



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about CHURCHES

Within each of our hundred or so administrative parishes, the parish church is nearly always the most significant heritage feature. 61 of our churches are Grade I-listed, more than all other Grade I listings combined.

The subject of churches is too big to cover in one introductory piece, so we have several articles, each providing an introduction to a particular aspect of churches. We have generally focused on Church of England parish churches and have not sought to cover Roman Catholic or nonconformist churches or places of worship for non-Christian religions. Please see individual articles as follows:

- Church bells
- Church clocks
- Church memorials
- Church towers, spires and bellcotes
- Church stained-glass windows

Over time, we aim to add more articles to cover additional aspects of churches. In alphabetical order, these might include anchorites, angels, brasses, corbels, fonts, gargoyles, graffiti, lecterns, lychgates, organs, piscinas, poppy heads, porches, pulpits, reredoses, roods, screens and wall paintings, as well as a general explanation of words used to describe elements of churches. Our ancestors, over many generations, have left a wealth of heritage for us to enjoy.

The remainder of this article is of a general nature.

On the website www.hundredparishes.org.uk, individual parish introductions usually include a photo of the parish church and sometimes of other churches. Only two administrative parishes do not have a church: Nuthampstead and Flitch Green.

Most of the walk routes on the website pass at least one church. Some churches are kept locked; those now cared for by the Churches Conservation Trust are usually open. We always encourage people to go inside if the church is open, but first please remove muddy boots or slip on a pair of plastic bags. If you enjoy your visit, please leave a donation – church buildings are expensive to maintain.

“The Parish Churches of North West Essex, drawn by Charles Grigg Tait” is an excellent book of black and white sketches of churches, mostly within the Hundred Parishes. Charles Grigg Tait (1915 – 1996) lived in Maldon, Essex. He was a prolific local artist. The book is one of a series of four covering Essex; this one includes two drawings each of 108 churches, 73 of which fall within the Hundred Parishes. It is usually possible to locate a copy of the book on the internet, and not expensive to purchase a copy.

All churches are unique and each one has fascinating architecture, memorials and memories, reflecting the history of its parish in its own way. We have included below a small selection of photos to indicate the variety to be found both outside and inside churches within The Hundred Parishes



Amongst our oldest churches are the three shown here: Chickney above on the left, Strethall above on the right and Hadstock on the right.

Each is about a thousand years old.

Hadstock claims to have the oldest door in the country still in regular use – it has been dendro-dated to mid-11th century.



On the right, the Hamlet Church in Duddenhoe End is in the parish of Elmdon. It is our only thatched church. It started life as a barn some 400 years ago and was converted to a church in 1859.

We have just two churches with round towers, Bardfield Saling which is pictured below and Bartlow.



Debden church, shown on the right, is distinguished by its castellated roof.



Some churches can be identified by their distinctive porches, including two shown here. Radwinter's double-decker porch, on the right, has survived since the 14th century.



Meesden's brick porch, on the left, was added around 1530 to the church which dates from the 12th century. Brick was then in its infancy as a building material.



Within the parish of Finchingfield, the church at Cornish Hall End, shown on the left, is relatively modern, built of brick and consecrated in 1840.

Even more recent is St Peter's in Littlebury Green, shown on the right. It is made of corrugated iron, assembled from a kit in 1885. The 'tin tabernacle' was erected as a "chapel of ease", a subsidiary of Littlebury's parish church, enabling worshipers from Littlebury Green to avoid a long and hilly walk into the village.



Lindsell's 12th-century church, on the right, is primarily built of flint rubble but seems to have benefited from brick reinforcement during a period of reconstruction.



Our churches are as varied inside as they are outside. Generally, the congregation will sit on benches but some churches retain box pews, including in Stanstead Abbots' old church, shown below.



Some benches have ends that have been decorated with ornate carvings, known as "poppy heads". St Michael, below, features on a bench in Ickleton church where he is depicted weighing souls.

Whether on benches or in box pews, most congregations can sit (or kneel) comfortably on kneelers that have been produced by a communal effort. Shown below are some of the kneelers in Much Hadham church. They have been embroidered with images and text recalling events in the life of the church or the parish.



Visitors who look up may be surprised to find that they are being watched over by angels looking down from the ceiling, as pictured below in Braughing.



Most churches display a royal coat of arms, but not many are as old as the one hanging in Thaxted, shown on the right; it relates to Queen Anne who reigned from 1702 to 1714.



Stebbing and Great Bardfield each have a rare stone screen. Both were carved in the 14th century. Stebbing's is pictured on the left. Most churches have wooden screens separating the nave and chancel.

Many of our churches have ancient fonts, including the one at Henham. It has survived since the 15th century, albeit that someone with initials PG carved them into the font in the 1780s. Graffiti can be found in several of our churches.



Some churches have elaborate decoration on the walls or ceiling. Pictured here is part of the inside of High Wych's church which is dedicated to St James the Great.

James was a fisherman before becoming one of Jesus's disciples. The church's interior decoration resembles fishing nets.



Lindsell's church has an anchorite cell where many years ago someone would have, by choice, been excluded from the world except for a small opening for passage of food. The tiny opening can be seen here on the right.



There is another type of cell in Anstey, built into the lychgate at the entrance to the churchyard. This is where minor offenders would have spent the night, perhaps sleeping off the after-effects of excessive alcohol.

We will conclude this introduction to churches with a photo from Radwinter of the splendid wooden carvings that make up the reredos, standing behind the altar.



A wander around any church is likely to reveal many more gems.

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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.