1. County and Shire.

When we look at a map of England we cannot fail to be struck by the way in which the land has been divided up into the different areas which we call counties or shires. It is not easy at first to see what method has been pursued in the division. There are two well-known ways of dividing up a large area of land. One is by the use of regular lines, such as parallels of latitude and meridians of longitude; a method which, though not employed in England, has been used largely in North America and in Australia. The other is to make the dividing lines follow some natural feature of the land whenever that is possible, and this has been the rule in England in many places, but not at all uniformly. For instance, the division into counties in the north of England clearly shows the influence of the Pennines, and in the south the river Thames has played an important part. There is yet another method, that of growth from a smaller unit. History teaches us that the division which we know as a county or shire grew from a collection of smaller units of area, the "hundreds." These hundreds were probably tracts of land inhabited by a hundred families; when larger divisions were wanted these were obtained by grouping

together a certain number of hundreds; and just as the outside boundaries of certain properties would form the boundary of the hundred, so the outside boundaries of certain hundreds would form the boundary of the shire. In fact the county was formed out of a certain number of hundreds grouped together, and was not, as might be supposed, subdivided into hundreds. The boundary of the shire might or might not follow natural features of the country; the determining factor was the boundary of the smaller unit.

In this book we are going to deal with one particular county, Northamptonshire, so that our attention will be riveted on a small tract of land, the size of which is about one fifty-eighth of that of England and Wales.

The first thing to do is to consider the name given to this division of the country. If we look at the names of other counties, we at once notice that the ending *-shire* is common to a great many. This word *shire* is derived, like the word *share*, from an old English word meaning "to shear," "to cut off," so that it is clear that the name Northamptonshire means "the division (or share) of Northampton." We might at once guess that the town of Northampton must have existed before the division was made of the land which gave a certain portion of the country to it as its "shire." We should be right in this, for although we do not know for certain when Northampton was actually founded, we do know that it had been in existence for some centuries before any division such as that of "shires" was effected: we find it mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle as Hamtune,

and it must have received later the prefix North- to distinguish it from Southampton, which is also referred to in the same chronicle as Hamtune. Early in the tenth century the town was held by the Danes, and in 1010 Sweyn almost completely destroyed it. Ever since that time it has been a town of importance, and several parliaments have been held within its walls. But we shall have more to say of its history later.

We have learnt, then, the meaning of the word Northamptonshire. It remains for us to find out when the division took place which marked off our county as "the share of Northampton."

If we look at a map of England after the Treaty of Chippenham in 878, we shall not see any district marked Northamptonshire, but we notice that the boundary of Danish Mercia, which divides it from the kingdom of Guthrum and from English Mercia, follows roughly a great part of the boundary of our modern county. In 878 then, we may say, Northamptonshire formed the southern portion of Danish Mercia. In all probability it was at some time during the century succeeding the Treaty of Chippenham that England was divided up into counties or shires. Many of the shires took their names from the chief towns in them, so that it was only natural that this county should receive the name of Northamptonshire.

Following the revolt of the Northumbrians in the reign of Edward the Confessor, a fresh division was made of the kingdoms in the north, and we find that Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire were assigned as

The Nene near Elton

(The boundary between Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire)

a separate earldom to Waltheof. We also find the county mentioned in Domesday Book, when it included much of Rutland, but in the reign of Henry II it was reduced practically to the area and shape which it has now.

2. General Characteristics. Position and Natural Conditions.

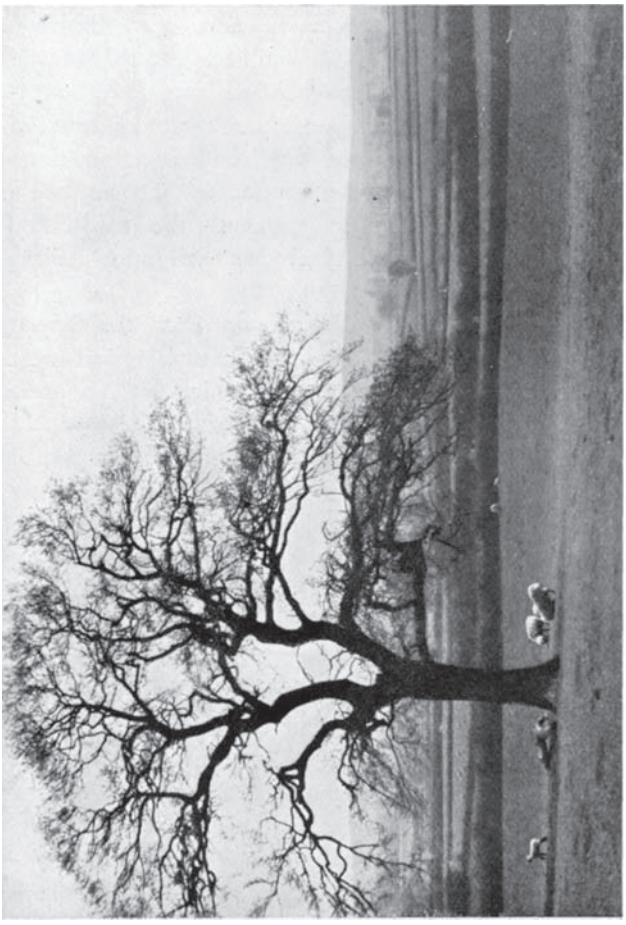
When we turn to examine the general characteristics of our county, the first thing that we notice is that it is what is termed an inland county, that is to say it is bounded on all sides by land. It stands moreover in that part of England which is termed the Midlands, a little to the south-east of the centre. It is difficult to see any natural boundaries; but if we look at a map which shows the height of the land (such as that at the beginning of this book), we cannot help noticing that most of Northamptonshire seems to form the upper part of the basin of the Nene. The county indeed rather resembles a leaf in shape, with its higher ground in the north-west and south-west, and with the mid-rib of the leaf represented by the river Nene.

There is an important point to be noticed with regard to its position. From the earliest times the great roads—and in these days of our own the railways—have radiated from London in every direction. Now to reach either Scotland or the north of England from London, one must decide to go either to the east or the west of the Pennines, that broad stretch of high ground which reaches

down into England as far as Derbyshire. We can, in fact, travel north from London by one of two ways—either through the Midland gate and then through Lancashire, or else to the right of the Pennines by the Vale of York. If we take a ruler and draw straight lines from London to Crewe and from London to York,

View near Arbury Hill
(*Showing hilly ground characteristic of West Northamptonshire*)

we shall find that both these lines cross our county. Northamptonshire, then, lies directly in the way of traffic from London to the north by either of these two great routes. Its position therefore has made it an important thoroughfare on the way from south to north—indeed four main railway lines cross the county.



View across Nene valley near Oundle
(*Showing the undulating lands of East central Northamptonshire*)

The shape of Northamptonshire has given it traffic in another direction, from south-west to north-east. Between London and the Pennines England is crossed by bands of high ground which run, roughly speaking, from south-west to north-east. Communication therefore between the west and east of central England has at all times naturally followed the lower ground in between these bands of high ground, and consequently the main valley of our county, that of the Nene, has been much used as a route from west to east.

It is usual to take a line drawn from the Severn mouth to the Wash as dividing industrial north-west England from the south-east part which has no great industries. Northamptonshire lies just to the south of this line, and is therefore not included in what is termed "industrial England." As a matter of fact it possesses industries, some of them very important ones, but on the whole it is an agricultural county. It has good soil, an equable climate, and a moderate to low rainfall; and as nearly all the land is capable of cultivation it would be curious if agriculture did not thrive.

The north-east corner is part of the low-lying flat district known as the Fens, but most of the county is undulating, and in parts it is hilly, although it does not rise much above 700 feet anywhere. Most of the highest ground is in the south-west, the west, and along the north-west border of the county, and in these parts the finest scenery is to be found. In many districts there are fine woods, and the uninteresting appearance of the land at the east end of the county is frequently improved by

the presence of noble trees which break the monotony of the view. In the rainfall map (see p. 51) in which the contours for 200 ft. and 400 ft. are drawn, it is possible to see at a glance the three chief districts outlined above, the flat land of the east, the high ground of the west, and the undulating country in the middle of the county, each having its own strongly marked characteristics.

3. Size. Shape. Boundaries.

As we have seen, then, in the preceding chapter, Northamptonshire is shaped somewhat like a leaf, with its stem pointing to the north-east. This north-east corner approaches more closely to the sea than any other part of the county, reaching to within 18 miles of the wide bay or gulf which we know as the Wash.

The length of the county from south-west to north-east is between 67 and 68 miles. The breadth of course varies, being greatest to the south-west of the centre; a line drawn across the county, following the direction of Watling Street for a greater part of the way, is 29 miles in length.

The area of the county (including the Soke of Peterborough) is 638,612 acres, or nearly 1000 square miles. If we compare Northamptonshire in size with Yorkshire the largest county in England, and with Rutland the smallest, we find that, roughly speaking, it is one-sixth the size of Yorkshire and six and a half times

the size of Rutland. If we divide the total area of England and Wales by the number of counties into which the land is divided, we find that the average size of a county is about 1116 square miles, i.e. a little greater than the size of Northamptonshire.

The county is bounded on the north by Leicestershire, Rutland, and Lincolnshire; on the east by Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, and Bedfordshire; on the south by Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire; and on the west by Warwickshire. Thus its borders are touched by nine other counties, a larger number of bordering shires than can be claimed by any other county in England.

If we start in the south-west corner of Northamptonshire and trace the boundary northward, we find that it coincides with the course of the river Cherwell to a point a little to the north of Banbury; here it turns east, and soon after passing Chalcombe bends in a north-west direction, crosses the Cherwell, and after an irregular course on high ground runs down to the Leam, which it follows as far as Braunston. A little to the north of this point it bends to the west, then follows Rains Brook to the east for a short distance, and a little to the north of Kilsby joins Watling Street, which it follows to the point where the Roman road crosses the Avon. Here it turns north-east and follows the Avon almost to its source. Near Welford it crosses the high ground separating the basins of the Avon and Welland, and follows the latter stream almost continuously, past Stamford and Market Deeping to a point about two miles west of Crowland. Here it turns south-east, and after a few