



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

ASHDON



Location: 5 miles northeast of Saffron Walden. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5842.
Postcode: CB10 2HB. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** well off main roads.
Bus: 319 (Mon – Sat) between Audley End Station, Saffron Walden and Haverhill.
Population: 792 in 2001, 893 in 2011, 900 in 2021.



Ashdon takes its name from two Saxon words: *aescun* meaning ash tree and *dun* meaning hill. It was recorded as *Ascenduna* in the Domesday Book of 1086. The parish is large in area with three main settlements – the oldest clustered around the parish church at the top of the hill; today's centre down in the valley of the River Bourn; and the third element at Steventon End. The Bourn is a tributary of the River Granta which then joins the Cam before reaching Cambridge.

The photo above, taken from the churchyard, shows the 15th-century Guildhall on the left and the 18th-century Old Vicarage. The Guildhall probably served as a church building before becoming the parish workhouse in 1775 for up to 30 inmates. Sixty years later it was converted into three cottages and later into the single private house it is today.



The parish church of All Saints dates mostly from the 14th and 15th centuries, whilst much of the outside was renewed in the 18th and 19th. It is Grade-I listed, taking pride of place at the head of 65 listings scattered throughout the parish.

Close to the church stands the former National School, pictured here. It opened in 1841 and closed in 1885, seven years after the Board School opened in the centre of Ashdon.

Many of the listed buildings are former farm houses or barns, some of which are now purely residential.



The parish comprises mainly arable farmland, but today requires few farm workers.

To the east of the church an area of pasture is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Archaeological evidence confirms that this was the site of a medieval settlement, whilst the discovery in the 1830s of burials with weapons and pottery suggests that Church End was settled even earlier, long before the present church was built, possibly in Anglo-Saxon times over a thousand years ago. In the year 1016 King Canute's Danish army secured a decisive victory over the English at the Battle of Assandun, and later Canute built a minster church at Icanho to honour those who had died in the battle. The site of this battle and minster are not known for certain, but Ashdon is a possibility for the battle and either Ashdon's Chapel End or nearby Hadstock are possible sites for the minster. Ashington in southeast Essex is another possibility.

From Church End there is a segregated footpath that follows the roadway downhill to today's village centre. The path rejoins the road close to Ashdon's village museum. Opening hours are limited – see the link below – but this small building is packed with a superb display of local and general history (which changes regularly), with the added attraction of a small tea room. The museum has been developed and is manned by an enthusiastic band of volunteers. Their usually cheery demeanour has been tested several times by the adjacent River Bourn, whose waters have flooded through the museum on more than one occasion. It is to be hoped that subsequent remedial works will prevent or mitigate any further flooding.

Ashdon's public house was closed for a while but reopened in late 2021. The Rose and Crown, pictured here, was originally a coaching inn and it is possible that Oliver Cromwell stayed here. The Cromwell Room has 17th-century patterned wall paintings, albeit in poor condition.



Close by are the Baptist church, built in 1835; the current primary school which dates from 1878, war memorial, well-used village hall and the two attractive residences shown below.



In 1914, Ashdon was a focal point in the Agricultural Strike which gripped this area of Essex, Cambridgeshire and Suffolk in the spring and summer leading up to the First World War. In all, around 800 farm workers withdrew their labour, seeking recognition of their trade union and improvement in their poor employment conditions. There were several hostile confrontations between strikers and farmers and a force of 70 police was stationed at the Rose and Crown. Eight Ashdon men were sent to prison and were widely regarded as heroes.

The dispute was eventually settled and most of the union demands were met. The strike ended just as war broke out, with many of the farm labourers then going off to war. Twenty four men from Ashdon died in WWI. Most are recorded on the war memorial, although the names of three brothers, Albert, Frederick and Erasmus Kent, were not inscribed at the request of their parents.

Much of Ashdon is strung out along the road that meanders between Saffron Walden and Bartlow. For 99 years – between 1865 and 1964 - a railway line also connected these places, following a flatter and more direct route. Three miles (5 kilometres) of the Saffron Walden branch line passed through Ashdon parish, albeit not very close to its centres of population. At its peak, the weekday service comprised eight steam trains each way, but it was not until 1911 that Ashdon had its own station. From that date trains would stop upon request at Ashdon Halt, an unmanned platform. The line has gone, but Ashdon's "waiting room" survives, just about, and is pictured here. It started life in 1883 as a railway carriage and was installed at Ashdon Halt in 1915.



Ashdon's undulating countryside is crisscrossed by an extensive network of public rights of way. The long-distance Harcamlow Way footpath traverses the parish, passing the former Ashdon Halt and many other landmarks. At Steventon End it goes by 16th-century Ashdon Place (shown here), several interesting buildings around Waltons and also the 18th-century post mill.



The mill was last used in 1910. An extensive programme of work has made it once again accessible and a striking landmark.

This introduction is deliberately brief as Ashdon's story is covered extensively in a number of publications and websites that are listed below, as well as in its excellent museum. Here, mention is made of only a sample of the fine buildings situated in the two conservation areas (Church End and the centre) and elsewhere around the parish. It is hoped that this introduction will encourage its readers to learn more.



Hospitality:

Rose & Crown, CB10 2HA – 01799 584414 - <https://roseandcrownashdon.co.uk/>

Hundred Parishes Walk:

Circular walk number 150 covers 6.5 miles around much of the parish.

Adjacent parishes:

Saffron Walden, Swards End, Radwinter, Hadstock, Castle Camps, Bartlow.

Links:

Parish Council: www.ashdonparish.co.uk

Ashdon Village Museum: www.ashdonvillagemuseum.co.uk

Ashdon Conservation Area appraisal – link from www.uttlesford.gov.uk/caa

Further reading:

Ashdon, A History of an Essex Village, written and published by Angela Green.

Annals of Ashdon: No Ordinary Village, Robert Gibson, 1988, Essex Record Office.

Five miles from Bunkum – a Village and its crafts, Christopher Ketteridge and Spike Mays, 1972, published by Eyre Methuen.

Reuben's Corner, Spike Mays.

The Empty Fields, the Agricultural Strike of 1914, Roy Brazier, 1989, Ian Henry Publications

The Ashdon Meteorite, Gerald Lucy & Mike Howgate, 2023