

HATFIELD HOUSE ARCHIVES

Note on the name HATFIELD

The place-name

It dates from the Anglo-Saxon period (between the 5th and the 11th centuries) and means “heath-covered open land”. This type of countryside was fairly widespread and there are at least five other places in England with this name, apart from Hatfield in Hertfordshire. They are situated in Essex, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and in the East and West Ridings of Yorkshire.

There are also places called Heathfield (which has the same meaning as Hatfield) that are scattered equally widely: in Cumberland, Devon, Somerset, Surrey, Sussex, Yorkshire and the Isle of Wight.

Probably the earliest written reference to Hatfield in Hertfordshire dates from about 750 AD, when it was mentioned in the Ecclesiastical History of the Venerable Bede.

The family surname

Most English families adopted the use of hereditary surnames between about 1100 and 1400 AD. They originated in a number of different ways: sometimes they were derived from a person’s occupation (e.g. Smith) or taken from their father’s name (e.g. Williamson) but it was also quite usual for people to name themselves after the place where they lived (e.g. Hatfield). If a person is surnamed Hatfield it is likely that they will be descended from a man who lived in a place called Hatfield before 1400. As explained above, this could be one of least six different Hatfields.

It is most unlikely that it would ever be possible to establish which Hatfield any particular family came from. This is because of the relative scarcity of mediaeval records, especially from the early period when the surname was first adopted.

Hatfield House

Hatfield House takes its name from the place in which it is situated. The house was built by Robert Cecil, First Earl of Salisbury, between 1607 and 1612, about a thousand years after Hatfield was first named. Since Robert Cecil’s death the house has remained in the possession of his descendants, the Earls and Marquesses of Salisbury. It has never belonged to anyone with the surname Hatfield and there is no connection (apart from the name) between Hatfield House and anyone called Hatfield.

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