LOCATION
Lea river valley within the confines of the urban settlements of Hertford and Ware

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER
Urbanised public amenity/nature conservation site between Hertford and Ware, with some rural characteristics; large area of public open space, divided between formal/informal sports facilities at Hartham and a broad area of predominantly wet grassland of joint nature conservation and informal recreation value (Kings Mead). The eastern end of this area is more urbanised, with the Lee Navigation a particular feature through Ware.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS
• flat river valley tightly enclosed by urban development on the surrounding slopes
• very linear, but extensive area of open space within urban envelope
• mainly grassland, but managed in different ways
• strong urban influences
• engineered character of Navigation
• confluence of rivers Beane, Rib and Lee

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES
• locks and narrow boats on the Navigation
• sports facilities at Hartham
• A10(T) road bridge over Kings Mead

Gazebos on the River Lea in Ware (T. Hamilton)
PHYSICAL INFLUENCES

**Geology and soils.** Gleyed (poorly draining) soils over alluvial drift (Fladbury 1 series).

**Topography.** Flat river valley

**Degree of slope.** Fall of 1 in 1000 between Hartham and Hartmead Lock

**Altitude range.** 31m to 35m

**Hydrology.** This area is notable as the confluence of most major rivers in central and eastern Hertfordshire. Within the area the Lea has been altered to a broad, deep, artificial navigable channel which now reflects lowland riverine habitat. At Kings Mead several sluices have been constructed to retain a higher water level across the meads and reinforce its nature conservation importance. Within Ware the river assumes a more confined, canalised character, enlivened by the historic gazebos lining it on the northern bank. The New River lies parallel to the railway towards the southern edge of this area, with its additional source at Chadwell springs.

**Land cover and land use.** There is an extensive area of informal public open space/nature reserve at Kings Mead, with playing fields and formal recreation further west at Hartham and sheep-grazed meadows visible to the west. The river Lee/Lea and the Lee Navigation flow closely together along the northern edge of the area, with the Navigation providing a well used transport route into the centre of Hertford, past new and old housing and allotments. Within Ware the two watercourses unite, only to divide again to the east of the town.

**Vegetation and wildlife.** This is an area of key conservation importance, being the largest (5 acres) remaining flood meadow complex in Hertfordshire, with several areas of unimproved alluvial grassland, ditch systems and the important chalk springs at Chadwell. Although much degraded, the site floods regularly and many scarce plants survive there. The area is important for birds and invertebrates as well as plants. The Lea contains species such as yellow waterlily, branched bur-reed, reed sweet grass and club-rush, at least seven coarse fish species and a number of uncommon invertebrates. Around the edge of the meadows there are wetland species such as willow, poplar and alder, with ash and beech. Within the meadows at Hartham there are plantings of more ornamental species.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

The Lea was the most important natural waterway in Hertfordshire, linking the rich grain-producing lands of the north-east to London, and was the more useful because of the poor state of most of the roads, which ran over (or into) the heavy, waterlogged London clay. The royal borough of Hertford had been given monopolies over navigation on the Lea in the 12th century, but the construction of weirs at Ware to obstruct navigation lead to its decline. The Lea Navigation canalised sections of the river and still provides a route through the valley, with frequent locks.

**Field pattern.** The drainage pattern within Kings Mead echoes the former field pattern. This would have been large and irregular, subject to the vagaries of the river's course through the grazing meadows.

**Transport pattern.** The Lee Navigation offered the first transport route through the area, and still does. The railway follows the line of the valley but partly bisects Kings Mead, while the A10(T) bridge soars overhead.

**Settlements and built form.** Although this area is hemmed in at either end by settlement, only in Ware does this development occur within the floodplain. Here the river has been canalised and houses and gardens extend to the water's edge. At the eastern end of Ware, running back from the High Street, there is a group of gazebos built out overlooking the water by the wealthy maltsters and merchants of the town in the 18th/19th centuries. Although it is within the urban area, mention should be made of Scott's Grotto in Scotts Road. Built c 1760, it consists of a number of passages and chambers lined with flint, shell, quartz and bits of glass, with a Gothick-windowed gazebo above. Other structures within the valley are the locks on the Lea Navigation and footbridges over it.

OTHER SOURCES OF AREA-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION
At Hartham there is small-scale unity around the combination of Edwardian terraced houses with allotments and the Lea Navigation, echoed by the scale of more recent development around it. It is also quite tranquil, with road traffic noise masked by the dense tree cover. Hartham Meadow is a mainly medium-scale contained landscape, unified and made coherent by the simplicity of its elements, as is the Navigation within Ware. Kings Mead is larger in scale, so that the A10(T) bridge overhead does not dwarf it (although it destroys any hint of tranquillity), but is also contained by urban development.

Rarity and distinctiveness. The section of river within Ware is unique and valuable as an example of the historic continuity of use. The watermeadow habitats are unusual relics of previous land use and require conservation, protection and sound management.

VISUAL IMPACT
The gazebos at Ware and the Lea Navigation at Hartham are locally distinctive features, while the scale of the meadows at Hartham and Kings Mead offers a refreshing change from the tighter, denser scale of their urban surroundings.

ACCESSIBILITY
Noted recreational land uses: walking, cycling, fishing, jogging, boating
Frequency/density of footpaths: extensive (there are more routes than shown on OS map)
Waymarked routes: widespread
Access not particularly good from north east
Condition: good; wide, narrow; surface: tarmac, gravel, rendered concrete with setts

COMMUNITY VIEWS
This area is significant for its distinctiveness (C).

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS
Landscape Development Area.
STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE: CONSERVE AND STRENGTHEN

- support the work of HMWT in managing the Kings Mead site to enable it to realise its full potential
- encourage the development of connected wetlands along the river valley
- protect the area from development that would alter its character visually or environmentally, such as culverting, impact on floodplain or water table, loss of water meadows or storage ponds
- encourage the establishment of wet native woodland along watercourses, such as black poplar and pollarded willow
- ensure that proposed improvements within the Landscape Development Area will contribute to and reinforce the distinctiveness of this area and that they will not jeopardize any existing areas of historic, ecological or landscape importance
- ensure that all landowners and developers are aware of the BAP objective of creating a ‘necklace’ of inter-connected wetland habitats along the river valleys
- encourage the establishment of buffer strips of semi-natural vegetation along all watercourses, avoiding potential conflict with recreational use
- resist the targeting of redundant or derelict pasture for development
- resist development in adjoining areas that could lower the water table and affect wetland habitats
- promote the use of low-density grazing as a management technique
- promote the re-introduction of permanent pasture and flooding regimes as normal agricultural practices, to increase landscape and habitat diversity
- encourage the management of the area through zoning, to maximise its potential for both wildlife and recreation