLO-SAXON TRIBE OF THE HITCHIN AREA

by Ian Friel

Introduction

At some date between about 650 A.D. and 800 a document was drawn up for the Mercian Crown listing all the tribes and peoples which owed it tribute. This list is now known as the Tribal Hidage, because each group mentioned was assessed at a certain number of hides (in this case a hide was a unit of taxation, not an animal skin; its value at this date is uncertain). Amid large groups such as the *Cilternsaetna* ('Chiltern dwellers' – 4000 hides) and the East Saxons (7000 hides), we find two small tribes each assessed at 300 hides, the *Gifle* and the *Hicce*.¹ Place-name evidence equates the *Gifle* with the Ivel valley in Bedfordshire and the *Hicce* with the later name of Hitchin. However, as the Tribal Hidage is the only document to suggest that there was ever a tribe called the *Hicce*, can we hope to learn anything more about them? This paper will examine the evidence for the nature and structure of their tribal area or *regio*.

It must be admitted that this evidence is fragmentary and of widely differing date. Documents concerned with the North Hertfordshire area are rare before Domesday Book, and archaeological information is likewise rather sparse. We have to proceed by indirection, using place-names and later sources (notably Domesday) to fill out the specifically Anglo-Saxon material.

Adventus Saxonum?

The problem of continuity between the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods is difficult and much-debated, and little is known of what was happening in the Hertfordshire area in the fifth and sixth centuries. Some form of organised urban life seems to have existed at Verulamium until at least the middle of the fifth century,² and it is possible that this town formed the centre of some enclave of sub-Roman Britons (as, for example, did the Roman town at Wroxeter).³ However, if there was such an enclave we know neither its extent or the date at which it ceased to exist. There are two main categories of evidence for this 'sub-Roman territory' theory. The first is largely negative and relies on the comparative dearth of fifth century Anglo-Saxon archaeological material and early Germanic place-names in Hertfordshire.

The lack of early archaeological finds may simply be a reflection of the role of chance in archaeology, but it must be said that the much more plentiful material from Bedfordshire also shows few fifth century objects and sites.⁴ There is a comparative profusion of sixth and seventh century Anglo-Saxon finds from Bedfordshire, indicating that full-scale English settlement of the county did not begin until the sixth century. This ties in with what little documentary evidence is available for the period, and even if the Bedfordshire analogy does not hold good for all of Hertfordshire, it clearly could have implications for the Hitchin area.

The place-name evidence is also somewhat negative. The place-name element *hām* is thought to belong to the earliest level of Anglo-Saxon place-names, but few are to be found in Hertfordshire. Apart from one possible example in the Stevenage area,⁵ most are on the eastern edge of the county, and may have related to the pre-

sence of *foederati*, late-Roman Germanic mercenaries who may have been used to defend Verulamium.

Two possible *wichām* names are found here (Wickham Hill in Braughing and Wickham Spring in Standon), which it is suggested could have developed from a combination of the Latin *vicus* ('village') and the Germanic *ham* ('village' or 'farm'), perhaps pointing to the settlement of Germans in the Roman period (the names are frequently found in the vicinity of Roman remains).⁶

Probable sixth and seventh century Anglo-Saxon names are better represented in Hertfordshire, these being the intermediate *ingahām* ('village of the people of . . .') and its development *ingas* ('the people of . . .'), and these will be discussed later.

The second major class of evidence for a post-Roman enclave is that relating to Celtic survivals. Sub-Roman archaeological material has yet to be recognised in Hertfordshire, but indications of continuity in land-use have been found in the apparent survival of Roman field systems in the layout of the open fields at Great Wymondley and Reed.⁷ Place-name research has produced indications that Celtic-speaking people were to be found in the Hertfordshire area even into the Anglo-Saxon period. Some local river-names, such as the Beane and Lea (and also the Ivel and Ouse in Bedfordshire)⁸ may have originated in the Celtic language. The Beane, indeed, is referred to in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 912 as *Bene ficcan, ficcan* perhaps being a Celtic adjective for 'small'. Some kind of Celtic dialect may therefore have survived as late as the tenth century.⁹ In the eighth century, one of the names that Bede used for Verulamium was an Anglicized version of the Romano-Celtic name, *Verlamacaestir*.¹⁰ Lastly, it should be remarked that at least three of the local Tribal Hidage peoples, the *Ciltern-saetna*, the *Gifle* and the *Hicce* seem to have derived their names from 'Celtic' geographical names. *Ciltern* seems to have come from an obscure hill-name and *Gifle*¹¹ from a river-name *gablo* meaning 'fork'. The picture in the Hitchin area is rather interesting.

It is suggested that the name of the *Hicce* may have originated from a Celtic stream-name, *sych*, meaning 'dry'.¹² It is difficult to see why an apparently Anglo-Saxon group should have taken their name from a 'Celtic' stream, but this may hint at the local survival of Britons. The presumed Great Wymondley field system is close by, and place-name evidence points to the presence of Celtic people in the Hitchin area. The names of King's Walden and St Paul's Walden have been interpreted as the Old English (OE) *weala-denu*, 'valley of the Britons or serfs'. The old name of Walsworth, *Waltonsford* (1066), may have contained the element *wealh* ('Briton, serf'), but unfortunately this cannot be confirmed.¹³ Thus we have indications that Britons were to be found in the vicinity of Hitchin after the advent of the English; we cannot know how large their numbers were, but the 'Walden' settlements are unlikely to have been so named until the majority of their neighbours were English in origin or culture.

Most of the early place-names in the Hitchin area are definitely derived from English, the commonest elements being *leah* ('clearing'), *tūn* ('farm'), the so-called 'habitative' names, and 'topographical' names such as *dūn*, ('hill'), *wielle* ('spring'), *denu* ('valley') and so on. Many were in existence by the time of Domesday (Pirton, Dinsley, Wellbury, for example), but the chronology of such basic names is very difficult to unravel. If this could be done it would help to show which were the places of primary and secondary Anglo-Saxon settlement. Some are found on light, easily drained soils which would have been areas of primary settlement. Hitchin lies on a broad gravel spread around the river Hiz, while Lilley and Langley are on the margins of chalk and gravel soils. Other places are on the drift clay deposits on the

hills, which are likely to have supported tree cover and thus been areas of secondary settlement. These clay deposits are valuable indicators of the possible extent of woodland in the Anglo-Saxon period. When viewed in conjunction with those place-names which refer to the presence of woodland they give some idea of the potential natural barriers around the Hitchin area in the first millennium A.D. (see figure 2). It will be seen that the drift deposits to the south-east, south and south-west of Hitchin seem to have been wooded, perhaps creating a southerly border to the early tribal area. It is worthwhile to note that the Domesday Book record of the amount of woodland available for swine pannage puts the largest concentrations of woods to the east, south-east and south of Hitchin: the Chilterns and south Bedfordshire seem to have been fairly lightly wooded by this time.¹⁴

The place-names of Clifton hundred, to the north of Hitchin, are also rather interesting. There is a concentration of topographical name elements here, and a lack of habitative ones,¹⁵ possibly suggesting that this was an area of secondary settlement, where the names at first provided reference points in an otherwise sparsely-populated landscape (the general lack of 'woodland' names on the heavy Gault clay is something of a puzzle).

In sum, the overall impression is that Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire saw little Anglo-Saxon occupation in the fifth and early sixth centuries, and it is possible that some sub-Roman enclave survived locally. There is a certain amount of evidence for the survival of a Celtic-speaking population in the region, and an unexplained link between the names of some Tribal Hidage peoples, including the *Hicce*, and the apparently Celtic names of certain geographical features. As for the Hitchin area itself, there are indications that the tribal *regio* may have been circumscribed in the south by woodland and in the north by an uninhabited area of waste.

The Hicce

In 571 the West Saxons under Cuthwulf advanced west, defeating the Britons at *Biedcanford* (not identified, but apparently not Bedford) and taking four *burhs*, one of which, called *Lygeanburg*, is identified with Limbury in Luton parish.¹⁶ From the late sixth century the rulers and possibly the bulk of the population in the Hertfordshire–Bedfordshire area were English. This accords with the archaeological evidence, and the appearance of the *Hicce* can perhaps be dated from this period.

Early Anglo-Saxon documentary material is rather scarce, and of relatively little help in trying to locate the *Hicce*. The Tribal Hidage appears to put groups in rough geographical order,¹⁷ but this has to be checked against place-names. The *Gifle* were located in the Ivel valley, and the place-names Northhill and Southhill (*Nortgiuele*, *Sudgiuele*, 1086) may give some idea of the extent of their *regio*.¹⁸ Southhill is just to the north of the fork in the river Ivel (see figs. 1 and 6), and it is reasonable to suppose that the *Hicce* must have been south of here, with the Ivel acting as a boundary. To the west and south-west the presence of the *Cilternsaetna* must have meant that the *Hicce* cannot have penetrated far into the Chiltern Hills. The East Saxons appear to have held at least some of the land to the south (and perhaps the east) of the Hitchin area. In c.704-706 King Offa of the East Saxons granted land in the district or *pagus* of *Haemele* (Hemel Hempstead) to Waldhere, bishop of London.¹⁹ Given the proximity of the district to the Chilterns and probable *Cilternsaetna* territory, it is likely that *Haemele* was a border area for the East Saxons. In any event it implies an ultimate southern limit to the *regio* of the *Hicce*, for like the *Gifle* and *Cilternsaetna* they were a Middle Anglian people, not East Saxon.²⁰ The

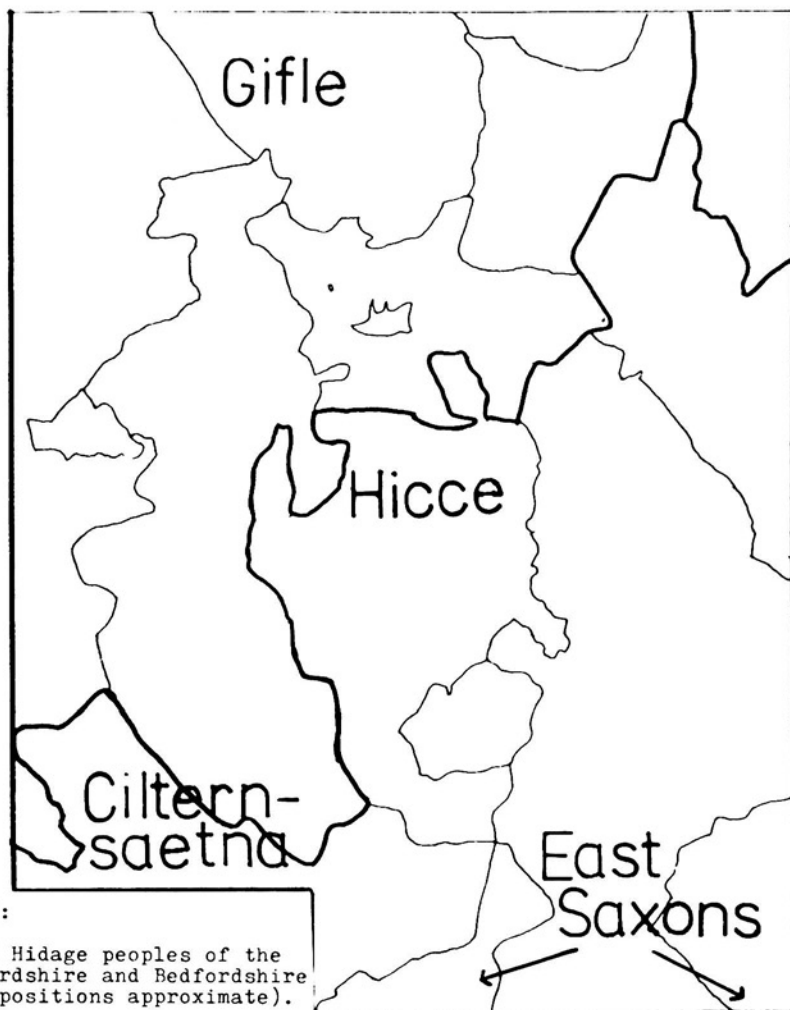


Fig. 1:

Tribal Hidage peoples of the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire area (positions approximate).

— County boundary.

— Hundredal boundary.

Scale. 0 1 2 3m

only other Tribal Hidage groups who can be located within twenty or thirty miles of Hitchin are the East and West Willa, but their location is uncertain and they seem to have had little relevance to the boundaries of the *Hicce*.²¹

Place-names do not offer much help in trying to fix the positions of tribal frontiers in Anglo-Saxon Hertfordshire. The *inga* and *ingas* names mentioned above mean 'the people of ...' and are thought to represent boundary settlements named by outsiders. However, most of the names of this type in Hertfordshire have unique first elements and seem to relate to isolated groups, such as the people of the

Braughing area (*Brachinges*, 1086). Only two names appear to refer to the same people, Bengo (*Belingehou* 1086, 'hoh or spur of land of the dwellers by the river Beane') and Benington (possibly 'tūn of the dwellers by the river Beane': *EPNS XV* does not accept this 'Beningas' interpretation, however).²² Both places are to the east of the river Beane, and so may have been on the edge of their tribal area, but there is little more that can be said at present about the *regio* of the putative *Beningas*.

We have a rough location for the tribal area of the *Hicce*, and at least a rough idea of the possible ultimate extent of its boundaries in the seventh or eighth century: we now have to discuss the evidence for its nature. Writers of the eighth century used the term *regio* to describe a unit smaller than a kingdom, usually a tribal unit.²³ These *regiones* often had certain features in common. At the centre would be a royal palace or *cyninges tūn*, with perhaps a market vill and one main religious site, possibly pagan in origin. The servicing of these centres would be dependent on farms and other settlements within the tribal area. Place-names and the existence of tenurial links between one principal village and a number of surrounding vills can indicate something of the nature and extent of a *regio*, as will be suggested later.

Unfortunately place-names and early Anglo-Saxon documents offer little help in identifying the classic components of a *regio* in the Hitchin area. The close identity between the tribal name *Hicce* and the place-name Hitchin leave little doubt that Hitchin was the tribal centre,²⁴ but it was not called a king's *tūn*. The thirteenth century St Albans chronicler Matthew Paris does say that Offa II of Mercia (757-796) established a vill at Offley where he later died, but there is no other proof of this. Offley is referred to in a tenth century will as *Offanlege* ('Offa's clearing'), but this could merely be a coincidence of names.²⁵ Only excavation could reveal the presence of a Mercian royal palace at Offley.

There are two place-names in the vicinity of Hitchin which may point to the existence of a pagan religious site or sites. These are Waylay Green (*Welei* 1086) and Wain Wood (*Wayndene*, *Wayngdene*, fourteenth century). Waylay Green is not to be found on modern maps, but it is shown on Bryant's 1822 map of Hertfordshire. (The modern O.S. reference for Waylay is TL 175261.) *EPNS XV* interprets *Welei* as *wēoh-lēah*, 'clearing or wood of the heathen worshippers' and Wain as *wēohingadene*, 'valley of the heathen worshippers'.²⁶ More recent research casts doubt on these interpretations, and suggests the derivations *weg*, 'way' for *Welei* (it does indeed stand on a track) and *wāegn*, 'waggon' for Wain. Their 'pagan' nature thus remains unproven.²⁷ If they were religious sites, then they were fairly close to the tribal centre and the track to Waylay would have given it easy access from Hitchin. Wain Wood is now several hundred yards from Waylay Green, but the two may have been joined originally. If so, the wood may have been named from the *lēah*, implying that there was only one pagan site. L.M. Munby infers that the pagan site might actually have been the dip now called Bunyan's Dell, inside Wain Wood:²⁸ this hollow accommodated John Bunyan's gatherings in the seventeenth century, and could have served for Anglo-Saxon religious meetings or the tribal folk-moot.

Beyond a rather dubious etymology and their geographical position, is there anything more that can be said about the possibility that these places were once the pagan religious centres of the *Hicce*? Both sites are in the parish of St Ippollitts (Waylay Green and the track are in fact on one edge), one of the few parishes in

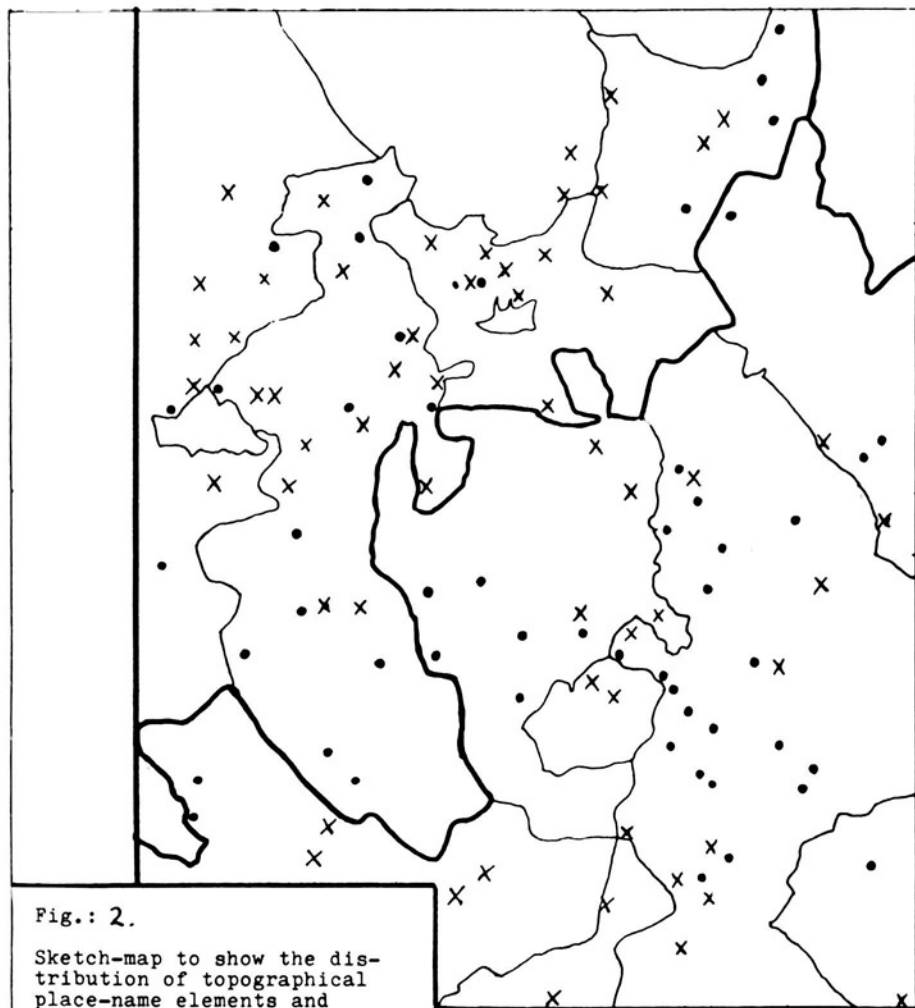


Fig.: 2.

Sketch-map to show the distribution of topographical place-name elements and elements indicating the presence of woodland.

● Topographical element: hyll, hoh, wielle, etc.

X Woodland element: leah, graefe, fyrth, worth, (ge) haeg, wudu, nolt, hangra.

— County boundary.

— Hundredal boundary.

Scale 0 1 2 3m

Hertfordshire named from a saint (St Hippolitus). The parish is not mentioned until the thirteenth century, when it was a chapelry of Hitchin and the hundredal meeting place was at Sperberry Hill nearby.²⁹ Possibly we see here an attempt to Christianize the pagan religious and secular meeting places of the *regio*.

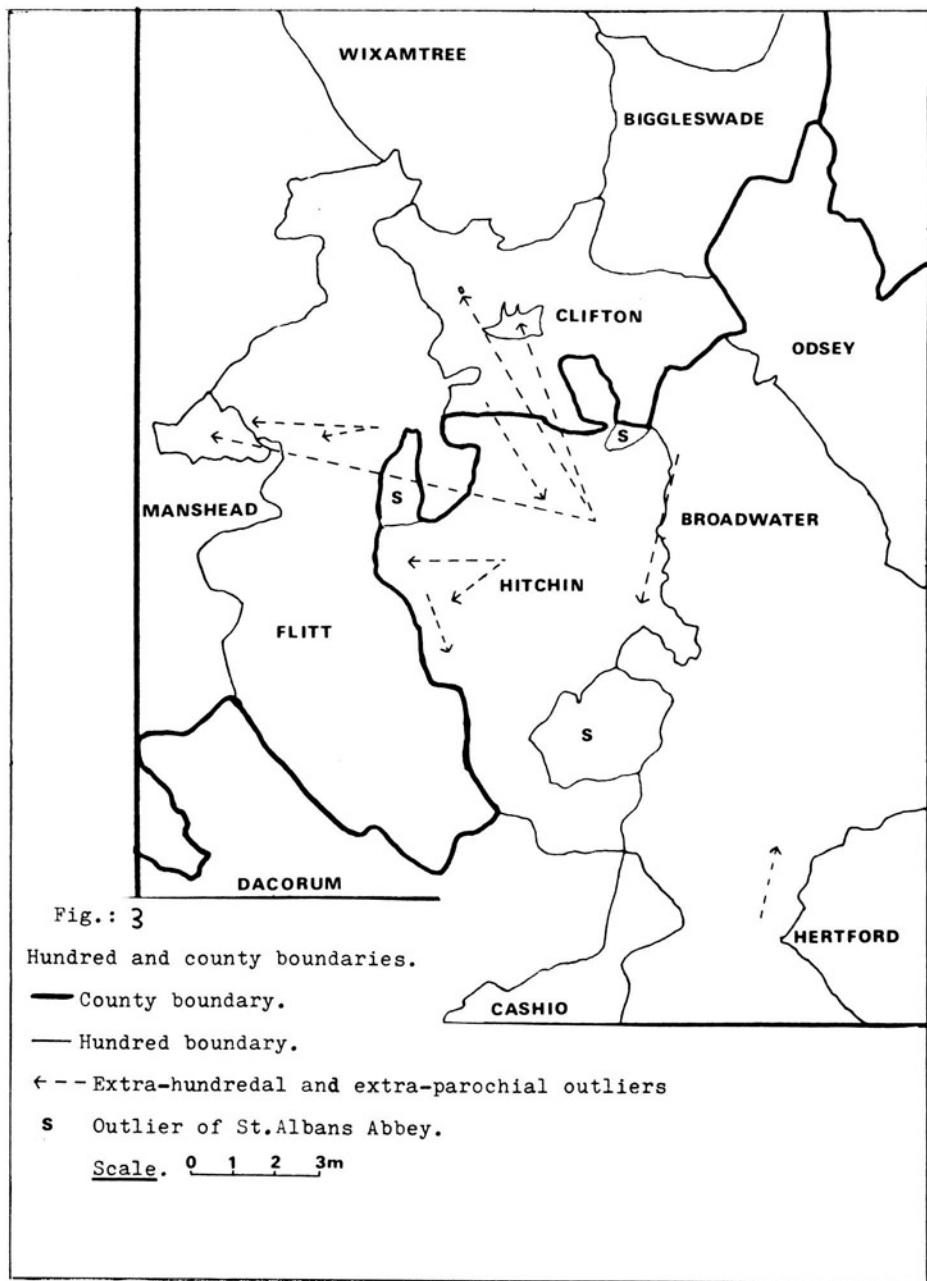
One other place-name in the area may offer a clue to another early element of the *regio*. This is Hitch Wood in Langley parish: the name is not found until the fourteenth century (*Hychewode*), but it may well have been 'the wood of the *Hicce*' in origin, much as Wychwood in Warwickshire was the wood of another tribe, the *Hwicce*. Hitch Wood could have been the common tribal wood, and like Wychwood it may have fulfilled some sort of boundary function (it should be noted that by 1086 Hitch Wood and Langley were in Broadwater hundred and not Hitchin half-hundred).³⁰

Later evidence

The documentary evidence is fairly sparse for our area between the eighth century and the compilation of Domesday Book in 1086, but it is rather more plentiful than that for earlier periods. The Danish wars of the ninth century and their outcome provide us with the first closely defined boundary in the Hertfordshire area. The treaty between Alfred and Guthrum in 886 created the Danelaw, with a boundary running up the Lea to its source at Luton, and then in a straight line to Bedford where it was to follow the Ouse upstream. It cuts through the lines of later local boundaries, and there is no particular reason to believe that it had much regard for local interests.³¹ Although Hitchin was included within the Danelaw, there is no evidence of any substantial Scandinavian activity in the vicinity: no Scandinavian place-names are known and archaeological finds are few. Some evidence of Danish occupation deeper in the Hertfordshire area is given by the name of Dacorum hundred, which means 'of the Danes'. Before this hundred was split in two by the creation of Cashio hundred for St Albans Abbey, it covered virtually all of south and south-east Hertfordshire. However, if there was Danish occupation here it seems to have been slight and temporary.³²

The formation of counties must have had some effect on local tribal units. When and why were Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire created? The *burh* or fortified settlement of Bedford is first mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 914, and Bedford itself is listed in a document known as 'The County Hidage', dated to c.942 (where the county is assessed at 1200 hides).³³ Thus Bedfordshire may have come into existence between 914 and c.942, or perhaps earlier. The *burh* of Hertford was constructed by King Edward of Wessex in 912, but the county is not mentioned until 1011.³⁴ The Domesday Book figure for the number of hides in Hertfordshire is 1,115 hides,³⁵ close enough to the round figure of 1,100 to allow the suggestion that it was an artificial composition, as Bedfordshire seems to have been. These two counties seem to have had origins similar to those outlined by C.S. Taylor in his general theory of the creation of the Mercian shires, that they were formed for military purposes, to service and support a fortified *burh* which acted as the county centre.³⁶ Hertfordshire may therefore have first appeared in the early tenth century. These new administrative centres and their demands must have had a considerable effect on local groups, perhaps cutting traditional boundaries. As Professor Stenton once observed, the West Saxon kings 'had no respect for the ancient divisions of Mercia'.³⁷ (See figure 3).

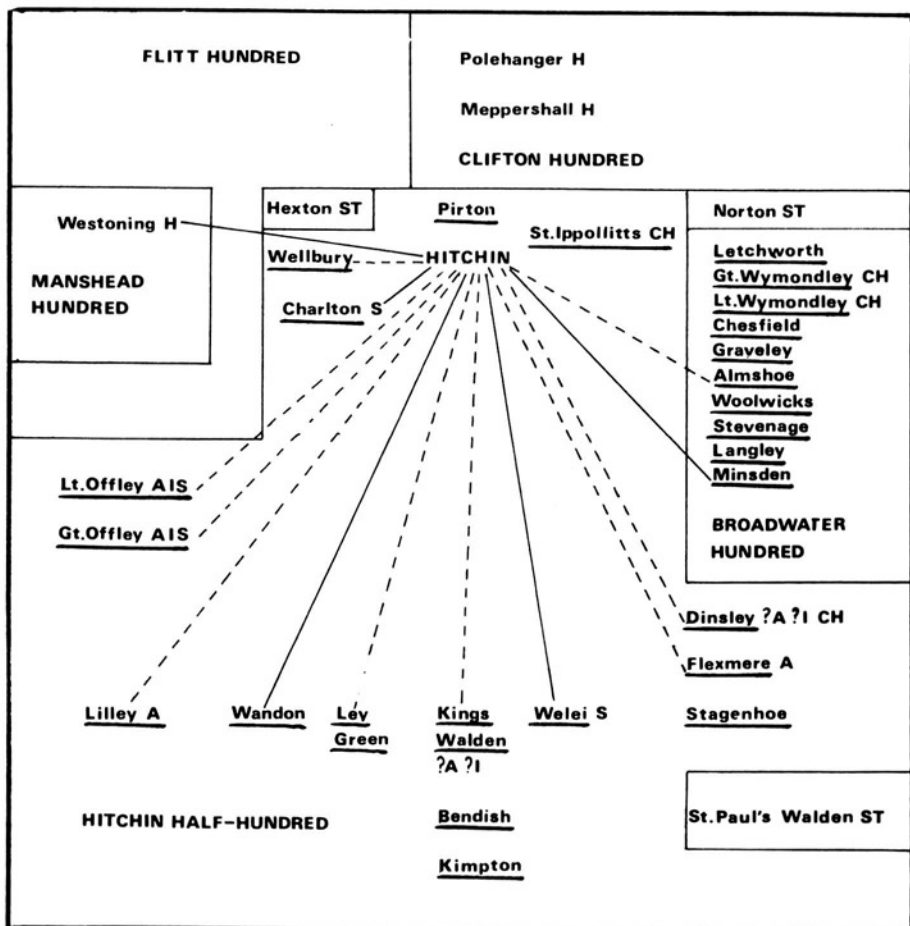
Can later information hope to tell us anything useful about the *regio* of the



Hicce? Domesday Book is one of the major documents of medieval English history, and although it dates from a period perhaps four or five hundred years later than the formation of the tribal area of the *Hicce*, it is of great value in trying to identify tribal *regiones*. Domesday was a tenurially-arranged taxation list, and it is very useful in giving the distribution and extent of royal estates in 1066 and 1086. Frequently the area covered by a royal estate is the only clue to the extent of a tribal *regio*, for in some cases the authority of a tribal ruler seems to have devolved upon that of a king. Unfortunately the Hertfordshire DB lists hardly any explicitly royal estates in 1066, although one large entity is described as belonging to the king in 1086 – the half-hundred of Hitchin. Bedfordshire, by contrast had three distinct and compact royal estates, Houghton Regis, Leighton Buzzard and Luton. The latter two had a number of characteristics identifying them as ancient royal demesne, such as prescriptive markets (that is, markets without charters, dating from before the Norman Conquest) and they also rendered some archaic services, including *firma unius noctis*, ‘one night’s farm’, the duty of providing one night’s food and shelter for the king and court. Only Kensworth and Caddington in Hertfordshire were held from the King in 1066,³⁸ and as these were adjacent to Caddington in Bedfordshire and also to Luton and Houghton Regis, it is likely that they once formed part of the same territory, perhaps a tribal area belonging to the *Ciltirnaetna*.

In 1066 Hitchin half-hundred was in the hands of Earl Harold (later King Harold, killed at Hastings), a member of an important aristocratic family. There is no statement in Domesday that it had been a royal estate before 1066, but the half-hundred had a number of features suggesting that it had once been royal land. In 1066 Hitchin was the only administrative centre in Hertfordshire surrounded with vills linked to it by both tenurial and jurisdictional ties (see figure 4). There were twenty settlements within Hitchin half-hundred in 1066 (excluding Hitchin itself), and fourteen were connected to Hitchin either by the bonds of ownership (directly through Harold or through his men) or by the force of administrative control (for example by being in the ‘soke’ or jurisdiction of Hitchin). Two features of this control are of especial interest. The services of *inward*, ‘escort’, and *avera*, ‘cartage’ were owed by the tenants at Great Offley, Lilley and Flexmere (DB also says that they were owed ‘by force and unjustly’ at King’s Walden and Dinsley).³⁹ *V. C. H. Herts.* believes that these services indicate Hitchin was once royal demesne (they are only found at Hitchin and in Cambridgeshire in DB).⁴⁰ With such services, and with its close internal ties, Hitchin was very much the exception in DB Hertfordshire. The evidence of Domesday Book is strong support for believing that Hitchin was once the centre of an Anglo-Saxon royal estate.

The extra-hundredal outliers of Hitchin are further evidence of the extent of this estate, and through that, of the extent of the *regio*. Two of the outliers were in the neighbouring hundred of Broadwater (although in these cases, Almshoe and Minsden, the link was tenurial, not administrative, and these settlements were within the jurisdiction of Broadwater). However, three detached portions of Hitchin half-hundred lay in Bedfordshire in 1066 and 1086, Polehanger, part of Meppershall, and Westoning. The first two were surrounded by Clifton hundred, whilst Westoning apparently owed some allegiance to Manshead hundred, for DB says of it: ‘it lay and lies in Hitchin; but the obligations of this manor lay in Bedfordshire before 1066, in the hundred of Manshead. It is and always was a manor there’.⁴¹ It would be very tempting to identify Westoning (DB *Westone*: it is not an *ingas* place-name)



—:Held by Earl Harold.
 - - -:Held of Earl Harold,
 or by his men.
 A :Owed avera.
 I :Owed inward.
 S :In the soke of
 Hitchin.

?A :Avera 'owed wrongly' (DB).
 ?I :Inward 'owed wrongly' (DB).
 H :In Hitchin half-hundred.
 ST:Held by St.Albans Abbey.
Minsden:In Hitchin deanery (1291).
 CH:Chapelry of Hitchin.

Fig. 4 : Schematic diagram of Hitchin half-hundred (1066) and the rural deanery (1291).

as the western outlier, the *west-tun* of the *regio* of the *Hicce*, but the statement in Domesday Book suggests that the connection with Hitchin was not of any great age. Westoning was Earl Harold's only complete manor in Bedfordshire, and a fairly prosperous settlement: perhaps he seized it and transferred it to Hitchin half-hundred, as Domesday says he did with Wymondley.⁴² However, Domesday makes no such assertion about Westoning, so there is still a slight possibility that the link between Westoning and Hitchin was an ancient one. One cannot definitely claim Westoning as one of the boundary points of the *regio* of the *Hicce*.

Polehanger and Meppershall were related with Hitchin by ties of jurisdiction, indicating that at one point the area of Clifton hundred was under some form of control from Hitchin, and thus that the *regio* may have extended as far north as the fork of the river Ivel (it will be remembered that Southill, the southern vill of the *Gifle* was located just north of here). There were also detached portions of Shillington parish in Hitchin half-hundred, further evidence of links between the half-hundred and Clifton hundred. It should be noted that where other settlements in the vicinity of Hitchin had outliers, then these outliers were confined to either the half-hundred alone, or to areas of the half-hundred and Hitchin deanery (for example, the link between Letchworth and its outliers near Knebworth. (See figure 3).

Both of the hundreds of Hitchin and Flitt (in Bedfordshire) are examples of the phenomenon known as *manerium cum hundredo*, that is the grant of a hundred with a royal manor,⁴³ It has been suggested that these related to pre-conquest units pre-dating the creation of hundreds in the tenth century. The close ties between Hitchin and its half-hundred imply that the half *hundred de Hiz* of 1086 was at least in part the successor of the *regio* of the *Hicce*.

It is very difficult to equate the hidation totals given in the Tribal Hidage with those given in Domesday Book, although superficially this is possible. If one adds the Domesday hidation of Hitchin half-hundred (just over 72 hides) to that of Broadwater hundred (229 hides – it is described as a 'double hundred'),⁴⁴ the resulting figure is just over 301 hides, very close to the hidation of the *regio* of the *Hicce* (300 hides) found in the Tribal Hidage. There are objections to regarding the unit formed by the amalgamation of Hitchin and Broadwater hundreds as being a direct reflection of the tribal area of the *Hicce*. The first is that some three or four hundred years separate the two assessment lists: it would be naive to assume that the hidation would remain unaltered for such a long period. Secondly, given the indications that the creation of Bedfordshire cut across part of the territory of the *Hicce*, one would have to include the hidation of the missing land in the total, and this would put it above the figure of three hundred. The 300-hide Hitchin-Broadwater unit may simply have been conceived as a quarter of an original 1200-hide Hertfordshire, the 1,115 hides of 1066 representing a decrease in the hidation of the county, and not an increase from 1100.

As we have seen, the organization of a *regio* had religious as well as administrative elements. The pagan religious site or sites of the *regio* may have been a few miles from the tribal centre. Perhaps by deliberate contrast, the Christian centre of the area was placed in Hitchin itself. The early churches of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were known as minsters or *monasteria*, and they were usually founded by some king or ecclesiastical dignitary to serve the needs of a royal estate or tribal area.⁴⁵ The minster created daughter chapelries within its pastoral area, and knowledge of such chapelries can be valuable in determining the extent of a tribal unit.

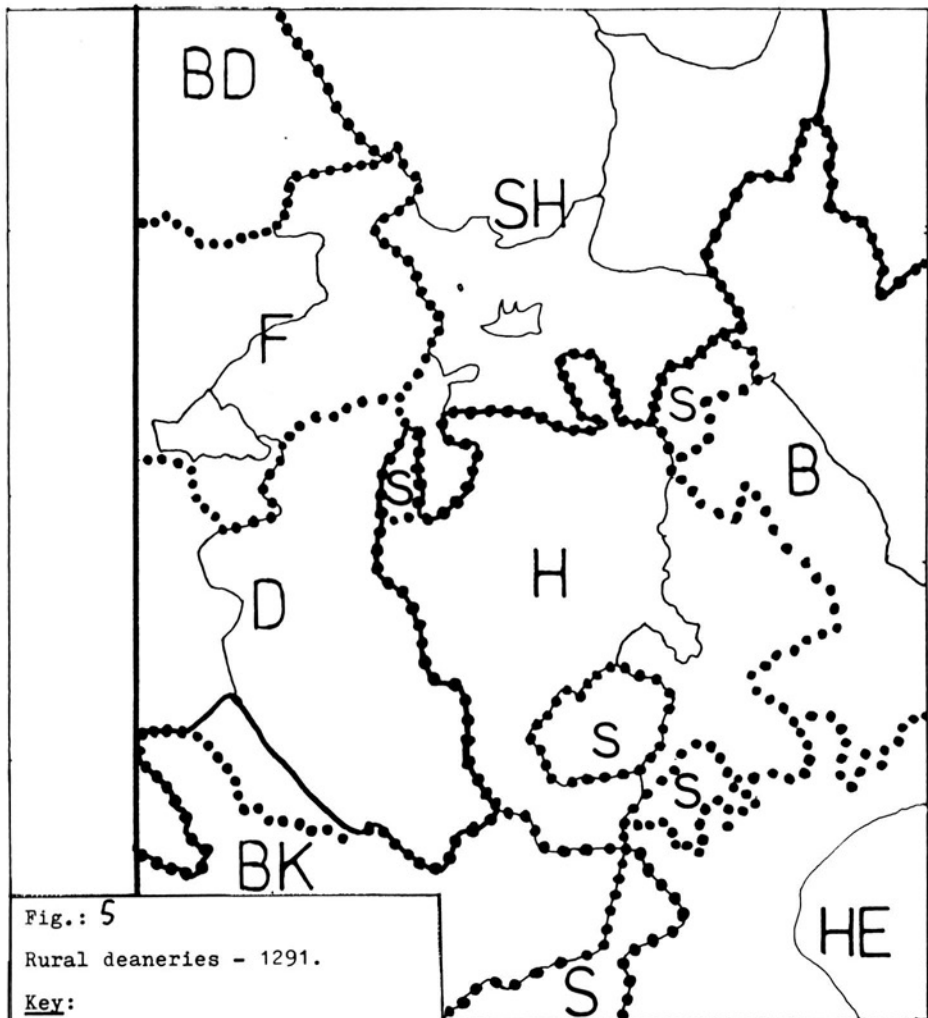


Fig.: 5

Rural deaneries - 1291.

Key:

SH - Shefford.

BD - Bedford.

F - Flitt.

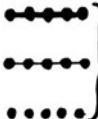
D - Dunstable.

H - Hitchin.

B - Baldock.

S - Liberty of St. Albans Abbey.

BK - Berkhamsted.


 Deanery boundary (these supersede all other boundaries on the map).

Domesday Book refers to the church of St Andrew at Hitchin as a *monasterium*, and says that the five hides at which this settlement was assessed were 'in the minster of this vill'.⁴⁶ Unfortunately the word 'minster' in the eleventh century did not necessarily signify an early minster of the missionary kind. However, as *V.C.H. Herts.* points out, the use of the word *monasterium*, the comparatively large amount of glebe land in 1086, and the fact that by 1291 Hitchin church was head of a rural deanery, all imply that it was something more than a simple parish church.⁴⁷ Hitchin church is referred to in a tenth century will, along with the churches of Braughing and Welwyn, in a context in which they are all called *monasteria*.⁴⁸

The evident importance of Hitchin church in the eleventh century and later, and the fact that it seems to have been regarded as a minster in the tenth century, indicate that it may well have been an early Anglo-Saxon minster, created to serve the *regio* of the *Hicce*. The later tradition that Offa II founded the church at Hitchin may contain some truth.⁴⁹

The *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291 lists the parishes, deaneries and dioceses of England, and in this both Hitchin and Braughing were the heads of rural deaneries.⁵⁰ This is a very late source if one wishes to reconstruct the ecclesiastical boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon period. (See Figures 4 and 5),

The creation of Dunstable and Baldock deaneries in the twelfth century was a result of the foundation of these two new towns, and probably owed little to the past. The transfer of parishes to the ownership and liberty of St Albans Abbey also disrupted past patterns in both the ecclesiastical and secular fields. However, the deanery of Hitchin may have remained reasonably intact, at least in Hertfordshire. The creation of Shefford deanery probably obliterated any ecclesiastical links between Hitchin and the area of south Bedfordshire. The Hitchin deanery in 1291 was not much larger than the half-hundred, and the inclusion of parishes such as Great Wymondley and Langley with the deanery may indicate that they were once a part of the *regio* (Langley parish contains Hitch Wood).

Place names which suggest the existence of specialised farms or settlements are also of help in trying to judge the structure and limits of *regiones*.⁵¹ One of the most striking is that of Charlton, close to Hitchin. The name in Old English is *ceorla-tun*, 'tun of the free peasants', and it is fairly common in England, often found in close proximity to an ancient royal estate. There is a theory that these settlements were created to provide a food-rent for the estate centre and it is possible that this Charlton was such a settlement.⁵² Other possible 'estate-component' names in the Hitchin area are Pirton (DB *Peritone* 'pear-tree farm'), Lilley (DB *Linlei*, 'clearing where flax was grown' or 'lime-tree clearing'), Flexmore (DB *Flexmere*, 'pool by which flax is grown') in King's Walden and Bendish (DB *Benedis*, 'bean enclosure') in St Paul's Walden. Other types of these names are those incorporating some of the four cardinal points, such as Westoning (*West-tun*) and Aston, perhaps the east *tun* of Stevenage, and Norton, the north *tun*. Aston and Norton were the property of St Albans Abbey by 1066, but they were probably once part of the *regio*. (Norton had once been royal property but was granted to the Abbey in 1007).⁵³

Conclusion

Much of the evidence for the nature and extent of the *regio* of the *Hicce* is vague and its interpretation is controversial. This paper has attempted to make some sense of the available material. The *Hicce* probably appeared in the Hitchin area at some

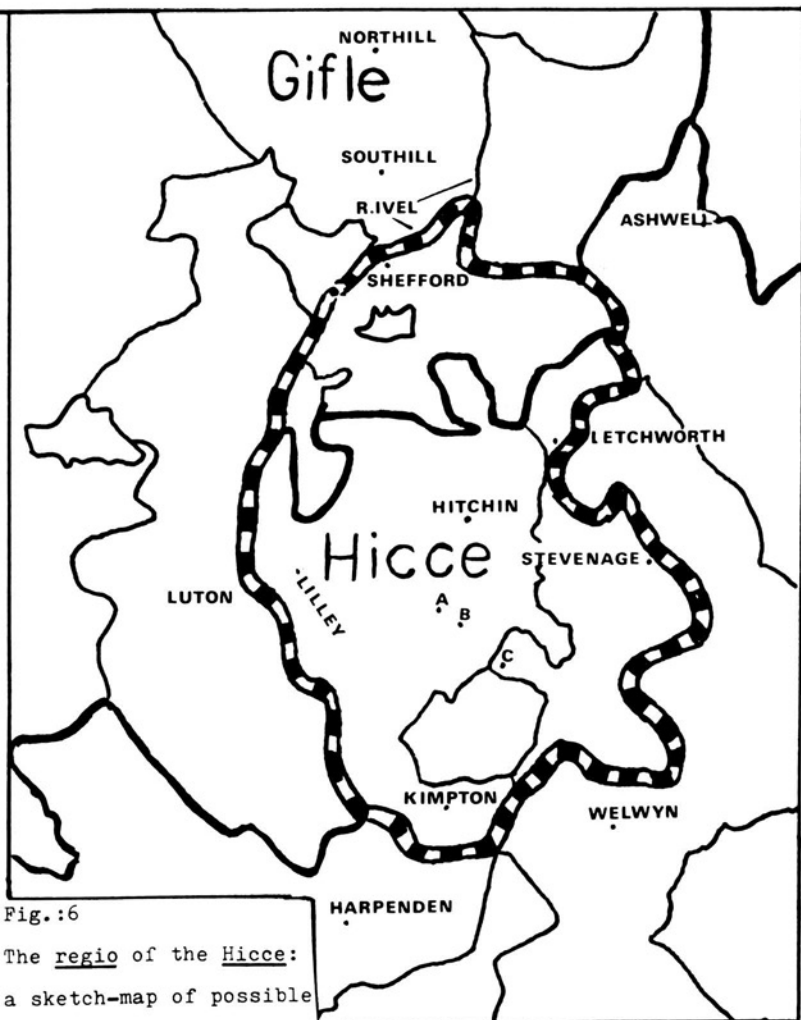


Fig.:6

The regio of the Hicce:
 a sketch-map of possible
 boundaries.

▣▣▣▣ Suggested tribal boundary.

A Waylay Green-possible pagan site.

B Wain Wood- " " " .

C Hitch Wood.

Other place-names added in order to place the regio in context

date after the Saxon advance of 571. By the period c.650-800 they were well enough established as a group to be assessed and taxed by their Mercian overlord. The *Hicce* was a small group and the early tribal area was probably bounded in the north by the *Ivel* and the *Gifle*, and in the west, south and east by woodland, the *Cilternsaetna* and the East Saxons. Few internal features of the early *regio* can be identified, but the royal estate which grew from it was a fairly complex and compact unit. By combining the early material with the later evidence of the tenurial, administrative and ecclesiastical outreach of Hitchin, we can form some idea of the full extent of the tribal area, perhaps in its ultimate phase. (See Figure 6). It was a small *regio*, possibly no more than fifteen or sixteen miles long by about eleven miles broad. We do not know when the *Hicce* ceased to be a tribe, but if they were still in existence in the tenth century then the partition of their tribal lands by the creation of Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire must have been a severe blow. By the time of Domesday Hitchin was no longer a tribal centre, and the *Hicce* were probably not even a memory.

Note on the text figures

The boundaries shown are taken from Bryant's county maps of Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, dated 1822 and 1826 respectively.

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Abbreviations

B.A.J. – *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*

Cameron – K. Cameron (ed). *Place-name evidence for the Anglo-Saxon Invasion and Scandinavian Settlements*. Nottingham 1975.

DB – Domesday Book. The Hertfordshire edition used here is that edited by J. Morris, Chichester 1976.

EPNS III – Allen Mawer and F.M. Stenton (ed), *The place-names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire*, English Place-Name Society, III, Cambridge 1926.

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This paper is based on a M.A. Dissertation submitted to the Department of Local History at the University of Leicester in 1978. It has not proved possible to up-date the work in the light of more recent research, and the conclusions and references in this paper are substantially the same as those to be found in the original dissertation.

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