



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

BERDEN



Location: 4 miles northwest of Stansted Mountfitchet. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL4629.

Postcode: CM23 1AY. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** South of B1038.

Bus: There is no general bus service other than school buses.

Population: 427 in 2001, 465 in 2011, 470 in 2021.



Two possible Old English language origins for the name Berden have been identified, giving a meaning of either swine pasture valley or corn valley. Each option has been incorporated into the village's three-dimensional sign, with a piglet peeping out from a sheaf of corn.

Berden appears in the Domesday Book of 1086 as Berdane. The parish comprises the village of Berden, the hamlet of Little London and a scattering of farmhouses and residential properties. Less than a hundred years ago almost every resident worked within the parish, but now there are limited local employment opportunities.

The book by Maurice Ancell (see below) gives a vivid account of life in Berden in the first half of the 20th century – a story of man and horse working the land, of many craftsmen serving just their local area and of tradesmen delivering their wares. Ancell tells of the arrival of mains water and the public telephone in the 1930s and electricity in the 1940s, tractors replacing horses by 1955, and ploughing by steam engine ceasing by 1960. He tells of the village school, shop, post office and two pubs, all long departed. This “social history” is repeated across the Hundred Parishes, indeed across rural England – a period of great change compared with the preceding hundreds of years.

Rather than regretting the demise of the past, Berden's residents are no doubt pleased to live more comfortable lives than their predecessors and to reside in a peaceful location away from busy roads.

Whilst much of the physical evidence of life for the average labourer in the 1930s has vanished, we are fortunate to be able to see some of the more sturdy buildings that have been handed down through the generations.

Life here has long revolved around Berden Hall. This substantial red brick house was built around 1580, probably on a site used since Saxon times. Its distinctive three gables are repeated on all four sides. The house, and with it the lordship of the manor, appears to have had a series of absentee owners including General Felix Calvert in the mid 19th century and then Christ's Hospital, a charity school also known as the Bluecoat School. The coat of arms of Christ's Hospital appears on a number of 19th-



century buildings including the vicarage and several cottages that were presumably built for employees of the Hall. The censuses for 1861 to 1881 give the head of the household as Edward Roberts. His domain expanded during that period so that in 1881 he farmed 1,000 acres (more than half of Berden), employing 36 men and 8 boys. Since then, ownership has changed several

times. From around 1948 the owners of Berden Hall have allowed the use of the grounds for the annual Berden Fete.



Whilst Christ's Hospital sold its last land in Berden in 1919, its governors continued to nominate the parish's vicar until at least 1943. The church, dedicated to St Nicholas, has a Norman nave from the 12th century and is listed as Grade I.

In the cemetery is the weather-beaten gravestone of Henry Trigg, a shoemaker and the parish constable. He was shot dead in 1814 as he tried to stop burglars stealing leather from his workshop next to Berden Hall. His two murderers, from Bishop's Stortford, were arrested a year later for other crimes and admitted the Berden murder. They were hanged outside Chelmsford gaol.



Berden Priory, a Tudor house shown here, was built in the late 16th century. It replaced a priory that was founded around 1200 AD as a hospital and closed in 1536 as part of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. The present house is at the centre of a farm complex.

One outbuilding is a 17th-century well house with working treadmill (listed, but not open to the public). The upright circular treadmill is 15 feet (5 metres) in diameter and was operated by a man walking, thereby generating the power to lift water in buckets from the well which is 120 feet (40 metres) deep. This apparatus supplied water for the house and farm until 1940.



The parish is well endowed with footpaths and quiet lanes, and also with seats for those who wish to rest and eat their picnic, but visitors who need to buy refreshment must look elsewhere. The Raven pub was demolished and replaced by houses in the 1970s, whilst the 17th-century Kings Head, shown here, is now a private house.

Hospitality: There is no pub in the village – see adjacent parishes.

Adjacent parishes: Manuden, Clavering, Quendon & Rickling, Ugley, Furneux Pelham, Stocking Pelham, Brent Pelham.

Circular Walks: Number 143, a 5-mile rural walk in Berden & Stocking Pelham and Number 180, 6.5 miles on quiet lanes & paths in Berden & Clavering

Links:

Parish Council: www.berden.org.uk

History: www.recordinguttlesfordhistory.org.uk/berden/berdenindex.html

1921 Film: <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/village-elects-boy-bishop/query/Berden>

Further Reading:

The History of Berden, written and published by CI Cherry, 1980.

The village where I was born: Recollections of Berden, Maurice Ancell, 1993, Martinn Publishing.

The Men of the Fields (memories of Priory Farm, Berden), Maurice Ancell.

This page, last updated 30 October 2023, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk