



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about CHURCH CLOCKS

Before the middle of the twentieth century, most people did not have watches; they relied on public clocks which could be seen at railway stations, post offices and other public buildings - and on church towers. Rupert Brooke, the poet, lived at Grantchester, not far outside the Hundred Parishes. In 1912, feeling homesick, he wrote:

*“Stands the church clock at ten to three
And is there honey still for tea?”*

Only half of the parish churches in The Hundred Parishes have a clock. All listed buildings have a formal description, but the details for a listed church rarely mention the clock, albeit that it is often a distinctive element of the church's external appearance.



Most clocks are mounted on the church tower. Many churches have just one clock, some two or three. Within the Hundred Parishes, there appear to be only three churches with four clocks, one on each side of the tower: Newport (shown here), Radwinter and Steeple Bumpstead.

The majority of clocks are round, but a few are lozenge or rhombus shaped, like Felsted (pictured on the right) and Great Waltham.



Most clocks have a solid face although a few, like those at Steeple Bumpstead, shown on the left, consist of metal framework and numerals through which the brick or flint wall can be seen. This clock happens to have been photographed at ten to three!

Solid faces are usually either blue or black. Numerals and the hour and minute hands are almost always golden.

The hands generally point to Roman numerals - I, II, III, IV, etc – although many have IIII instead of the usual IV. Widford (shown here) breaks the mould with Arabic numerals: 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.



The clocks at Great Canfield and Stebbing each have just a single hand, pointing to the hour. Great Canfield is pictured on the left

Some clocks are inscribed with a date and occasionally a royal cipher, for example Great Waltham, on the right, which celebrates Queen Victoria.



Hatfield Broad Oak appears to display the oldest date locally, 1797, although the clock looks in pristine condition following a major conservation exercise in 2014: the 1910 workings were taken apart, overhauled and cleaned, and the clock face repainted and re-gilded. An account of the project and an earlier clock, thought to date from the 17th century, are displayed inside the church.

Hinxton possibly has our oldest clock, believed to date from 1700 AD, albeit extensively renovated in 1809 when a new face was fitted. It is pictured on the right.





In Furneux Pelham, St Mary's clock is topped by Old Father Time and the words "Time Flies, Mind Your Business". One wonders what prompted those words to be included.

The bell tower at Sheering has two clock faces which were installed in the 1940s to remember those who served in the War. The north-facing clock tells us to "Work and Pray" while the west-facing proclaims "Today Is Yours".



The church at High Wych was built in 1861 to the design of local architect George Edward Pritchett. Its clock, shown on the left, is almost as wide as the thin flintstone tower on which it is mounted.

Artist Eric Ravilious lived in Great Bardfield. His wood engraving of Great Bardfield's church of St Mary the Virgin has been adopted as the logo for The Hundred Parishes – it appears at the top of the first page of this article. The engraving clearly shows the enormous clock that was added to the north face of the church tower to commemorate the coronation of King George V in 1912. One assumes the residents of Great Bardfield are never late.

It is hoped that this brief insight will encourage readers to take more notice of our humble church clocks. As with so many things in the Hundred Parishes, we can rejoice in the variety.

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