



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about CASTLES

Around the Hundred Parishes, there is evidence of the existence of at least eleven castles. All are shadows of their former selves, but many can still be seen and just a few can be visited.

Many of our castles were built soon after the Norman Conquest in 1066, often on the site of a Saxon stronghold. These Norman castles are described as motte and bailey. They consisted of a large mound of earth or rubble (motte) surmounted by a wooden or stone tower. Alongside would be an embanked enclosure with additional buildings (the bailey).

At **Stansted Mountfitchet**, there is a fine example of what a typical Norman castle may have been like. Although little survives other than the mound on which the original Norman castle once stood, a wooden stockade and village have been recreated. Mountfitchet Castle is particularly popular with children, either in school parties or with their family. Several Hundred Parishes walks pass close by.



The parish of **Castle Camps** takes its name from the castle which dated back to Saxon times. The castle and its estate were given by William the Conqueror to the De Vere family, the Earls of Oxford. In 1584 the castle was sold and then in 1611 it came into the possession of Charterhouse School who eventually replaced the castle with “a very noble house”. The castle landscaping and former moat can still be seen on the land which is now a private farm and has scheduled monument status. The site is visible from walks 153 and 154.



The De Vere family also built the motte and bailey castle at **Great Canfield** in the late 11th century or early 12th century. The remaining tree-covered mound is just visible behind the church. Walk 127 passes beside the mound.

The mound of **Stebbing's** Norman castle can be seen from a footpath which is used in walk numbers 117 and 119

Anstey has the remains of a 12th century motte and bailey castle. It was demolished by Henry III and its stone was used in the nearby church. Its mound and moat can still be seen today behind the parish church (soon after the start of Walk number 132). Sadly, in 1944, an American bomber plane, taking off from nearby Nuthampstead airfield, crashed onto the castle mound, killing all crew but without any bombs exploding.

Clavering castle is another scheduled monument. The site pre-dates the Norman Conquest. The buildings were surrounded by a large ditch, which can still be seen, adjacent to the churchyard. The castle site can be seen from walks 118 and 180.

The civil war in England between 1135 and 1153 saw a period of hasty castle-building. This period in history is known by the Victorian term "The Anarchy", a time of upheaval during the war of succession between Empress Matilda and her cousin Stephen of Blois. Stephen seized the throne but neither side gained any real advantage and power transferred back and forth for many years. Eventually, at the Treaty of Winchester, Stephen recognized Matilda's son Henry as his heir. Stephen died the following year and Henry ascended the throne as Henry II in 1154.



Geoffrey de Mandeville was the first Earl of Essex at this time and was a very prominent figure. He initially supported Stephen but changed allegiance to Matilda in 1141 when Stephen was captured at Lincoln. When Stephen was later released Geoffrey returned to Stephen's side. Geoffrey founded a Benedictine priory and a castle at **Saffron Walden**. He surrendered the castle to Stephen and his successor Henry II rendered it indefensible in 1158. Some walls remain and they are Grade I listed. This is the finest surviving stone castle within the Hundred Parishes.



Great Easton castle was yet another built at this time by Geoffrey de Mandeville. Its mound, just visible from the road east of the parish church, is shown on the left. The mound can be seen on walk number 163.

Geoffrey de Mandeville also built a castle at **Pleshey** during the Anarchy but was required to surrender it to Stephen. Pleshey castle was demolished in the early 17th century but the large motte remains, together with a 15th-century brick bridge giving access over the moat.

The castle is not usually open but this photo was taken in 2019 during a private visit by The Hundred Parishes Society. Intrepid members climbed to the top of the castle mound.

The present village of Pleshey lies mostly inside the outer bailey earthwork that once protected the castle. The earthwork is clearly visible along much of its length.

Another view of the brick bridge, shown below, can be seen from Pleshey's village street. Walk 110 passes the castle.



The motte and bailey castle at **Barkway** is no longer evident. It stood on Periwinkle Hill, 150 metres or nearly 500 feet above sea level in the highest parish within the Hundred Parishes. From here, on a clear day, a lookout could see as far as Ely Cathedral rising above the Fens, 30 miles to the north.

Finally, in this quick roundup, there is just a hint of a castle mound still in evidence in **Rickling**, just south of Rickling Hall.

If we have missed a castle, please let us know by using the Feedback form on the website www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.