

THE GEOGRAPHY
OF THE
HASLEMERE DISTRICT

by

MARY MORGAN, B.Sc.

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Although not the nucleus of any well-defined region, Haslemere is yet of considerable regional interest. Situated at the western end of the Weald, almost at the junction of Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire, it is sufficiently near the adjacent major regions of the London Basin and the Hampshire Basin to enjoy by means of modern transport the business, shopping and entertainment facilities of London and in a lesser degree, Portsmouth. The dual outlook to the south coast and to London is shown again in the overlapping of the hinterlands of the ports of Southampton and London in the Haslemere area. The proximity of the London and Hampshire Basins means also that within a short distance of Haslemere are many different landscapes—the prosperous agricultural scene of the Middle Chalk and the diverse Tertiary landscape of poor heaths, profitable market gardening and ever-increasing suburbia. These unlike landscapes are yet a complete contrast to those immediately surrounding Haslemere.

PHYSICAL FEATURES

The town is surprisingly situated on a saddle of the Lower Greensand hills in a bend of the eastward-facing scarp immediately above the junction of the Weald Clay and the Lower Greensand. The general and perhaps oversimplified concept of the Cretaceous rocks of which the Weald is formed is of a dome elongated from east to west and eroded by various marine and subaerial denudations to form a series of inward facing escarpments, the Chalk forming the outer rim. To the north, the sharp ridge of the Hog's Back separates the geographic Weald from the London Basin; to the south, the steep scarp face of the

South Downs fades westwards to the more gentle slopes of the Hampshire Downs. The Upper Greensand and the Gault form a narrow belt at the foot of the Chalk scarp, usually characterised by rich and long-settled farmlands, the chalk downwash resulting in a peculiarly happy admixture of soils. To the west these beds widen considerably and of particular note is the ancient forest of Alice Holt on the Gault south of Bentley.

The Lower Greensand

The most widely exposed of the Cretaceous strata in the western Weald are those of the Lower Greensand escarpment which are themselves exceedingly diverse. The uppermost layer, the Folkestone Beds, may be associated with an agricultural landscape, but, more frequently, with a heath vegetation of birch, pine, rhododendron, bracken, heather, etc. over a slight escarpment such as is seen south of the Midhurst-Petersfield road in Midhurst Common, Stedham Common, Iping Common and West Heath. The Sandgate Beds (known around Godalming as the Bargate Beds) are of a more fertile nature and are epitomized in the south in the large rolling fields of red soil of the dip slope across which flows the River Rother. The spectacular Hythe Beds show an abrupt scarp face varying in height but rising in Leith Hill and Blackdown to over 900 feet. The massifs of Hindhead and Blackdown, more properly described as plateaux of over 600 feet, slope gently to the north and west, and this dip slope is deeply dissected by steep valleys such as the Golden Valley, the Devil's Punch Bowl, Boarden Door Bottom and the valley of Kingsley Green. Haslemere, between these massifs, is yet on the scarp above the great expanse of the Weald Clay. Cobbett thought the greensand villainous but to a large non-farming yet rural population there is a fascination in the commons with their varying but similar heath vegetations and the admixture of forest trees such as oak and beech. The unobtrusive forest industries persist; the cutting of conifers and oak for timber, the re-planting of conifers, the perennial and rotational cutting of chestnut plantations for fencing and the almost moribund coopering, the more unusual broom-making and recurrent charcoal burning.

The Weald Clay

The Weald Clay of the narrow vale of Fernhurst is overshadowed by inward facing scarps of the Hythe Beds; Blackdown to the north, Harting Combe to the west, Telegraph Hill and Henley Hill to the south, but to the east the Weald Clay widens rapidly to over 15 miles from north and south, a "bocage" landscape of small fields, heavy hedges of thick wooded banks, tangled coppices and many large forest trees, a landscape still reminiscent of the old Andredesweald. It is particularly noticeable that the streams are deeply incised, small gorges with steep sides having in places been formed. These incised valleys, of considerable geomorphological interest, have also a subsequent economic interest linked with the wooded nature of the countryside. The two major industries of the Weald were iron working, from pre-Roman times intermittently to the Peninsular wars, and the making of glass from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth century. The iron industry, of which so many sites and hammer ponds remain around Haslemere, was based on local iron ores, local wood for charcoal and a plentiful water supply which in the later centuries provided the necessary water power. The glass industry, centred in Chiddingfold, seems to have been associated with local sand, bracken for potash, and again timber and a plentiful water supply. It seems that West End, below Haslemere, had first an iron industry and later made glass.

Drainage

Although emphasis may be laid on the many incised and relatively swift streams, yet Haslemere itself is on no major stream or river. The Wey, a mile or so to the south, is but a small stream collected from Blackdown and Hindhead and flowing westwards through Liphook to Bordon and making a great northerly bend. At Tilford this stream is joined by the other branch of the Wey which has come through Farnham, and the augmented Wey flows now eastwards past Elstead to Godalming and then north through the gap in the chalk at Guildford. It is probable that to the north of Tilford there has been

a reversal of drainage, the Wey to the east having captured the headwaters of the Blackwater, which is now a small stream in a disproportionately large valley to the north of Farnham.

Another noticeable feature of the drainage of the Haslemere area is that the streams of the Wey eventually flow northwards to the Thames, but the streams of Anstead Brook to the east and the River Lod through Fernhurst flow south to the English Channel.

Although it cannot be considered here in detail, brief mention must be made of the climatic peculiarities in the immediate neighbourhood of Haslemere, of the heavy rainfall and the varying climatic differences of valleys with different aspects, immediately emphasized by any phenological observation which may be made.

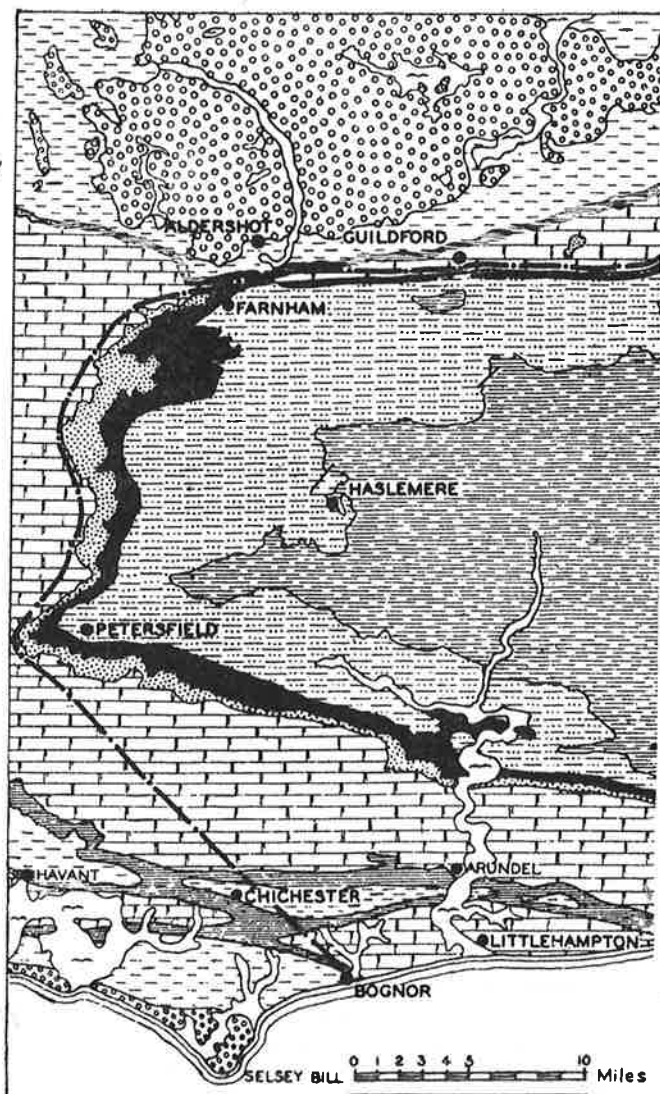
HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

When the human geography of the area is considered, perhaps the most fascinating topic is that of settlement, for centuries a continuous but unspectacular occupation. Traces of the Mesolithic peoples have been found in many places on the Lower Greensand. At a much later date, part of the forest had been cleared and used in the iron works by the pre-Roman British. The Romans crossed the western Weald by the Stane Street and the Romanized Celts built such villas as Bignor. The Saxon settlement at the foot of the scarp of the South Downs, the later Saxon settlement in the Weald itself, and the much-debated Jutish settlement, eradicated the Celts and cleared more of the forest. For the reputed Danish connection with Haslemere there is little evidence, although the idea may be attractive, and for the last thousand years the interest of Haslemere has been largely parochial. In the twentieth century there has been a great and sudden increase in non-local population, a spectacular and somewhat urban spread, not due to any major industry, but to the current interest in the countryside; so that, in a sense, Haslemere has now a somewhat dormitory relationship to London. Never a rich agricultural neighbourhood (as may be seen from the

ALLUVIUM

BRACKLESHAM &
BAGSHOT BEDS
LONDON CLAY
OLDHAVEN WOODWICH
AND READING BEDS
THANET SAND
CHALK
UPPER GREENSAND
GAULT
LOWER GREENSAND
WEALD CLAY

BOUNDARY OF
THE WEALDEN DISTRICT.



GEOLOGICAL SKETCH-MAP OF HASLEMERE AND DISTRICT

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small and modest churches so different from those of the great mediaeval prosperity of East Anglia) the land has only in this century acquired the peculiar value of a residential area. To the west the large area of heathland now used by the army is another example of a recent alteration to the landscape, in this instance neither agricultural nor industrial. This increase in population around Haslemere is directly related to the presence of the railway and the always frequent train service to London. A fascinating and rewarding comparison of population may be made by the study of the succeeding editions of the one-inch Ordnance Survey maps of the district.

COMMUNICATIONS

The railway, too, is yet another instance of the prevailing north to south trend of the main lines of communication. A minor example is the sequence of telegraph stations on the hills from Portsmouth to the Admiralty, the more striking that of the main roads which, focussing to a certain extent on London, have for centuries avoided a direct east-west line across the heavy Weald Clay. The main roads are still today north to south, the east to west routes being but narrow sinuous lanes, yet another feature of the landscape recalling Andredesweald.

If the definition of geography as a study of man in relation to his physical environment is satisfactory, then in the Haslemere area may be seen a twentieth century geography which, dominated by the new metropolitan regard for this wooded countryside, is superimposed on the summation of the geographies evolved through the centuries with a particular geomorphological background of abrupt scarps, wide dip slopes, incised streams and varied soils.