1. County and Shire

ENGLAND was first divided into shires during that early period of our history in which the Saxons and the Danes were fighting for supremacy in the land. The word *shire* is of Anglo-Saxon origin, being derived from a verb—*sceran*—meaning "to cut," and it is thus a portion of land *shorn*, or cut off, from some larger area. This dividing up of the land was probably undertaken for purposes of military organisation. It appears to have been carried out, at any rate so far as our own county is concerned, in the early part of the tenth century, during the reign of Edward the Elder, son of Alfred the Great. Although a few of our present English counties, such as Essex or Kent, are the survivals of ancient kingdoms and thus came much earlier into existence, it is not until the end of the tenth century that we find any record of the Midland shires.

At the Norman Conquest, about a century and a half later, the old divisions were, on the whole, fairly closely adhered to. The Normans, however, substituted their own word "county" (*comté*) for the English word "shire"; but in their original meanings the two words do not exactly correspond, for while a shire is simply a share or division of the land, a county is a portion of the land under the rule of a *Comes* or *Comte*, who cor-

responded more or less to the Saxon *Eorl* or *Thane*. Since Norman times changes in the county boundaries have taken place, but they have been for the most part comparatively insignificant, so that we may fairly say that our modern English counties are substantially the original pre-Norman divisions.

When, however, we come to consider why the English counties have their present boundaries, and what guided the first dividers of the land in shaping them, we find ourselves on more difficult ground. In the days of the Saxon heptarchy—say towards the end of the ninth century—the land was divided into kingdoms (see map on page 54) of which the boundaries were never fixed for any appreciable time, and the division into shires was of course unknown. There arose, however, probably about this time, a division known as the *Hundred*,[1] and it was by the grouping together of these Hundreds that the Midland shires were built up, the shire name in most cases, as in that of Leicestershire, being taken from that of the principal town in the Hundreds concerned. If the outermost Hundreds bordered on a river which could not easily be forded, this river would remain a county boundary, but if they had irregular boundaries or outlying districts then these irregularities and outlying portions would also appear in the county boundaries. So, too, in the case of lands held by religious bodies which it would be inconvenient to have in different counties. In this way we

[1] See p. 132.

can explain many of the irregularities of outline shown by the English counties.

The town of Leicester, from which the county took its name, is of much greater antiquity than the county itself—indeed the name clearly indicates that the place

Ancient Earthworks at Ratby, near Leicester
(*Looking through a gap in the "vallum"*)

existed in Roman times, although it was known to the Romans by another name. At the time of the Domesday survey (1086) the county was referred to as Ledecestrescire, and in other old records the name appears in the following forms, Lege-cestria, Legeocester, and Leger-ceaster. The termination of all of these is evidently derived from the Latin *castrum*, a camp,

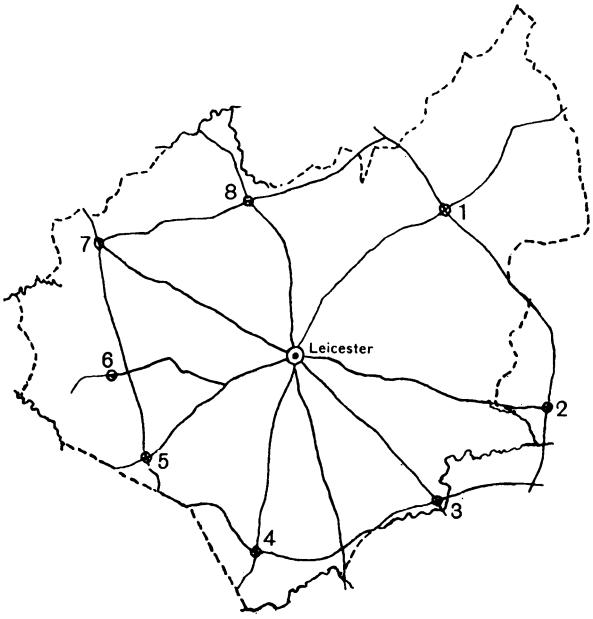
which has survived in these and various other forms, such as *-chester*, *-cester*, *-caster*, and *-castor*. The first part of the name is in all probability a corruption of the word Leir or Leire, the old name for the river, on the eastern side of which the "castrum" was situated, and now known as the Soar. The ancient name, which is said to have been taken from that of the Lœgre (afterwards Loire) in Gaul, has survived in the name of the small village Leire in the upper valley of the river, and it is interesting to note that in the case of the village also old records give the name of the manor as Legre and Leyre.

The Roman name for the town—Ratae—is in all probability a latinised form of the still older British name Rhage, which may possibly be related to the British word *rath*, signifying a cleared space used as an encampment. The plural form of the Latin name seems to indicate that more than one of these ancient encampments existed in the neighbourhood. Ratby, a few miles away, was probably another, and at this village ancient earthworks may still be seen.

2. General Characteristics. Position and Natural Conditions

Leicestershire, in spite of the fact that it has no very marked natural boundaries such as mountain ranges or arms of the sea, is in many respects one of the most compact of all the English counties. If we could

imagine it completely isolated from the important neighbouring counties on all sides it would make an admirable county-state, either alone, or together with



The Market Towns around Leicester

1. Melton Mowbray. 2. Uppingham. 3. Market Harborough. 4. Lutterworth. 5. Hinckley. 6. Market Bosworth. 7. Ashby de la Zouch. 8. Loughborough.

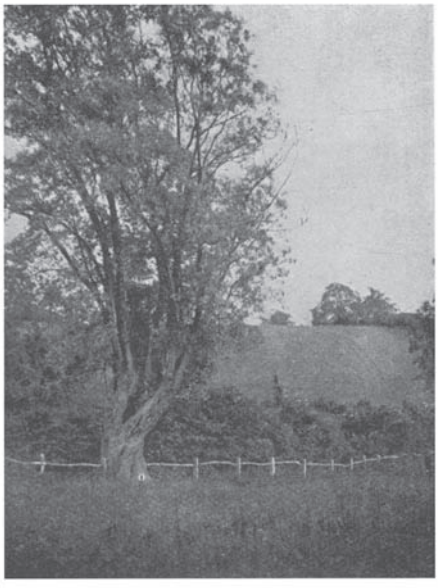
the tiny county of Rutland which adjoins it on the east.

This compactness is well shown in the annexed map of the market towns. The county town is situated

almost exactly in the centre of the county; it is in all respects a true capital, the next largest town, Loughborough, having only about one-tenth of its population, and it is surrounded by a ring of lesser market towns. The main roads radiate from the centre like the spokes of a wheel from the hub, while the rim of the wheel is completed by a series of secondary roads which only to a very slight extent cut into the bordering counties. With one important exception, which will be mentioned later (page 122), the map shows practically all of the important roads of the district.

Leicestershire includes an almost complete river basin—that of the Soar—which flows right across the county from south to north, dividing it into two approximately equal areas. These are in some ways very unlike in their natural characteristics. Their geological formations are quite distinct, and the same is consequently true to a great extent of their soils and scenery, while to a lesser degree the difference may also be seen in the occupations of the inhabitants and in the characteristic architectures of the two portions. The eastern side of the county is almost entirely agricultural; the soil here is highly fertile and forms excellent grazing country, and there are no waste lands such as heaths, moors, or bogs; even the highest points of the picturesque hills and rolling country being, as a rule, enclosed and used for grazing purposes. The western half of the county, on the other hand, although still to a great extent agricultural, has other, and in many places more predominant interests. Here, chiefly

in the north-western corner, are to be found stone-quarries and coal-fields, which are especially important owing to the fact that they are among the nearest



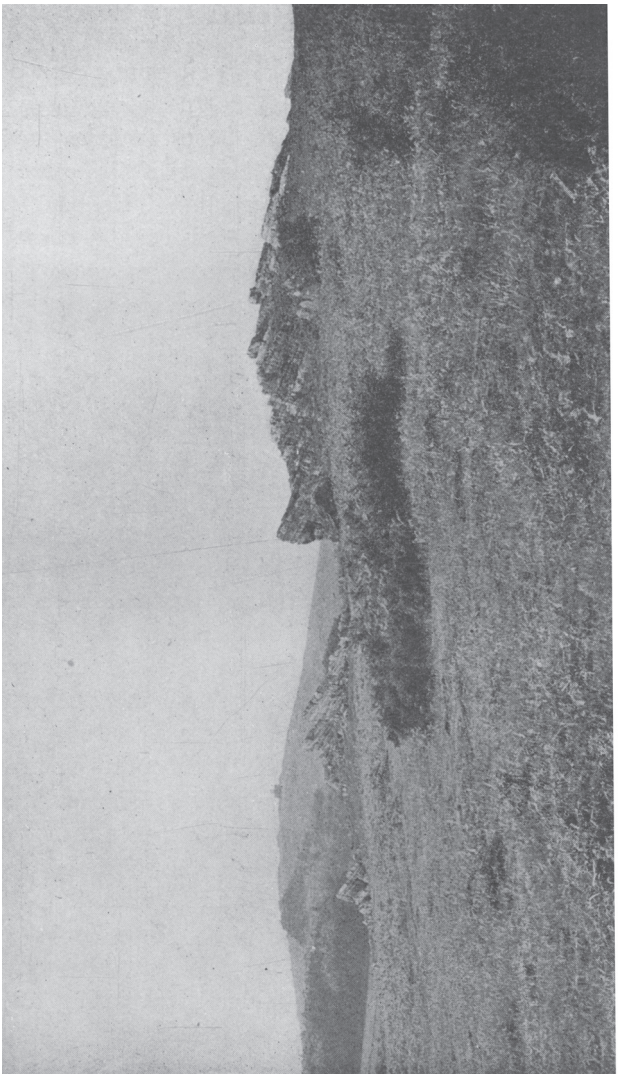
Typical rolling country of East Leicestershire

of their kind to London and the south-eastern counties ; and here also occurs a remarkable region known as the Charnwood Forest, described more fully in a later section, where the scenery is altogether unlike that of any other portion of the county.

The country, then, on the east and south-east is entirely agricultural, that on the west and north-west agricultural and mining, but the towns—Leicester itself, as well as most of the lesser towns—are best described as industrial, though in some cases the manufactures are only of comparatively recent growth. The tendency here, as in many other parts of England, seems to be distinctly towards an increase in the industrial population at the expense of the agricultural: some of the smaller towns, such as Loughborough and Hinckley, have of late years become quite important manufacturing centres, a result which was perhaps only to be expected in view of their proximity to the Leicestershire coal-fields, as well as to those of the neighbouring counties of Derbyshire, Warwickshire, Staffordshire, and Nottinghamshire.

In position Leicestershire may be regarded as almost the centre of England. It is of interest, therefore, to try to discover in what way its central position has affected its general characteristics.

Being a long way from the sea, having no great natural waterways, and not lying very near either to the metropolis or to the great manufacturing districts further north, it seems to have come to depend largely upon its own resources, and this probably has added to that compactness already referred to. Yet it is in reality not at all cut off from the rest of the country, as is clearly shown by the fact that ever since Roman times Leicester has occupied an important position on the main routes up and down or across the country. At the



Broombriggs Hill: a typical view of the Charnwood Forest country

present time two of the great railways running northward from London pass through the county town, while feeders come in from each of the two other great lines lying respectively east and west of the county. Lastly, its position in the central uplands of England has doubtless contributed both towards its equable climate and to the multiplicity of small streams by which it is watered, with its consequent agricultural prosperity.

3. Size. Shape. Boundaries

If an average be taken of the size of all the English counties, Leicestershire is found to be slightly short of it, the administrative area to-day being given as 530,642 acres, or almost exactly 800 square miles. Its area, compared with that of the whole of England, is shown by the figure at the end of the volume.

The shape of the county is roughly that of a pentagon, with a broad bay entering the northern side, while the north-eastern corner extends outwards as a large promontory into the flat lands of the neighbouring counties of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. The greatest length of the county (45 miles) is that from this north-east corner—Three Shires Bush—to the southern apex near Rugby, and its greatest breadth, that from the most easterly point, where it meets the counties of Lincolnshire and Rutland, to the most westerly, where lies its junction with Staffordshire, Derbyshire, and Warwickshire, is nearly as much—41 miles.