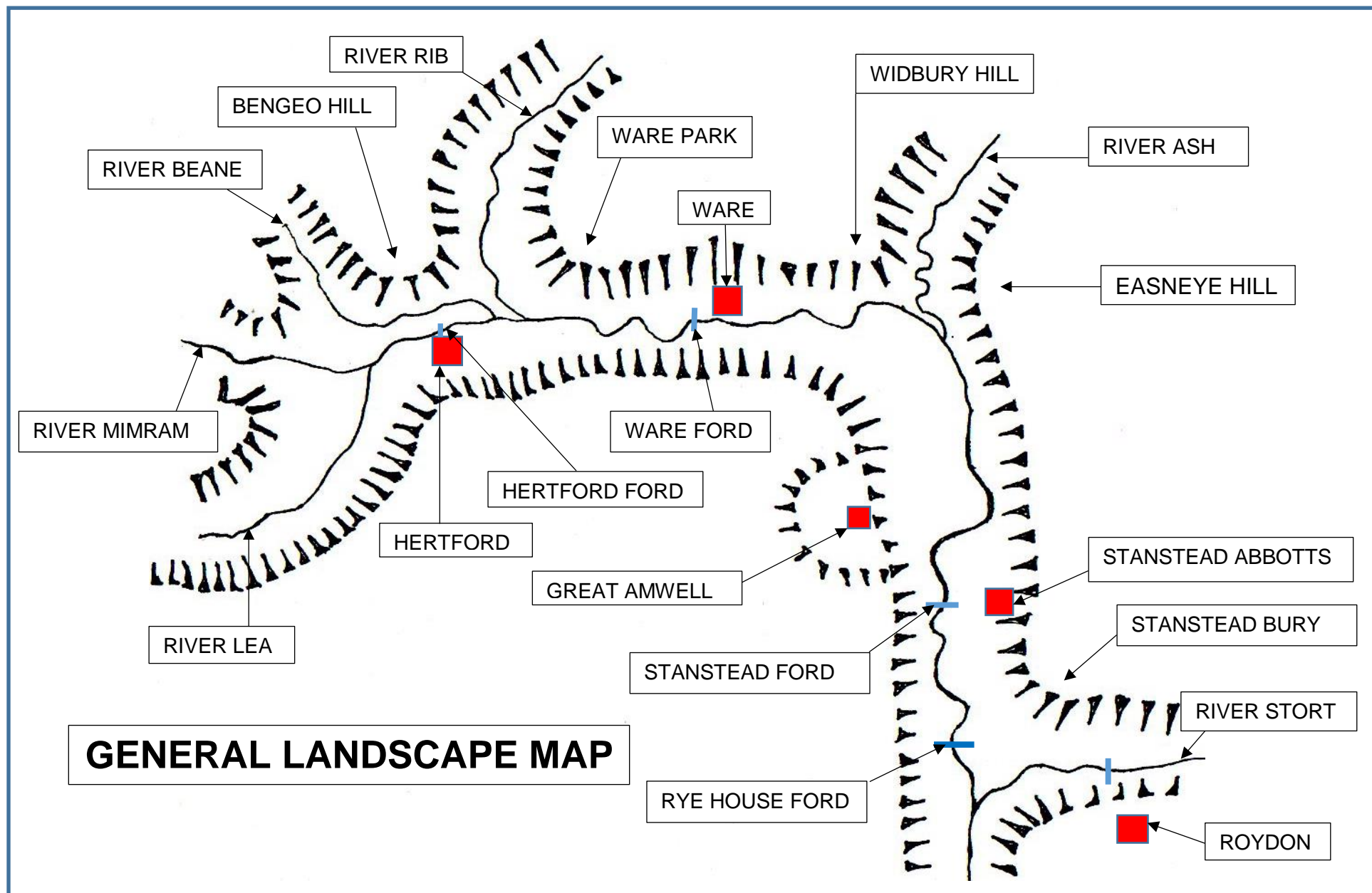


# Stanstead Abbots Location and Site

By  
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This article explores the reason why the village developed where it did within the wider landscape, as well as the benefits offered by the specific site on which it was built. Stanstead Abbots is located in the valley of the River Lea as it turns through a ninety degree bend along the seven mile stretch between Hertford and its confluence with the River Stort located three quarters of a mile downstream from Rye House. In many places the valley sides rise quite steeply from the flood plain to gently undulating fertile upland. The major features of the landscape date from the end of the most extensive glaciation of the current ice age. This is known as the Anglian Glaciation which occurred between 478,000 and 424,000 years BP [**B**efore **P**resent]. During this glaciation the existing land surface was completely overridden by ice which dramatically changed the topography of the area. The later glaciations saw the landscape experience varying degrees of tundra climates during which permafrost, spring melting and extensive melt water from ice to the north further modified the landscape. The last glacial period ended some 10,700 years BP, since when there have been times of warmer and colder temperatures than at present. Each of these climatic phases adding its own subtle modifications to the landscape in which humans were beginning to permanently settle, make route ways across the landscape and start to farm the easier land. It is in fact during these early times that the most suitable sites for settlements and the most convenient routes across the landscape would have become apparent and subsequently established within the landscape.

By 5,000 years ago the New Stone Age people were beginning to create a landscape of scattered small agricultural settlements based on domesticated herds of animals and arable farming. This required the clearing of woodland around these early small clusters of homes and the development of frequently used trackways between them. This part of the Lea Valley even as late as the Saxon period some 1,500 years ago was being described as one with extensive woodlands on the higher ground reaching in many places down to the bottom of the valley sides with extensive marshes on the flood plain through which a wide river meandered. In our local area many of the early settlements grew along the sides of the Lea Valley just above the height of the frequent floods which would cover much of the valley floor. It was these locations where the inhabitants could have easy access to water, plentiful wildlife in the marshy valley floor, fish from the river, as well as ample wood for building and cooking from the woodlands on the upland areas. The siting of settlements tended to also lie on the line of important trackways which followed the boundary between the woodland and the wet land of the valley floor along both valley sides. Those places along this part of the Lea Valley that were to subsequently grow to be the significant settlements were sited just above flood level close to where the crossing of the valley floor and fording of the river offered the best all year round routes across the valley.

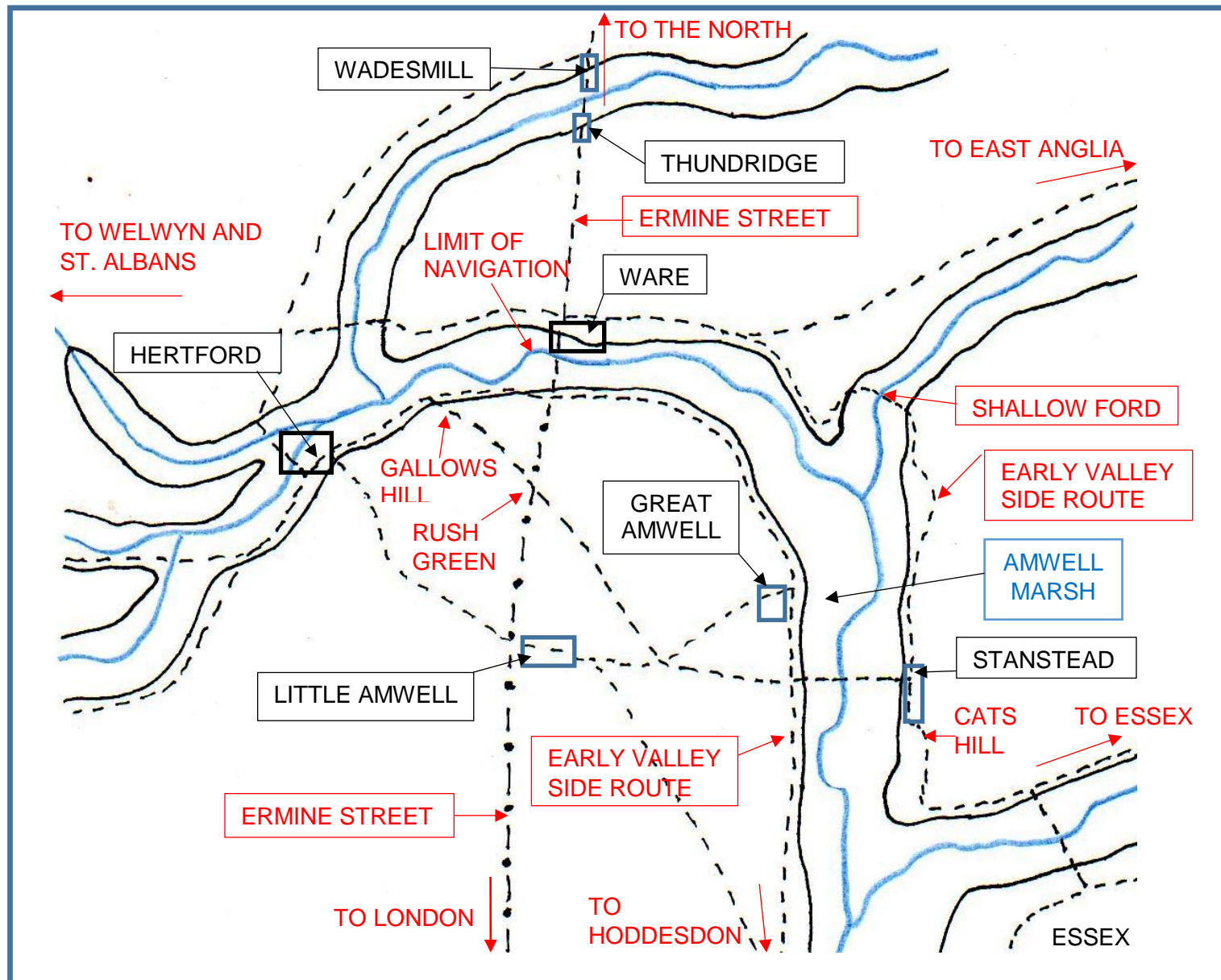


The General Landscape Map above shows the main local rivers as black lines and the valley sides by the use of hachures. The key valley side settlements are indicated by a red box placed at the focus of today's settlement. The river in early times had many shallow sections which could be easily forded. However much of the valley floor was very marshy and wet particularly in the winter months. This meant that it was those fords that could be more easily accessed from the valley sides that were the ones that became the major valley crossing points. The most important ones that were to be replaced by early bridges have been indicated on the map by blue lines drawn across the river channels. The river itself in its natural state had many short sections where the depth was only about two feet [60 cms] deep which severely limited the size of boats that could navigate the River Lea. This may come as a surprise to many readers familiar with the modern navigable river. However the shallowness of some sections of the River Lea were still proving problematic in the 1570s when those attempting to improve the navigation struggled to maintain a 2 foot [60 cms.] depth along the full length of the Lea between Ware and the Thames.

The archaeological evidence gathered from the Pre-Roman settlement in the Puckeridge / Braughing area suggest that produce in quantity from the continent was being brought up the River Lea to Ware before heading north on a road that would be later improved by the Romans as part of Ermine Street. Just upstream of the town of Ware a sudden steepening of the gradient meant navigation to Hertford proved difficult, not becoming a reliable navigation until the 1740s. Not surprisingly the River Lea for centuries was referred to as the "Ware River". As the River Stort was not made navigable until the 1760s. This meant that Ware and Stanstead Abbots were the two places with access to river transport and for centuries benefitted as river ports for a sizeable hinterland of rich agricultural land to the north and the east. This river traffic was to grow giving both Ware and Stanstead Abbots a distinct advantage as growing settlements.

The locations of the few important fords not only provided the few limited places the river could be reliably crossed but also had positioned close by an area of flat land above the level of the frequent floods. However until the early 10th century these local river crossing places did not see the development of significant settlements. The mainly agricultural economy saw the population scattered across the landscape with just a small concentration of buildings near to these important river crossing points. This appears to have been true even for Ware and Stanstead despite the fact that they had the potential advantage of being located where road transport met the boats transporting goods on the river. In those early times much of the land remained wooded and had yet to be exploited. The settlements were surrounded by the fields and the woodland they used for their needs with wild woodland beyond separating them from adjacent places. Hertford, Ware and Stanstead were however well placed, with their good road communications and for the latter two access to river transport, to take advantage of the opportunity to develop from villages into towns. This was initially encouraged by King Alfred from the late 890s as he used it as a part of a strategy to consolidate control over land recaptured from the Danes, a practice continued by his son King Edward the Elder. These three towns on the banks of the Lea have each seen their periods of growth and decline over the centuries reflecting their individual changing economic fortunes. These changes being in part connected to their specific individual location within the landscape.

## EARLY ROAD AND MAIN SETTLEMENT PATTERN

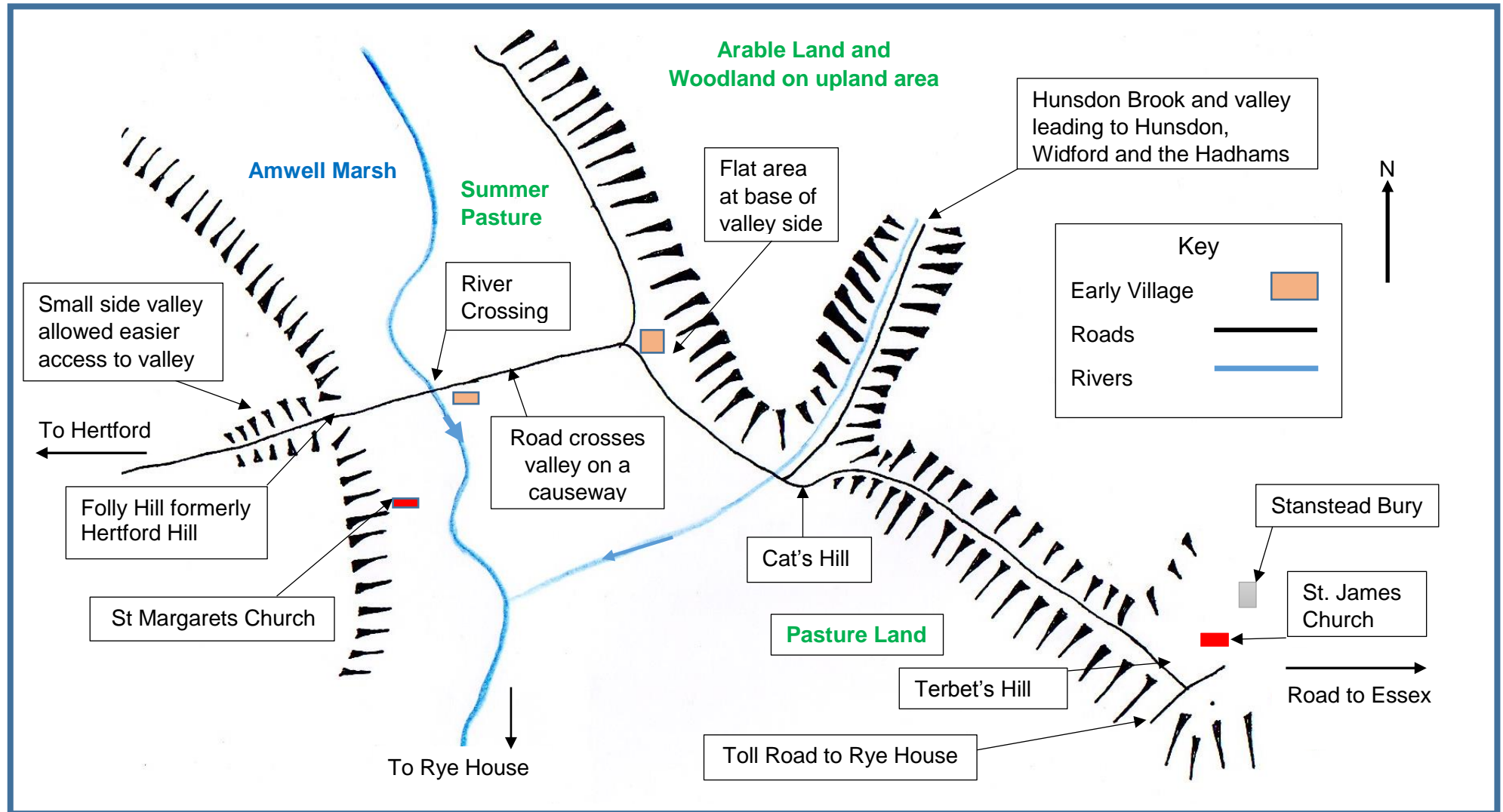


The diagrammatic map above gives an idea of the early local road network. Some sections of these roads have been abandoned whilst newer roads have been omitted from the map. It will be noted that the opportunity to cross the valley by road were limited. The earliest routes would have undoubtedly grown out of the valley side tracks of the earliest humans to settle this area once the climate warmed after the last glaciation. Their modern counterparts remain important today for local traffic. The map of early routes above does include the Roman Ermine Street built at a time when London became important and radial routes spread out from London like spokes of a wheel. Both before the Roman occupation and after they left the east to west routes would have been of greater importance. However once the Normans re-emphasised the north to south route up the western side of the Lea Valley from London the east west routes assumed a secondary role. This goes a long way towards explaining why Ware became for centuries the most important town along this stretch of the Lea. Stanstead was described in the Domesday Book of 1086 as a town of some importance. However it faded away to assume village status partially at least due to it being on an east west route rather than the north to south route that was in time to become a road of national importance which passed through Amwell Cross Roads [a roundabout today] and then along Ware High Street on its way to the north.

The settlement of Stanstead grew at a point where various helpful features in the landscape came together to provide a suitable location for growth. The main features are listed below both with respect to its location within the surrounding landscape as well as the specific site on which it developed.

- 1 Formed a convenient place to cross the valley and river for the main west to east route across this part of Hertfordshire. This leads eastwards into Essex, the main route being along the valley of the River Stort.
- 2 A stretch of shallow river which provided a suitable fording point.
- 3 Less severe descent possible from the surrounding upland down otherwise steep valley sides. However these easier routes down to the flood plain were still fairly steep and were not located on directly opposite sides of the valley.
- 4 A gap in the rather marshy valley floor which provided a drier and firmer valley crossing point.
- 5 A width of valley floor that was narrower than downstream of Stanstead, where it widens as it merges with the Stort Valley.
- 6 The construction of a low causeway would be sufficient to provide a dry cross valley route way except in times of flood.
- 7 A small area of slightly higher land at the base of the steep valley side on the Stanstead side of the valley. Upon which was to be built the central focus of the original settlement. This was still obviously the focus of the village right up to 200 years ago but today there is at first sight little to suggest that this was in fact the case.
- 8 A line of springs on the valley side above the early village.
- 9 A narrow river terrace about four feet above flood plain level on the Stanstead side of the valley suitable an early valley side roadway the modern counterparts being Roydon Road and Cappell Lane.
- 10 Suitable arable and pasture land existed close by on the valley sides and uplands.
- 11 River trade was possible down to London from the river banks close to the river crossing point.

## THE SITE OF STANSTEAD WITHIN ITS IMMEDIATE SURROUNDINGS



In early times the ford at Stansted was the only crossing point on the Lea that gave ease of access to Essex from Hertfordshire to the west of the Lea Valley. In addition when travelling by road along the west side of the valley from the south Stanstead Abbots provided the first really useful crossing point north of the fords at Waltham. This route from London into East Anglia was to become increasingly more important in later centuries. This led in the mid 1400's to the building of a bridge over the Lea at Rye House and a much improved thoroughfare between that bridge and Terbet's Hill close to Stanstead Bury. This was to become an important route from London to Newmarket and beyond, still surviving today as a toll road used mainly by local traffic.

The road from Hertford approaches the Lea Valley from the west and makes use of a small side valley to reduce the sharpness of the gradient down into the valley of the Lea. The form of the original side valley has been lost due to human activity. Firstly in the early 1600s when the New River was built and in the C20th when the road was improved and a much wider cutting formed. This has given rise today to a gentle initial approach to the village and then the steep Folly Hill once one crosses over the New River. At the base of Folly Hill the edge of the flood plain is some four feet higher than the middle of the High Street and has thus avoided all but the more extreme floods of the past centuries. The side valley allows the road to enter the valley of the Lea at a point down valley of Amwell Marsh still regarded in the early 1800s as a dangerous place to go in the winter and noted for the loss of wandering cattle. Further south the valley was also marshy and with the Valley of the Stort joining the Lea Valley on the eastern side made it unsuitable for a crossing point in early days.

Although Stanstead was a good location to take the road across the valley to connect with more distant places it did present a valley floor liable to frequent flooding. This led to the building of a causeway to take the road from the bottom of Folly Hill to where the ground rises outside the Red Lion on the far side of the valley. Remaining evidence for the existence of this causeway are now hard to find but the drop in ground level behind the telephone exchange in St Margarets gives some hint of what it may have been like in the past. Older villagers may remember the Town Mead, a meadow replaced in modern times by houses and the car park off the High street. This field was some four feet lower than the High Street with a soil ramp leading down to it from the High Street. The Town Mead continued to be used for grazing and by visiting fairs even as late as the 1950s. An idea of the height difference that once existed can be glimpsed by looking over the wall by the side of the Village Café at the stream that runs alongside the side of it then under the road in a conduit. The water from the conduit emptying out into the Millstream at the bottom of Glenmire Terrace.

The Parish boundary between St. Margarets and Stanstead used be in the middle of the ford, later in the middle of the bridge, which is first mentioned in 1100 AD. This stretch of the Lea either side of the bridge was historically a shallow section of the river and remained so well into the 1700s. It would have provided a conveniently located stretch of river for an initial ford and a relatively easy location to construct a bridge. The causeway continued from the bridge across the flood plain in a straight line for about a quarter of a mile before rising sharply by about four feet onto a valley side platform This being a wider section of a river terrace which stretches some way along the valley side in both directions as a narrower ledge. The causeway would have required a series of conduits under the road to allow the water of frequent floods to pass underneath and prevent the water being dammed back by an otherwise solid causeway right across the valley. Remnants of these conduits, much improved and replaced over the centuries can still be found beneath the High Street. The flat area of land at the eastern end of the High Street provided an ideal location above regular flood levels for the location of the early growth of Stanstead as a nucleated settlement, albeit for a very small population by modern standards.



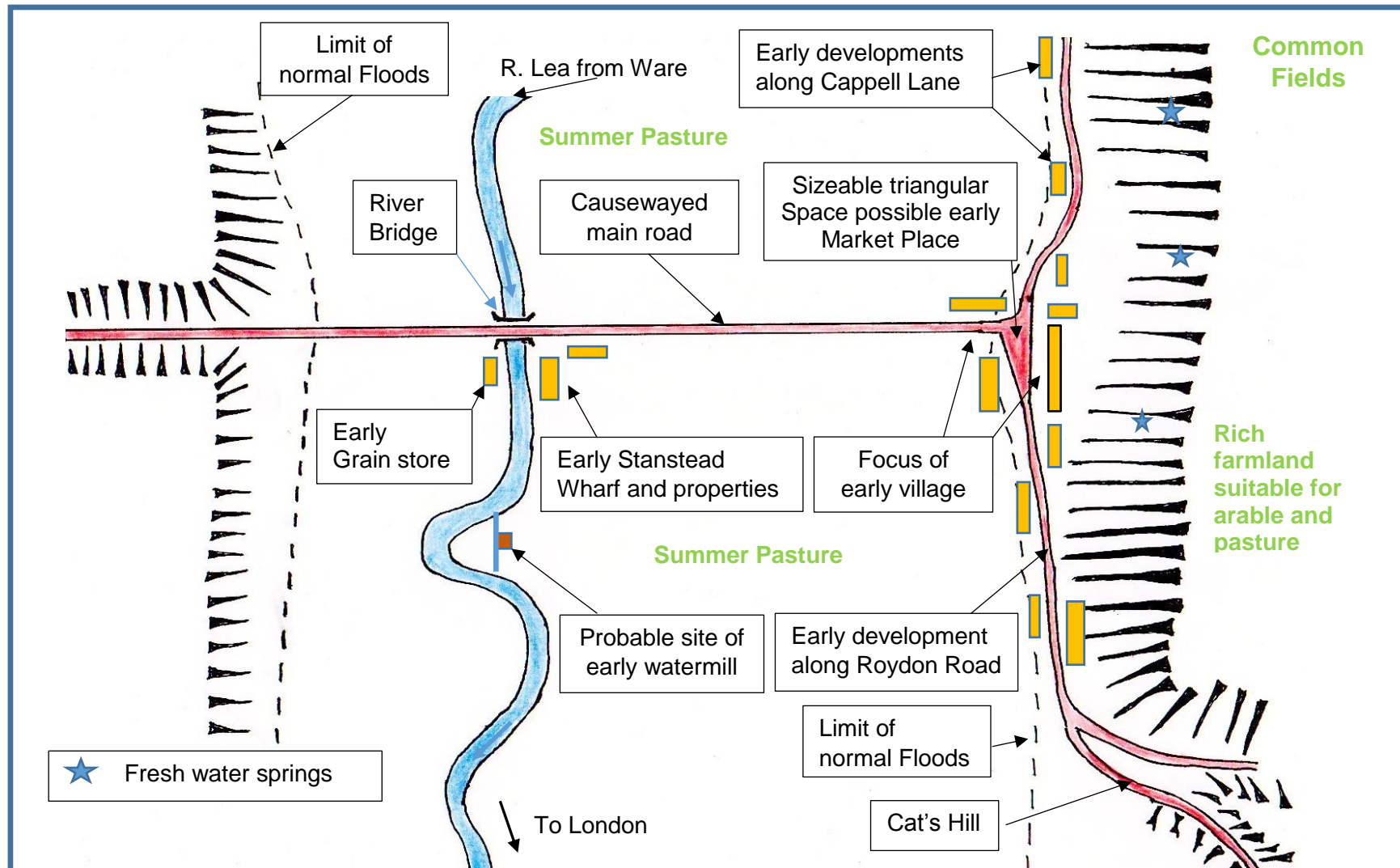
The river terrace stretching along the valley side in both directions provided a route for an ancient riverside trackway just above the level of flooding. Towards Ware this road is today known as Cappell Lane, leads on to Hollycross Road and then through the town of Ware by way of Musley Lane, Collett Road and The Bourne. In the other direction the road followed roughly the line of Roydon Road on a river terrace that rapidly begins to merge with the flood plain. Roydon Road was for many centuries the main street of Stanstead as the current High Street was far too vulnerable to the annual floods and the one in ten year severe floods. Roydon Road continues for some 600 yards before it turns left splitting into two main roads. The left hand one follows the valley of the Hunsdon Brook and climbs gently to the higher ground giving access to the rich farmland to the north of the village. For many centuries this area supplied Stanstead with considerable amounts of Barley and Wheat for the production of malt and flour, much for onward transport by river to London. The right hand fork climbs up the steep valley side at Cats Hill, the newer road that lies just to the west of the original route being only slightly less steep than the one it replaced. Now at a much higher level the road heads towards the point where the Valley of the River Stort joins that of the Lea Valley from the East. Here it was possible to cross the Stort into Essex via Roydon or travel along the northern valley side of the Stort towards Sawbridgeworth and beyond to East Anglia. On the point of high ground where the Lea and Stort valleys meet is sited the ancient church of St. James, the parish church of Stanstead until 1882, built close to the old Manor House of Stanstead Bury but rather a long walk from the village.



*A 1980s view along the High Street from the fields above Chapelfields with the woodlands of Haileybury and Little Amwell on the skyline*



## THE SITE OF STANSTEAD ABBOTTS



The known history of this corner of Hertfordshire tells us that towns did not start to be formed until the early C10<sup>th</sup> when the two defended boroughs on either side of the river at Hertford were built in AD 912 and 913. Ware on the other hand seemed to have developed to little more than a large village by the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, but was an important agricultural parish. Stanstead appears to have taken a path somewhere in between these two local towns. By 1086 it is recorded as being an important town in the County with Burgesses, a considerable number of property owners, a significant annual income and undoubtedly had a market, as places of this importance usually did at the time. It is likely that it developed into a town in the 900s with the trading centre located at the end of the cross valley road taking advantage of the slightly higher flat ground at the base of the steep valley side. The buildings seem to have been crowded around a triangular shaped market place with a road leading off at each corner which was a common feature of such growing towns at the time. The Red Lion Inn at the end of the High Street, an ancient building, still looks out from the short side of the somewhat reduced old market place. This triangle of land lost its original purpose probably sometime in the middle of the C12<sup>th</sup> when Stanstead became diminished in importance as Ware rose to dominate the local economy in this part of the Lea Valley.

Buildings near to the river bridge would characteristically in such landscapes be limited due to the dangers posed by frequent flooding. The most suitable places for the loading and unloading of boats would be close to the where the ford and later a bridge crossed the river. At Stanstead and St Margarets wharves developed on both sides of the river just downstream of the road crossing point. The village was thus able to become an inland river port for the agricultural hinterland to the north and north east of the village. As London continued to grow in importance over the years the village became an important provider of flour and malt for the London market much transported by barge. The village also had the benefit of freshwater springs located on the valley side above the early settlement which began to grow out along the road we now called Roydon Road. Old documents suggest that there were also outlying settlements at the far end of Roydon Road near the bottom of Cat's Hill as well as on Cappell Lane between the location of today's Warrax House and the Southern Lodge of the Easneye Estate.

The layout of the settlement was strongly controlled by the local geography with buildings stretched out along the roads on the flat ledge of land just above the normal flood level at the base of the valley side. The road and buildings being squeezed between the area liable to flood and the steeply rising ground of the valley side. The road across the valley remained poorly developed for many centuries because of the frequent risk of flooding. This road was known for a long time as Tollbridge Street and only began to see considerable development of housing and commercial properties after the river alterations of the mid C19<sup>th</sup> when the better management of the river's flow reduced the depth of floods and hence their frequency. Once this development was underway there was a move of the commercial centre of Stanstead from the Tollbridge Street end of Roydon Road round the corner into the newly renamed High Street. A change of name perhaps encouraged by the removal of the toll on the river bridge in 1886. The higher ground above the village did not see development for housing until the C20<sup>th</sup> with previous developments restricted to infill within the existing built up area and extensions on the flood plain. Development on the flood plain was further accelerated after the flood alleviation scheme of the mid 1970s greatly reduced the incidence of serious flooding. Today those landscape controls that shaped the early settlement still in some ways continue to be evident in the way the village is strung out as a continuous linear settlement along the main road through the village from the river bridge right the way to Cat's Hill.

*This aerial view of the village was taken at an altitude of some 2,000 feet above the village on the 7<sup>th</sup> August 1981. The river bridge is very noticeable in the bottom centre with the High Street running straight into the distance to its junction with Cappell Lane and Roydon Road. The church of St. Andrews on Cappell Lane can be easily identified in the top left of the view with its crescent shaped approach road very noticeable in the picture. Roydon Road can be picked out heading off to the right from the road junction at the far end of the High Street. Beyond both these roads the housing developments of Chapelfields nearest the church and the Thele Estate to the right can be seen built on the sharply rising valley side with upland farmland beyond. The image also shows how in the last 170 years the flood plain particularly down valley of the High Street has been built over. A far cry from the humble beginnings of a few properties at each end of the High Street.*



Stanstead did not begin to grow into a town until the 900s AD at a time when nucleated settlements were being encouraged both for safety and centres of trade. It benefitted from being on an east west route at a very convenient location that assisted travellers avoiding otherwise rather roundabout routes across this part of the country. The village began to attract businesses that supported a market place, could make good use of the local agricultural produce and transport their final product down the River Lea. Although it was still thriving as an important Hertfordshire town in 1086 circumstances changed which saw the settlement fall into decline. Geographically Ware was located at the most advantageous point on the river where the main road from London to the north crossed the river. After the commercial area of Ware was remodelled, a new bridge built in the 1180s and a grant for a market given in 1190, it grew to economic pre-eminence in the local area. Stanstead then settled down to a future as a small malting and flour milling village making the best it could of its relatively inferior geographical location. However its location was to pay dividends in 1843 when the railway was built through the valley to Hertford. This led to a growth of commercial activity and later in the C20<sup>th</sup> the increase of commuting to London by train saw the population of the village rapidly expand.