



The Hundred Parishes

Circular walks – number 101

Saffron Walden country & town walk – 6.7 miles (11 kms)

This walk starts and finishes in the market town of Saffron Walden, but most is along paths through attractive, rolling countryside, all within the parish of Saffron Walden apart from a short foray into Wimbish parish. It concludes with an introductory stroll around part of the historic centre of the town, the largest settlement within the Hundred Parishes. There are no stiles but some steps and two short, steep sections of path. Altogether the route covers around 4 miles of path and 2.5 miles of town roads, all gently undulating.

Within the town, keep watch for pudding stones, pargetting and a great variety of architectural styles. There are many places to eat in Saffron Walden on every day of the week, but none for the first 5 miles of the route.

A more extensive town trail is available from the Tourist Information Centre in Market Square.

Start & Finish: Saffron Walden, Essex: Uttlesford District Council HQ car park (weekends only) in London Road (Grid Reference: TL536380, Postcode: CB11 4ZH) or nearby in Springhill Road (TL536377, CB11 4AH) or Summerhill Road (TL536375, CB11 4AJ). Parking restrictions may apply on these residential roads. [*Should parking here prove impossible, the main Saffron Walden car park is at Swan Meadow, access CB10 1BX. We will pass it at the 4th paragraph on page 5.*]

Public toilets in Hill Street (TL538384, CB10 1JZ).

The whole route is on Ordnance Survey Explorer Map 195.

Either (a) from the council office car park, walk towards the road but pause to look at the main council office building. It was constructed in 1866 as Saffron Walden Hospital, largely funded by a member of the Gibson family. Turn right into London Road and very soon, before the mini roundabout, cross the road with care and turn left into Borough Lane. When safe to do so, cross Borough Lane and continue uphill to turn right onto Springhill Road. At the end of this road, turn left into Summerhill Road . . .

Or (b) if you have parked in Springhill Road or the early (western) part of Summerhill Road, head uphill to the junction of these two roads and then continue eastwards, slightly uphill, along Summerhill Road . . .

At the end of Summerhill Road turn left onto Debden Road, heading towards a red-brick water tower. The 90-foot tower was built in 1913 and is visible for miles around. Soon, cross the road with care and turn right into The Avenue. The route now weaves through relatively modern developments.

Follow The Avenue round to the right on a public footpath through tree-lined private gardens, passing Pavilion Way and Tilia Court, both on the left.

When the path reaches a residential road (St Johns Close), bear slightly left, cross the road and continue uphill on the pavement. After 70 yards, turn right beside a half-hidden lamppost into a narrow footpath/alley to the left of house number 16.

This path becomes a road and when it reaches a T junction, turn left and almost immediately right into another footpath/alley.

This path passes between houses and soon joins Reddings Close. Keep straight ahead and at the end of the close turn left (into Cromwell Road) and almost immediately cross the road to turn right into another footpath. Very soon this comes to another road (Long Horse Croft). Turn right and follow this road round to the left, past a community centre and play area on the right.

Turn right (into Ross Close), keeping the playground on the right. Cross the entrance to Plantation Close on the right and soon cross the road. Turn left just after house number 168 and follow a public footpath across a small green, keeping to the left of a block of flats.

Keep straight ahead across a parking area to pass between house numbers 65 and 46, heading towards a high metal mesh fence.

At the fence, turn right. Keep the fence on the left, bearing right and soon turning left alongside it. After another 50 yards, turn left again to continue beside the fence. At the end of this field, bear right and soon pass between concrete bollards to emerge onto a narrow lane. Suddenly, we have left the built-up area and are in open countryside.

Keep left along the lane towards a farmhouse. At the house, Herberts, turn right, away from the house onto a field edge path with a hedge on the right. At the end of the field, follow the path and hedgerow round to the left and soon turn right, descending beside a line of oak trees on the left. This path is in the parish of Wimbish, but we will soon return to Saffron Walden.

At the bottom of the descent, bear right and then turn right (imperceptibly re-crossing the parish boundary back into Saffron Walden) onto a road towards some red brick houses. Soon, near the houses and when safe, cross the road and continue for a short while on the left.

As the road turns to the right, turn left onto a path which runs beside a hedgerow. [*Another track runs parallel with this, slightly higher up the field – they meet again in the next paragraph.*] For some distance this relatively straight and level path runs beside Fulfen Slade, down to the left, a tributary of the River Cam. The hedgerow ends after a while. Around three-quarters of a mile after leaving the road, the path reaches a wood and at this point, a long-distance footpath, the Harcamlow Way, joins our route after crossing a footbridge from the left.

Bear to the right, keeping a thin wood on the left. After 200 yards, another path joins from the right [*the one referred to in italics in the previous paragraph*]. Keep ahead with the wood on the left.

After another 200 yards bear left and take the wooden footbridge with metal handrails over the stream. Immediately turn right along a narrow field, staying close to the line of trees on the left.

At the end of the field, pass along a narrow copse, now with the stream close by on the right.

After a while, the path rises steeply to a busy road (Newport Road, B1052). Carefully cross the road to rejoin the path, which descends steeply through woodland onto a field. Turn right and, almost immediately, right again to follow the path along a narrow strip of woodland – with many large beech trees. Fulfen Slade is immediately on the right. Fulfen Slade tends to be an all-or-nothing drainage ditch, sometimes dry and at other times in full flood.

At the end of the woodland turn right across a bridge over the Slade and then turn left to continue along the Harcamlow Way with the stream now on the left.

The path emerges via a small car park onto a road. Cross carefully to enter the private road to Abbey Farm. Follow this private road, bearing right past 17th-century St Mark's College, former almshouses, and right again to climb gently up Village Street through the hamlet of Audley End. The long run of houses on the left dates mainly from the 18th century.

Towards the end of the street, Audley End House may be seen through the trees straight ahead over its boundary wall.

The entrance to this splendid mansion, now run by English Heritage, is just round to the left, but our route turns right. At the end of the village street, bear right and cross the road to use the pavement on the opposite side.

Continue uphill with the long, high 17th-century boundary wall of Audley End House on the left.

After a quarter mile, just beyond two seats, turn left through a gateway through the wall into Audley End Estate. Follow the path straight ahead. Cross a gravel estate road with care and note in the distance to the right the red brick water tower near where we started. Keep ahead, beneath a line of trees.

To the right may be seen the red and cream brick building that was originally Saffron Walden Hospital and is now Uttlesford District Council's offices, where this walk began.

As the path starts to descend, in winter months parts of the roof of Audley End House can be glimpsed through the trees, back to the left. In the distance to the left, the obelisk, designed by Robert Adam, was erected in 1783 by the then owner of Audley End House (Sir John Griffin Griffin, later to become the first Lord Braybrooke) in memory of his aunt, Elizabeth, Countess of Portsmouth, who had left him the estate.

Towards the end of the descent, the spire of the parish church of St Mary's comes into view. Go through the iron gate to exit Audley End Estate, passing the estate lodge house that was built in 1814.

Continue ahead on Abbey Lane. In 100 yards, pass the beginning of the Repell Ditch on the right. We will return to this point later.

Continue along Abbey Lane, passing the King Edward VI Almshouses on the left. The main block was built in 1834 and has a central chapel. The buildings at each end were added later in the 19th century by members of the Gibson family, wealthy Quakers who were generous benefactors to the town. Saffron Walden has a wealth of interesting history and heritage, with more than 300 listed buildings. We will pass a good selection and mention just a few.

Continue ahead to the traffic lights at the junction with Saffron Walden High Street.

The route so far has covered about 5 miles. For the final 1.5 miles, the route meanders through older parts of town past many places of interest and a variety of opportunities to eat or drink. Please take your time.

Turn right up the High Street past many grand buildings on each side. Just before the phone box use the traffic island to cross the road. On the far side of the crossing, look back to the large building, Hill House. This was once the home of George Stacey Gibson, banker and philanthropist, and is now divided into 17 apartments.

Continue uphill for a short way before turning left into Gold Street. Enjoy the variety of buildings along this street, with equally varied past or present uses. Follow Gold Street round to the left and carefully cross to the right pavement to appreciate the view of St Mary's Church, one of the largest in Essex. At the bottom of Gold Street, carefully cross Hill Street into Cross Street. [Public toilets are just a few yards from the bottom of Gold Street – turn right along Hill Street].

Soon, Cross Street bears right, but we keep straight ahead on the pedestrian route and then turn right into King Street. This soon leads to Market Square. The market is held on Tuesdays and Saturdays. The Town Hall and Tourist Information Centre are on the right. The T.I.C. has much information about Saffron Walden and the wider area, including a free Town Trail.

On reaching Market Square, turn left past the Library and ascend Market Hill to the cross roads with Church Street. The four buildings at this cross roads date from the 14th and 15th centuries. [The road straight ahead leads to the ruins of Saffron Walden Castle and an excellent museum]. Turn left into Church Street, immediately passing a heavily pargetted building on the left which was once the Sun Inn. Carefully cross the road for a better view of the pargeting, especially the two figures who possibly represent Thomas Hickathrift, a legendary folk hero, and the Wisbech giant who he killed.

Continue down Church Street for a further 50 yards before turning sharp right up steps to walk around a small garden that features a 2018 statue "The Children of Calais". On the left are more almshouses along Church Path. Exit at the far end of the garden and continue past the parish church which we saw from the top of Gold Street.

You are encouraged to visit St Mary's which is possibly the largest parish church in Essex. It dates from the 13th century and was largely rebuilt around 1500 AD. There is some splendid decoration and the many tombs and memorials include one of black marble to Thomas Audley, Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII. His memorial can be found at the far end of the right aisle.

On leaving the church, turn right and soon keep straight ahead into an alley.

Beware of the step at the end of the alley, where we turn left into colourful Castle Street. Carefully cross the road and soon turn right under an archway marked "Bridge End Garden".

Pass Fry Art Gallery, which specializes in local artists especially the Bardfield Artists, and enter Bridge End Gardens. Note the eagles above a gateway on the right which leads into the restored Dutch garden.

The gardens have great variety. You are encouraged to explore and return to the eagles. Beware the maze: it could add many yards to the length of this walk!

After exploring, with the eagles and Dutch garden behind you, turn left and then, before another archway, turn right and soon follow a stream on the left (behind the wall) to leave Bridge End Gardens.

Exit the gardens onto the main road, Bridge Street. Turn left and, soon after the Eight Bells pub, cross the road with care to turn right into colourful Freshwell Street.

At the end of the street keep straight ahead with the high wall on the left, passing the duck pond on the right. When the path reaches a road, Park Lane, cross to the pavement and turn left. If we had turned right, we would have entered Swan Meadow car park.

At the King Edward VI Almshouses, turn right and pass beneath the archway. Keep ahead on the footpath until it reaches a road (Abbey Lane) and here turn right. Pass the almshouses on the right. We are now retracing a short part of our earlier route.

At the end of the long wall on the left, turn left onto a footpath with a deep ditch on the right. This is part of the "Repell Ditches", a substantial defensive earthwork that is believed to date from Saxon times. Climb gently with the ditch on the right for about 200 yards.

At the end of a fence, turn left along the path, ascending some steps and climbing steadily beside the ditch until the path reaches a road, Gibson Gardens. Turn right.

At the end of this cul-de-sac, keep ahead on a footpath. Very soon, reach the Uttlesford District Council office car park on the right.

If you have parked here you can pass through a gap in the wall into the car park. If you have parked in Springhill Road or Summerhill Road continue to the end of the path and turn right when it reaches the busy London Road. Cross with care and soon turn left into Borough Lane. Continue uphill to turn right into Springhill Road and, if appropriate, continue to Summerhill Road.

This has been just a brief, cursory introduction to Saffron Walden. Please consider a return visit, perhaps to explore more thoroughly with the aid of a Town Trail or other guide, available from the Tourist Information Centre.

Two diagrams, one covering the whole route and the other the final town section, are shown on the next pages. They are published under © Crown copyright 2020 OS 100062498.

This route description, last updated 06 September 2022, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk where you can find an introduction to Saffron Walden and a short account of the life of George Stacey Gibson, as well as many more local walks.

Please email any suggestions for improving the route or the route description to hundredparishes@btinternet.com.



