



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

BIRCHANGER



Location: 1 mile northeast of Bishop's Stortford. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5022.
Postcode: CM23 5QA. **Access:** off A120 and B1383. **Buses:** 7/7A between Bishop's Stortford & Stansted Airport; 310 between Saffron Walden & B. Stortford; 510 between Harlow & Airport.
County: Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Population:** 987 in 2001, 1,589 in 2011, 960 in 2021.

Birchanger is known to countless motorists as a motorway service area. However, few of those drivers will have ventured off the main highway to discover the quiet oasis that is the real Birchanger. This is a parish that has survived as a community despite the advances of "progress" since the 1970s. Its southeastern corner has become a network of M11 motorway sliproads, in the southwest a swathe of ancient Birchanger Wood was sacrificed to the A120 Bishop's Stortford bypass, and the parish's northern boundary retreated in the early 21st century so that the new Foresthall Park residential estate would fall entirely within Stansted Mountfitchet. All this has left Birchanger parish as one of the smallest in the Hundred Parishes, but it is a proud community, determined to retain its separate identity. Most of its residents live along the two miles of meandering Birchanger Lane, whose wide variety of dwellings include some that date back to the 17th century.

Birchanger village evolved just north of the old Roman road, Stane Street. Its name has Saxon origins, probably meaning a slope with birch trees. After the Norman Conquest, control of Birchanger manor passed to the Abbey at Saint-Valery. Saint-Valery is a village on France's Normandy coast, where the River Somme flows into the English Channel. It was here that William the Conqueror assembled his fleet in 1066 before his successful mission to conquer England. In gratitude, William granted the Abbey much land in Birchanger and other nearby parishes.

Birchanger's church, dedicated to St Mary, dates from the early 12th century, having a Norman nave and two Norman doorways. Much renovated in the 19th century, it retains a font and some benches from the 15th century. Its organ, by the renowned organ builder August Gern (1837-1907), is the only unspoilt example of his work in England.



The link with Saint-Valery was not broken until 1337 when Edward III confiscated all estates owned by French priories. Later in the 14th century, the manor was granted to New College, Oxford. Whilst most manors, specifically the manorial courts that dealt with disputes and petty criminals, were administered by a resident lord of the manor, Birchanger's was overseen by a representative of New College, either the warden or the steward. Even today the Warden and Scholars of New College have the right to nominate Birchanger's rector.

The London to Newmarket road (now the B1383) runs through Birchanger close to the parish's western boundary, the River Stort. The river also marks the Essex county boundary with Hertfordshire. In the 18th century this road was turnpiked and a tollgate was erected close to where it meets Birchanger Lane. A milestone close to the junction shows 30 miles to London and probably dates from the 19th century after road changes and re-measurement – the 1777 Chapman and André map indicates around 31½ miles from this point.



After nearly 500 years as absentee landlords, New College, Oxford sold most of its Birchanger land in 1883, with substantial areas being bought by William Fuller Maitland and James Blyth, both of Stansted. Thereafter, William Fuller Maitland was known as the lord of the manor.

Birchanger has benefited from the generosity of Charles Gold who lived at The Limes, a property that was then in Birchanger but has now passed to Stansted Mountfitchet following a boundary change. He donated the church reredos, the parish recreation ground and the Working Men's Club and Reading Room. Charles Gold was later elected as the local Member of Parliament and subsequently knighted. He was elected as president of Birchanger Club in 1891 and held that position until his death in 1923. The Club has been a focus of village social activity ever since.



Birchanger also has a village hall, built in 1935 and recently extended. This is used for meetings and social gatherings. Another popular venue is the Three Willows, shown here. Its sign depicts cricket bats, not trees, and the cricket theme is evident throughout the pub and its restaurant.



In the early part of the 20th century, Birchanger Place near the centre of the village was used frequently for outdoor village social events by courtesy of the Harrison family who lived there. After the last member of the family died, the mansion became derelict and it was demolished in 1953 to make way for a residential development that was appropriately named Harrisons.



Birchanger Wood, albeit cut in two by the A120, is a much-loved area, entirely maintained by volunteers working with the Birchanger Wood Trust which owns and cares for it. Successful fund-raising has permitted the laying of three miles of all-weather, wheelchair-friendly paths that wind through the undulating ancient woodland. These routes are popular with people of all ages and abilities. Birchanger Wood is particularly recommended in springtime when the floor is generously covered with bluebells and wood anemones.

Hospitality:

Three Willows pub and restaurant: 01279 815913 - <https://thethreewillows.com/>
Cottage guesthouse – 01279 812349 - www.thecottagebirchanger.co.uk

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk number 144 which covers 3.5 miles within Birchanger parish.

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes: Great Hallingbury, Stansted Mountfitchet.

Links:

Parish Council: www.birchanger.com
Sports & Social Club: www.birchangerclub.com
Birchanger Wood: www.birchangerwoodtrust.org