



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

BUNTINGFORD



Location: 7 miles south of Royston. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL3629.

Postcode: SG9 9AE. **Access:** A10, A507, B1038. **District:** East Herts. **County:** Hertfordshire.

Buses (all Mon to Sat): 18 between Royston & Buntingford; 331 between Hertford & Buntingford; 386 between Bishop's Stortford & Stevenage.

Population: 4,278 in 2001, 4,948 in 2011, 7,900 in 2021.

The parish of Buntingford covers a relatively small area, around 3 square miles or 7 square kilometres, with most of its population living in the market town of Buntingford itself. The town has evolved where the old Roman road, Ermine Street (from London to Lincoln and York) crossed the River Rib at a ford. Buntingford does not appear in the Domesday Book of 1086, but grew into a market town in the Middle Ages, having been granted the right to hold a market and fair by Edward III in the 14th century. It thrived as a market town and still holds a market on Mondays.

Buntingford became a civil parish in its own right only in the 20th century. Before then, the western side of the town was within the parish of Aspenden and the eastern side mostly within Layston and partly within Wyddial. Taking all elements into account, Buntingford had a population of around 1,200 in 1901. This doubled by the 1960s when the construction of Sainsbury's huge distribution depot south of the town led to much house-building and a further doubling of the population. The census of 2011 identified almost 5,000 residents. Although Sainsbury's depot closed in 2003 with the loss of 800 jobs, Buntingford is now experiencing further expansion with new residential estates on the site of the Sainsbury's depot and to the north of the town.

Buntingford's straight High Street follows the line of the Roman Ermine Street, which became known as the Old North Road. This was a busy long-distance route and Buntingford welcomed the trade from passing traffic. However, many parishes struggled to meet the cost of maintaining their stretch of the highway. After a petition to Parliament, the first turnpike was established along this road in 1663, allowing toll gates to be erected and fees collected from travellers for the purpose of maintaining the highway. This first turnpike ran from Wadesmill in the south, through Buntingford to Royston and Huntingdon in the north. In the 20th century, this road was designated the A10. With the continuing growth of motor traffic, the A10 was diverted around the town along the bypass constructed in the 1980s. Whilst most residents were relieved that their High Street was now much safer and quieter, the passing trade that had brought prosperity was largely lost.

Around 1900 there had been as many as 15 coaching inns offering accommodation and stabling. Some of these establishments can still be identified by their high gateways that once allowed

entry of a horse-drawn coach. Just a few still function as inns. There is a list of current establishments below.



This postcard view from a hundred years ago includes the single-handed clock in the turret over an entrance that once led to the yard of the Angel Inn, the building on the far side of the entrance. The clock is still there and it still has the one hand.

The High Street has many fine and varied buildings that were mostly constructed in the 16th to 19th centuries during Buntingford's prosperous period as a market town and coach staging post.



Of 99 listed buildings in the parish, more than 60 are along the High Street. Today these are a mixture of commercial and domestic premises.

Near the southern end of the High Street is “Ward’s Hospital”, shown below. These almshouses were founded in 1684 by Seth Ward, who became bishop of Exeter and then bishop of Salisbury. They are described by Pevsner as “the stateliest almshouses in the county”.

The almshouses stand beside St Peter’s Church. This Grade I-listed church was built of red brick around 1615 AD as a subsidiary “chapel of ease” to Layston church. The white stone in front is a milestone erected around 1742 by the Turnpike Trust.



Until the 20th century, it would seem that church loyalties were decided by which side of the High Street one lived. Those on the western side were in Aspenden ecclesiastical parish, whilst those on the eastern side came partly under Wyddial but mainly under Layston. Layston’s parish church, dedicated to St Bartholomew, stands within the present Buntingford parish on the hill about half a mile northeast of the town. Layston Church, shown here in 2010, dates mostly from the 15th century, with a 13th-century chancel. Over time, the centre of population migrated down the hill, leaving Layston and St Bartholomew’s somewhat isolated and abandoned. St Peter’s became the parish church.



Layston’s church roof fell into disrepair and was removed, the nave then being used as a cemetery. Most of the church was little more than a shell for many years. However, since 2008 the church was the subject of an ambitious project, now completed, to preserve it by conversion into a family home. The owners reported regularly on their progress in the Buntingford Journal and these fascinating accounts can be viewed online – see the Layston Church link below.



Not far from the High Street, there are a number of interesting buildings that reflect other aspects of life in old Buntingford. Pictured on the left is the early 18th-century Lock-up or Cage. It seems a fine building from the outside.

The Buntingford Union Workhouse, shown here, was built in 1836 to house up to 160 inmates from the surrounding 16 parishes. In recent years it was converted into a range of houses and apartments.



The origin of the name of The Pig's Nose is unknown. This 17th-century house, shown below, is best known for its topiary, with giant rabbits peering over the hedge at passers-by on this path beside the River Rib.



Buntingford was served by rail for a hundred years, from 1863 to 1964. Buntingford station marked the end of the 13-mile Buntingford branch line that joined the Hertford – London line at St Margarets.

During World War II army vehicles were brought by rail for servicing at the army's maintenance depot that was set up south of the town. In the 1960s, this site became part of the Sainsbury's distribution depot.

From the centre of Buntingford, Hare Street Road runs East towards Hare Street in the neighbouring parish of Hormead. Just off this road, within Buntingford parish, is Alswick Hall, pictured below. Part dates from the 16th century. Below on the right is the public path which runs south past Alswick Hall and the hamlet of Owles before reaching the southern end of Buntingford.



This public footpath is one of several attractive public rights of way that criss-cross the parish.

The Crouch family owned Alswick Hall for over 100 years until 1720. The main benefactors in the 17th century founding of Buntingford Grammar School, Elizabeth Freeman and Lady Jane Barkham, were probably members of the Crouch family. The school building, just off the High Street and pictured to the right, is now called Layston Court and is a private residence. Seth Ward, who went on to become Bishop of Salisbury, was educated there.



The grounds of the former grammar school are now separated from the house and are open to the public as Layston Court Gardens. They can be reached from the High Street via the footpath alongside the house or via a bridge from the path beside Pig's Nose.



Today, Buntingford is the smallest of Hertfordshire's towns. Following recent planning decisions and longer-term planning proposals, Buntingford seems destined



to continue the pattern of growth that has been established in recent decades. It is to be hoped that future development will respect the town's heritage and character that have evolved over many generations, whilst removal of the highly visible Sainsbury's depot has provided an opportunity to improve distant views of the town

Hospitality:

Visitors Information Point: The Manor House, High St, SG9 9AB (Mon-Fri to 5pm): 01763 272222

Online guide: https://www.localauthoritypublishing.co.uk/flip_guides/buntingfordguide/index.html#

Black Bull, 16 High Street – 01763 271230 - www.mcmullens.co.uk/blackbull

Buntingford Coffee Shop, 61 High Street - 01763 273940 - www.thebuntingfordcoffeeshop.co.uk

Crown pub, 17 High Street – 01763 271422 - <https://www.facebook.com/TheCrownBuntingford/>

Falcon Restaurant, 69 High Street - <http://falconrestaurant.co.uk/>

Fox & Duck pub, 23 Church Street: 01763 271308 - www.facebook.com/foxandduckbuntingford/

Jolly Sailors pub, 2 Station Road – 01763 271367 - www.facebook.com/thejollysailors/

Peppermill, 30 High Street – 01763 793168 - <https://peppermillbarandkitchen.co.uk/>

Viceroy Indian restaurant, 53 High Street – 01763 271307 - the-viceroy-restaurant.business.site/

Queenie's Café, 35 High Street: 01763 662909: <https://queeniescafe.co.uk/>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 113 of 6.4 miles through Buntingford and Wyddial.

Circular walk 147 of 6.7 miles through Hormead and the rural eastern side of Buntingford parish.

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes: Westmill, Aspenden, Wyddial, Hormead

Links:

Buntingford Town Council: www.buntingford-tc.gov.uk

Buntingford Civic Society: www.buntingfordcivic.org.uk

Buntingford Railway & Local History Society: www.thebunt.co.uk

Buntingford in old photos: <https://www.facebook.com/BuntingfordInOldPhotographs?ref=hl>

Layston Church history and 21st-century renovation: www.layston-church.org.uk/default.htm

. . . especially: <http://www.layston-church.org.uk/eastherts3.html>

Further reading:

Buntingford Official Guide & Map, available from Visitors Information Point, The Manor House.

The Archive Photographs series – Buntingford, Philip W. Plumb, 1995, Chalford Publishing Co.

The Hospital of Seth Ward, Lord Bishop of Sarum, Buntingford, 1684-1984, Philip W. Plumb

The Buntingford Branch, P. Paye, 1980, Oxford Publishing Company.