The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

GREAT CHESTERFORD

Location: 3 miles northwest of Saffron Walden. **Ordnance Survey grid square**: TL5042.
Postcode CB10 1PL. **Access**: Great Chesterford station on London Liverpool Street to Cambridge line; B1383; B184; M11 junction 9. **Buses**: 7 (regular, each day) between Saffron Walden and Cambridge; 132 Sunday to S Walden & Cambridge; 101 Tuesday to S Walden.
County: Essex. **District**: Uttlesford. **Population:** 1,424 in 2001, 1,494 in 2011, 1,800 in 2021.

The village of Great Chesterford is a hidden gem, lying between the B1383 and the B184, yet the village itself is but a small part of the parish of Great Chesterford which climbs steadily upwards for around two miles to the north and east with wide open fields and expansive views.

Two thousand years ago, a traveller coming from the south and rounding the sweeping bend on the B1383 would have been confronted by a substantial Roman fort and town with perhaps 1,000 inhabitants. The fort was probably built around 60AD following the uprising by the Iceni, led by their queen Boudicca, but it was later abandoned and superseded by the town. The Roman fort and town were built beside the River Cam which today flows unnoticed beneath the bend in today's road. Then, of course, there was no B1383 and the Cam was crossed by a ford.

The Romans were here for around 400 years, leaving in the 5th century. There is now no sign of their long occupation, although artefacts from past excavations can be seen in Saffron Walden and Cambridge museums. The site of their fort and town is designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, meaning that further excavation and metal detecting are banned. The present Great Chesterford developed somewhat east of its Roman predecessor and its population overtook the Roman number only in the latter years of the 20th century. The Crown House hotel on the B1383, shown here, was built in the 18th century on part of the Roman town wall.

By the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, Great Chesterford was again a place of note with 47 households. It was owned directly by King William I and continued to be owned by the monarch and let to tenants until granted to Westminster Abbey in 1502. When the Abbey was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539, the manor was acquired with many other estates by Thomas Audley, 1st Baron Audley of Walden. Ownership passed down through his descendants, none of whom lived here. For centuries, the parish was a small part of the extensive estates of a series of absentee landlords. Unlike most parishes, it was not divided into smaller manors and there was no manor house around which the parish revolved. The lords of the manor probably visited to hunt in the deer park that once existed over a large part of the north of the parish, but by the 18th century nearly all the parish was cleared of trees and converted to productive arable farmland.

There seem to have been very few farmhouses in the outlying parts of the parish, so those who worked the land (the majority of the population) must have lived in the village, often walking long distances to tend their distant strips and fields. Today, the minor roads that head northeast from the village into the rural majority of the parish become tracks or footpaths long before arriving at the nearest settlements of Abington, Linton or Hadstock. To cycle or drive "around the block" entails a journey of more than 15 miles or 25 kilometres.

The oldest surviving building is the parish Church of All Saints which dates from the 13th century. Much has been added or renovated over the centuries including the tower which replaced one that collapsed in the 18th century.

The village of Great Chesterford developed during the Middle Ages into a small town with a network of streets that form the basis of today's layout. It became largely self-sufficient with all kinds of craftsmen and tradesmen. At one time there was a weekly market, but this declined as the importance grew of the market in nearby Saffron Walden. In 1634, Charles I granted the parish the right to hold an annual fair and this was held until the early 20th century.

The London-Newmarket road (now B1383) was turnpiked in the 1740s and the London-Cambridge railway came in the 1840s, bringing a station that contributed to the local economy. It was about this time that King's Mill, pictured here, was built beside the Cam – today it has been converted into flats.

A railway branch line from Great Chesterford to Newmarket was opened in 1848 but proved uneconomic and closed in 1851. For several miles, the line ran parallel with the old Roman road (now the A11) north from Great Chesterford. Surprisingly, after all these years, some stretches of the rail route are still visible.

Great Chesterford's population was 600 in 1801 and 659 in 1961, but grew with extensive house-building in the latter part of the 20th century to 1,494 in 2011. Many of today's residents commute to either London or Cambridge, using the railway station or nearby junction 9 of the M11 motorway.

Great Chesterford is best explored on foot. Most of the parish's 70 listed buildings are concentrated around the historic core of School Street, Carmel Street, Manor Lane and the eastern end of High Street, an area that was first designated as a Conservation Area in 1969.

Buildings date from as early as the 15th century. Most are from the 17th and 18th and the majority of these are timber-framed and plastered.

Flintstone occurs naturally in great abundance in this area and there is much evidence of its use, especially in boundary walls. Here it is seen in the primary school, built in 1849 and also at Dell's Farm, north of the village.

Overall, there is an interesting diversity of architectural styles, only some of which are shown in the pictures in this introduction.

Hospitality:
Crown House Hotel, CB10 1NY – 01799 530515 - www.crownhousehotel.com
Crown & Thistle, CB10 1PL – 01799 530278 – www.thecrownandthistle.pub
The Plough, CB10 1PL – 01799 531651 - www.theploughgc.co.uk

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .
Station walk 13 between Audley End and Great Chesterford stations (8 miles).
Station walk 14 between Great Chesterford and Whittlesford stations (5 miles).
Station walk 21 between Audley End and Great Chesterford stations (8 miles) and
Circular walk 174 between Linton and Great Chesterford (which can be started from Great
   Chesterford at The Plough, joining the route at the top of page 4 of the description).

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes:
Little Chesterford, Littlebury, Ickleton, Hinxton, Hildersham, Linton, Hadstock, Saffron Walden.

Links:
Parish Council: https://www.lovegreatchesterford.com/
Conservation Area Assessment: Link from: www.uttlesford.gov.uk/caa
History: www.recordinguttlesfordhistory.org.uk/gtchesterford/grchesterfordindex.html

Further reading:
Great Chesterford: A Common Field Parish in Essex, published by M.Deacon in 1984.
Great Chesterford, a Brief History, published by Great Chesterford Local History and Archaeological Society in 2000.

This page, last updated 31 October 2023, was downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk.