



The Hundred Parishes

Introduction to a famous local person . . .

WILLIAM HARRISON (1535 – 1593)

Born in London of wealthy parents, William Harrison received a good education in London, then at Oxford University and later at Cambridge University. He served as rector of Radwinter from 1559 to 1593 and of Wimbish from 1571 to 1581. He was also appointed to several other ecclesiastical positions, mainly in London.

Harrison lived with his wife and four children in Radwinter. His various church roles appear to have provided adequate income and left him with sufficient time and energy to pursue his interests as a scholar and historian. He accumulated a small library and mixed with other scholars.

Harrison's lifetime project was to research and write a history of the world, titled *Chronology*, but it remained unfinished and unpublished at his death. However, he drew on that research in a 1577 publication, *Description of England*. This was a wide-ranging book that covered many aspects of life in Elizabethan England, from domestic arrangements to matters of state, including diet, dress, economics, furnishings, geography, politics and religion. It was recorded that he once asked a group of elderly Radwinter men what had been the greatest changes in their lifetimes. They agreed these were chimneys, pewter and pillows.

Description of England brought William Harrison fame in his own lifetime and even greater recognition later. The book is regarded as perhaps the most readable and informative account of the way of life during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It is a prime source for students of the period.

Later in life, Harrison received his most senior church appointment, as a canon at St George's Chapel, Windsor. He died and was buried in Windsor.

The full text of *Description of England* is available online at either <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1577harrison-england.asp> or <http://www.bartleby.com/35/3/>