



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

GREAT BARDFIELD



Location: 7 miles northeast of Great Dunmow. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL6730.
Postcode: CM7 4SD. **Access:** B1057. **County:** Essex. **District:** Braintree.
Buses: 9/9A (Mon to Fri) to Braintree, 16 (Mon – Sat) between Chelmsford and Wethersfield.
Population: 1,238 in 2001, 1,227 in 2011, 1,400 in 2021.

The parish of Great Bardfield is bisected by the River Pant, just a few miles upstream from Braintree where it becomes the River Blackwater. Great Bardfield is a place of considerable historic, architectural and cultural interest. These three strands are interwoven because of the Bardfield Artists who drew many visitors here in the 1950s.

One link between the parish's historic architecture and its artists is depicted at the top of this page – the logo for The Hundred Parishes Society. The image is a print from a wood engraving by Eric Ravilious; it shows Great Bardfield's parish church which is easy to recognise because of its enormous rhombus-shaped clock. The clock was installed in 1912 to commemorate the coronation of King George V in the previous year. Some have described it as 'the clock with a church on it'.

A postcard sent in 1905 depicts the church with a similarly-shaped clock, not quite so large. The old picture is shown on the right and a more recent image below. The old photo also features children gathered around the water fountain that was installed by Henry Smith in 1860. Spring water still flows from the fountain but its quality does not meet modern standards. The Smiths were Quaker landowners who also donated Great Bardfield's town hall.



Grade I-listed St Mary's is predominantly of 14th century origin, although parts of the chancel foundation appear to date back to the 12th century. The church is visually distinctive, not just because of its clock but also its copper roof.

The interior of the church is notable for its fine stained-glass windows, mostly Victorian, and its 14th-century rood screen of carved stone, one of only three in the world. Another can be found in the parish church at nearby Stebbing; the other is in Trondheim Cathedral in Norway.

Two of Great Bardfield's ancient buildings merit a listing at Grade I: the parish church and also the so-called Anne of Cleves Barn, around a mile southeast of the village at Great Lodge.



The brick-built barn dates from the 16th century and nowadays is used for wedding receptions and musical concerts. The Great Lodge estate also has a vineyard, regularly open to the public for self-guided or guided tours. The Anne of Cleves Barn is shown below and the church's stone rood screen on the right – the screen separates the nave from the chancel.



Great Bardfield has had several royal connections across the centuries. There is evidence that Henry III owned Bardfield Park in the mid-1200s. A century later the Black Prince was entertained here by the noblewoman Elizabeth de Burgh. In 1460 Great Bardfield was made a royal manor by Edward IV, and during the reign of Henry VIII the manor passed in succession to Katherine of Aragon, Anne of Cleves, Katherine Howard and Katherine Parr.

Elizabeth I's Serjeant-at-Law William Bendlowes left an enduring mark on the parish. Bendlowes was born and died at Place House in the 1500s and was arguably Great Bardfield's greatest benefactor, contributing many charitable works such as building almshouses and endowing a school and chantry. Place House is pictured on the right.



The Lumley family who lived at Great Lodge were also generous benefactors; they endowed four almshouses, now private residences known as Lumleys.

There are over 100 listed buildings in the parish, most of them in the village itself. Every house is unique, its name often a reminder of bygone village life; Old Police House, Drill Hall House, Old Dairy, The Maltings, The Old Bakehouse, Corniche.

The Cage, a 19th century lock-up, is pictured on the right. It stands next to Cage Cottage and Beam Cottage, now separate elements of a house that dates from the 15th century. Like many local dwellings, it is timber-framed, plastered and thatched.



Several walk routes explore Great Bardfield, including Hundred Parishes walk number 104 (which also visits Finchingfield). Great Bardfield Historical Society has published a helpful village map and also offers guided walks for a more in-depth appreciation.

Uttlesford Wildlife has designed a walk especially dedicated to the Bardfield Oxlip (see link below). The Oxlip is a rare native primula found only in the east of England, and in recent years a programme for its regeneration has been taking place in Pipers' Meadow on the edge of the River Pant, close to the narrow road bridge which has spanned the river since 1784.

The oxlip is not dissimilar to the cowslip, producing its yellow blooms in springtime. It is the parish emblem and can be seen as a carving on the Town Hall.

Next to the Town Hall, the Community Information Point is one place to buy local guides; another is Between The Lines, a charming little bookshop which welcomes customers for coffee and a chat. A few yards uphill from the Town Hall, the tiny Cottage Museum opens at weekends from Easter until the end of September from 2pm to 5pm.

It was in the late 1920s that two artist friends happened upon Great Bardfield while cycling in Essex. They were Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious. The character of the village and its inexpensive property appealed to them so much that they rented part of a house together. In the early 1930s, they each married fellow artists and Bawden's parents bought Brick House (pictured here) as a wedding present for their son. Edward and Charlotte Bawden and Eric and Tirzah Ravilious (nee Garwood) all lived in Brick House for a year or so before Eric and Tirzah moved to a nearby village.

Bawden and Ravilious became official war artists, painting all kinds of wartime activities. Sadly, Ravilious was killed in 1942 when the search and rescue plane in which he was travelling crashed into the sea near Iceland.

More artists were drawn to live in Great Bardfield and the group became known as the Bardfield Artists. The community flourished until the 1950s. Edward Bawden produced a series of 16 lithographs, 'Life in an English Village', recording the shops and workplaces of local tradesmen and women, and in doing so he preserved a record of a now-vanished way of village life.

The Bardfield Artists included the 'Colonel Blimp' cartoonist David Low who lived in Serjeant Bendlowe's Cottage (seen here) and Marianne Straub, some of whose textiles are retained in the Warner Textile Archive in Braintree. There were numerous others, and a series of 'open house' exhibitions during the 1950s served to put Great Bardfield on the national cultural map. Much of the work of the Bardfield Artists can be viewed today at the Fry Art Gallery in Saffron Walden. A later son of Great Bardfield, who grew up here and perhaps imbibed something of its artistic heritage, is the ceramicist Sir Grayson Perry.



Great Bardfield has a lovely mix of properties, mostly ancient in origin. From Brick House, the artists would have looked out onto the war memorial on the opposite side of the road. It stands in front of Bucks House, 16th-century in origin and now offering bed and breakfast accommodation. Tucked behind Bucks House is a Quaker meeting house and cemetery.

Just in sight to the left of the photo is the oak tree planted on Crown Green to commemorate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. It stands opposite 17th-century North Place, almost hidden behind the blooms of its wisteria.



Gobions, below, is believed to date from the 14th century.



The row of houses shown below are in Brook Street; they date from the 15th century.



Town House Cottages, below, are an interesting blend of ancient and relatively modern: the left portion, with four octagonal-shaped chimneys, dates from around 1500; the right section was added in the 19th century.



The contrasting houses on the left stand beside one another in Bell Lane, just around the corner from Gobions and Town House Cottages. The thatch and dormer windows of 18th-century Bell Cottage compare with the newer neighbour's slate roof and flint wall. Great Bardfield is full of variety; just a few examples are shown here.

Beyond the village centre, the variety continues. The hamlet of Bridge End lies a little to the north, just the other side of the River Pant. Immediately beyond the 18th-century road bridge, you will find Brady's and the adjoining Fullbridge Cottage, dating from the 15th century and now extended on each side. Nearby is 18th-century Wellington Cottage, decorated with pargetting in its plasterwork and shown below on the right.



Slightly further afield, but still within the parish, you can find Gibraltar Windmill. This tower mill was built of brick in the early 1700s and has since been plastered. Its working life ceased long ago and it is now a private house.

In the tiny hamlet of Waltham's Cross, Vine Cottage – shown below - started life in the early 19th century as two dwellings.



Great Bardfield is a vibrant community. There is a fair range of shops and activities for all. Residents can enter the annual Bardfield Boules competition outside the Town Hall, tread the boards with the Bardfield Players, sing with the Community Choir, exhibit with the Horticultural Society, play cricket or ring the bells at St Mary's.

The Historical Society has published a helpful map and a range of booklets covering various aspects of the parish's past. These can be purchased from Between The Lines bookshop or from the Community Point.

Details of most activities can be found on the parish council website – see details below.

USEFUL INFORMATION ABOUT GREAT BARDFIELD

Hospitality

Great Lodge – Accommodation, wedding venue & vineyard - southeast of the village

– 01371 810776 - <https://www.greatlodge.co.uk/>

Bucks House Bed and Breakfast, CM7 4SR - 01371 810519 - www.bucks-house.com

The Vine bar and restaurant, CM7 4SR - 01371 811711 - <https://www.thevinebardfield.co.uk/>

The Bell Inn, CM7 4SA – 07506 661989 - <https://www.facebook.com/TheBellEssex>

Between The Lines, bookshop with coffee, CM7 4SP – 01371 810087 -

<https://www.facebook.com/BetweenTheLinesBardfield/>

The Blue Egg including café - south of the village on Braintree Road, CM7 4PY - 01371 811801 –

www.theblueegg.co.uk

Hundred Parishes Society walks include 2 circular countryside routes between Finchingfield and Great Bardfield. They can be downloaded, free of charge, from the website:

Walk 103 starts from Finchingfield and covers 4.5 miles, and

Walk 104 starts from Great Bardfield, covering 6.3 miles.

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes:

Shalford, Finchingfield, Stebbing, Bardfield Saling, Little Bardfield, The Sampfords.

Links

Great Bardfield Parish Council: www.greatbardfield-pc.gov.uk

Film: corn dollies: <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/corn-dollies/query/great+bardfield>

The Fry Art Gallery, Saffron Walden, CB10 1BD - 01799 513779 - www.fryartgallery.org

Warner Textile Archive. Braintree, CM7 3GB - 01376 316780 -

<https://www.warnertextilearchiveshop.com/>

Uttlesford Wildlife: <https://uttlesford-wildlife.org.uk/walk-and-cycle/walks/walk-great-bardfield/>

Further reading:

See the People section of www.hundredparishes.org.uk for short introductions to Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious and the Articles section for Art and Artists.

Several booklets published by the Great Bardfield Historical Society can be purchased from the Community Information Point or Between The Lines bookshop. The bookshop has further books about the Bardfield Artists.

A History and Tour of our church: booklet available inside the parish church.

This page, last updated 27 February 2024, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk.