



# The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

## GREAT DUNMOW



**Location:** 8 miles east of Bishop's Stortford and 8 miles west of Braintree. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL6222. **Postcode:** CM6 1DG. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford.

**Access:** off A120; on B1256, B184.

**Buses:** 313 and 314 (Mon – Sat) to Thaxted and Saffron Walden; 133 (every day) between Stansted Airport and Braintree; 42A (every day) between Bishop's Stortford, Stansted Airport and Chelmsford; 323 (Mon – Sat) to Bishop's Stortford; 324 (Mon – Sat) to Stebbing; X30 between Stansted Airport and Southend; 17 (Fri & Sat) to Chelmsford; 18 (Tue & Thur) to Chelmsford.

**Population:** 6,996 in 2001, 8,830 in 2011, 10,600 in 2021.

Great Dunmow is the second largest settlement within the Hundred Parishes, after Saffron Walden. Its population has expanded dramatically since the start of the 21st century and seems set to continue to grow.

The settlement developed originally around the meeting point of several Roman roads. One might expect there to have been a garrison or even a town at such a location, yet only limited evidence has emerged of any Roman presence. The most visible of the ancient highways is Stane Street, which was designated as A120 in the 20th century and is now labelled B1256 for much of its length. To the east, Stane Street ran to Colchester, the first Roman capital of Britain. To the west it went through Bishop's Stortford via the Roman town at Braughing and thence to St Albans, which became the second largest Roman town in Britain, after London.

A second Roman road headed north through today's Thaxted and Radwinter and then on to the Roman fort and town of Great Chesterford. The straight Roman route heading south-south-west is still very apparent as it passes through High Roding before going on towards London. The final Roman road, less visible today, headed southeast through Barnston and Ford End towards the Roman town of Chelmsford. If there was a Roman town or garrison in Dunmow, it would have been extremely well connected.



Dunmow's name seems to have arisen long after the Romans left, derived either from the Anglo-Saxon meaning *hill meadow* or the Celtic language meaning *hill fort*.

The area was certainly settled by the 11th century, when no less than seven manors were recorded in the Domesday Book. Sometimes using more modern names, these manors were Bigods, Clopton Hall, Great Dunmow, Martels, Merks Hall, Newton Hall and Shingles. Most of the names are still in use.

It is thought that there may have been a Roman settlement in the north of the present town, at Church End, close to the River Chelmer. Today, this area is still relatively rural and is the location of Dunmow's oldest building, the parish church dedicated to St Mary the Virgin. The building has a Grade I listing. It dates from the 13th century and was substantially restored in the 19th and 20th centuries.



The view below of Church Street from 100 years ago is readily recognisable today, though now there are usually far more cars and even fewer prams. The building on the extreme right now has exposed beams; it is part of what was once The Six Bells public house, dating from around 1500 AD. The church originally had six bells; two were added in 1927 as part of a renovation project. The eight are now rung regularly. The other houses date from the 15th to the 19th centuries.



Great Dunmow has two buildings that are listed at Grade I. The other stands nearby and is pictured on the right. The Clock House dates from the 16th century and is surmounted by a single-handed clock.

The building displays a blue plaque recording that Sir George Beaumont was born here in 1753. He became a noted amateur painter and an influential art collector. He left Dunmow around 1785. He was instrumental in the establishment of London's National Gallery in 1824, donating 16 paintings from his personal collection. His name has been perpetuated in the naming of Beaumont Hill, the road which rises from here to the north, towards Helena Romanes School.

St Mary's and The Clock House feature on Hundred Parishes walk number 126 which explores much of the older parts of the town and introduces the walker to many of its listed buildings. See the link at the end of this introduction.





Great Dunmow has more than 200 listed buildings and much of the town centre, which retains its ancient street pattern, is protected as a conservation area. The town encourages visitors with a central car park and a good selection of places to eat, drink and shop.



Close to the central car park, you will find The Saracens's Head, a 16th-century former posting house and now a hotel and restaurant which retains some of its older interior features.

Opposite the Saracen's head is the Town Hall with its bell in a cupola above the clock - pictured below.

Another fascinating building in the centre of town is The Maltings, situated in Mill Lane close to the main parking area. It dates back to 1565 and was used originally for traditional malt production. It has a Grade II\* listing and has been sensitively renovated to retain one of its original kilns with distinctive conical flue. Visitors can see how barley was converted into malt using traditional tools.

The Maltings is home to Great Dunmow Museum, offering an intriguing insight into the history of the town. It is usually open at weekends and bank holidays from 11am to 4pm. The venue may also be hired.

Dunmow has many colourfully-decorated buildings, including those in New Street, shown below on the left, and the terrace in North Street, pictured on the right.





Near the centre of town, between North Street and The Downs, is Doctor's Pond, shown below. Now a pleasant spot to rest and admire the view, it is believed to have been the place where, in 1784, Lionel Lukin conducted trials with models of the first unsinkable lifeboat. It is called Doctor's Pond because it was once within the garden of The Chestnuts, home of the local doctor. He is reputed to have bred leeches here – they were in common medical use until the 19th century to suck blood from patients.



Also in North Street is 16th-century Brook House, shown on the left.

The town was first granted the right to hold a market by King Henry III in 1253. Albeit now on a different scale, a street market is still held on Tuesday mornings in the Angel Lane car park.

The library in White Hart Way includes a Tourist Information desk.

A good mix of independent and interesting shops is to be found in and around the High Street. A few are shown on the left – in Market Place. There are also cafés, banks and other services – and the well-preserved water pump pictured below.



The town is surrounded by countryside. A walks leaflet, offering routes for seven circular walks, can be obtained from the Town Council Offices in Stortford Road or the Tourist Information Centre in the library.



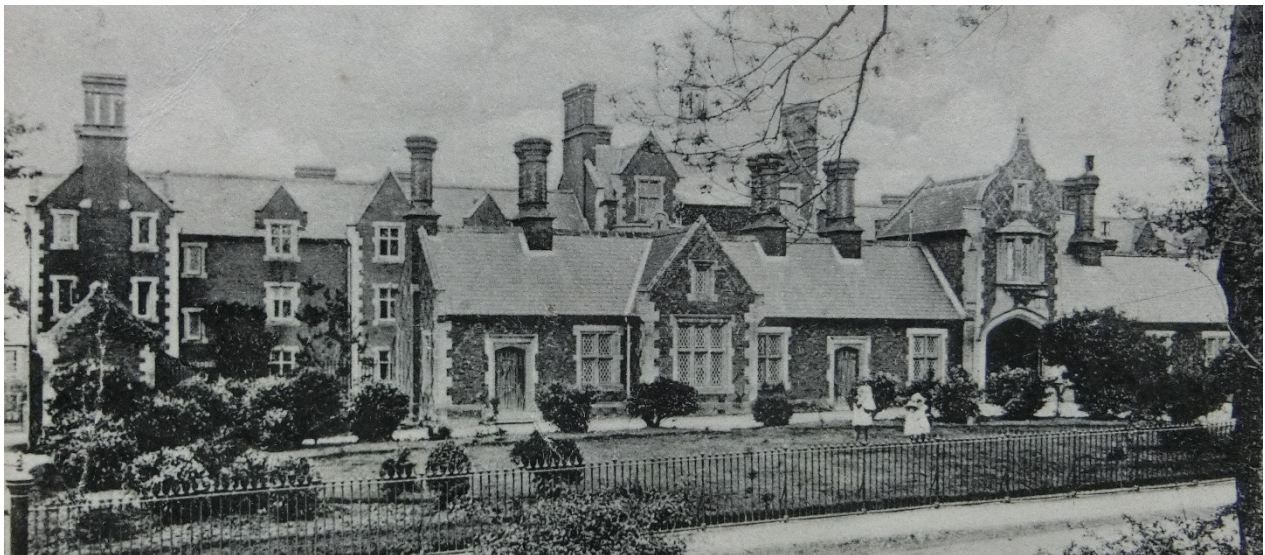


A single-track east-west railway line was constructed in the 1860s to link Braintree, Great Dunmow and Bishop's Stortford. After a hundred years and facing growing use of cars and lorries, the passenger services and then freight services ceased. About a mile of the rail route was used as the basis for the original Great Dunmow bypass, now called the B1256. Subsequently, most of the rail route between Bishop's Stortford and Braintree was named The Flitch Way and designated as



a bridleway and country park to encourage walkers, cyclists, horse riders and wildlife to take advantage of the quiet traffic-free avenue. There is hope that discussions over many years to bridge the gap in the traffic-free Flitch Way route may come to fruition one day.

Along the Flitch Way, various bridges and station buildings remain, including this brick bridge that takes a farm track high over Dunmow Cutting.



The original bypass was itself bypassed at the beginning of the 21st century when the A120 was diverted for about 5 miles to the south of the town.

Close to the route of the railway stands the former workhouse, pictured above at the start of the 20th century. It was built in 1840 to a design by Sir George Gilbert Scott whose brother was at one time the vicar of Great Dunmow. It has been converted to houses and apartments and renamed The Close.

A brick tower mill has stood in St Edmund's Lane since 1822. It now forms an unusual wing of a residential property, Tower House.

Beyond the built-up area, Great Dunmow parish spreads for some distance to the north and to the south, quiet and rural, a completely different world to the town. To the south, there are just a couple of tiny hamlets - Philpot End and the intriguingly-named Pharisee Green. It has been suggested that the latter arose when a surveyor misinterpreted the local dialect for Fairies.





To the north, Bigods Hall functioned as a school for Roman Catholic boys in the early 1900s. Then, during the Second World War, it was a home for orphaned boys who had lost their parents during the Blitz. Within the grounds, there stands an unusual medieval red-brick building described as a “summer house”; it dates from the 16th century and is pictured on the right.



Dunmow is widely known for the “Flitch Trials”. Their origin dates back to the 12th century with records as old as 1445. A flitch, or side, of bacon is awarded to couples who can demonstrate to a judge and jury that they have been happily married for a year and a day. Counsel represent the claimants and opposing Counsel represent the Bacon, trying to save it for the suppliers. The jury comprises six maidens and six bachelors. A Clerk of the Court records the proceedings, a Court Chaplain administers the oath and an Usher seeks to keep order.

Successful couples are paraded on a chair carried at shoulder height to the Market Place where, in order to claim the Flitch, they must swear an oath proclaiming their happiness within the marriage while kneeling on pointed stones. Nowadays the trials take place every leap year and are always hugely popular, attracting claimants from around the world. *[Photo by Mike Perry, ABIPP]*



The Dunmow Flitch Trials subsequently gave their name to the Flitch Way trail and country park and also to the relatively-new nearby parish of Flitch Green.

Great Dunmow also hosts an impressive annual carnival procession in late September. This tradition began in 1952 and it is now thought to be the largest carnival in Essex. Each year it adopts a theme and a Carnival Queen and Princesses are chosen to take part in proceedings. The procession and fairground events culminate in an evening of musical entertainment and a firework display.

Great Dunmow has been twinned with Dourdan in France since 1991 and many friendships have been formed between the two towns.

While Great Dunmow’s ‘suburbs’ continue to grow apace with swathes of new residential estates, the town centre has kept much of its character, retaining its built heritage as an integral part of a bustling market town. As befits a town that welcomes visitors, there are public toilets close to car parks in the Town Square and at the recreation ground and helpful town maps are displayed in several locations.



## **USEFUL INFORMATION ABOUT GREAT DUNMOW**

### **Accommodation:**

Dunmow Guest House, CM6 1DL – 01371 859138 - <http://www.dunmowquesthouse.co.uk/>

Puttocks Farm B&B, CM6 1JQ - 01371 872377

Saracen's Head Hotel, High Street, CM6 1AG – 01371 873901 - [www.saracenshead-hotel.co.uk](http://www.saracenshead-hotel.co.uk)

Star Inn, Market Place, CM6 1AX – 01371 874321 -

- <http://fultonsrestaurants.com/the-star-inn-dunmow/>

Travelodge, CM6 1LW – 08719 846313

- <http://www.travelodge.co.uk/hotels/315/Standed-Great-Dunmow-hotel>

### **Pubs & Restaurants:**

Too many to list here !

### **Hundred Parishes Society walks** include . . .

Circular walk 126 – 3 miles around the town

Circular walk 119 – follows a largely rural route on a 9-mile loop from The Causeway car park through the parishes of Great Dunmow and Stebbing.

Each route may be downloaded, free of charge, from this website.

**Adjacent parishes:** Little Dunmow, Barnston, High Roding, Great Canfield, Little Canfield, Little Easton, Great Easton & Tilty, Lindsell, Stebbing.

### **Links:**

Town Council: <https://greatdunmow-tc.gov.uk/>

Great Dunmow Museum: <https://www.greatdunmowmuseum.org.uk/>

Great Dunmow Maltings: [www.greatdunmowmaltings.co.uk](http://www.greatdunmowmaltings.co.uk)

Great Dunmow Carnival: <https://www.dunmowcarnival.co.uk/>

Dunmow Flitch Trials: <https://www.dunmowflitchtrials.co.uk/>

### **Further reading:**

*The Dunmow Centenary Book 1894-1994*, ISBN 0-952-3691-0-9

*Dunmow Diamond Jubilee 2012*, ISBN 0-0523601-3-3

(Both published by the Dunmow Historical & Literary Society)

*7 Walks In and Around Great Dunmow 2012* (available from the Town Council)

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This page, last updated 31 October 2023, was downloaded from [www.hundredparishes.org.uk](http://www.hundredparishes.org.uk).