



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

HATFIELD BROAD OAK



Location: 5 miles southeast of Bishop's Stortford. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL5416.

Postcode: CM22 7HE. **County:** Essex. **District:** Uttlesford. **Access:** B183.

Buses: 305 (Mon to Sat) between Bishop's Stortford & Stansted Airport; 347 (Tues and Thurs) one bus to Harlow.

Population: 1,167 in 2001, 1,276 in 2011, 1,300 in 2021.

The quaintly-named Hatfield Broad Oak is one of the largest parishes in Essex. It has had a number of other names over the centuries, all double-barrelled, perhaps to ensure that it is recognised as distinct from two other Essex Hatfields – Heath and Peverel. It has been known as Hatfield Chipping, Hatfield Regis and even King's Hatfield, the two latter presumably in deference to the parish's royal patronage in its early history.

The parish has three distinctive elements: the village of Hatfield Broad Oak in the south of the parish, Hatfield Forest in the north, and then the countryside which is criss-crossed by a maze of quiet lanes and footpaths that link together a collection of small hamlets and farms.

The village of Hatfield Broad Oak was, in medieval times, a thriving market town and retains its early street pattern today. It is now a conservation area with many listed buildings, and architecture representing every century from the 14th onwards. It is probably best experienced on foot and The Hundred Parishes Society has put together walk number 125 to assist anyone who would like to take up this approach. The route refers to many of the older buildings and can be freely downloaded from www.hundredparishes.org.uk ready for printing. It covers less than two miles. A longer Hundred Parishes route, walk number 159, explores the northern part of the parish including some of Hatfield Forest.

Near the centre of Hatfield Broad Oak village, in Cannons Mill Lane, Oak Cottage, shown below, has survived, largely intact, since the 15th century. It is timber-framed and plastered.



The church of St Mary the Virgin is a Grade I-listed building on the site of a 12th-century Benedictine priory, dissolved by Henry VIII. The original nave of the priory church forms part of the present church, which is predominantly 15th-century. The west tower dates from the 15th century and has eight bells.

There has been much 18th-century renovation. An 18th-century library houses rare antiquarian theological books. Other artefacts of particular interest include the reredos, chancel panelling, candelabra and a stone effigy of Robert de Vere, of the family who founded the original priory.



The photos on this page illustrate the variety of buildings to be found around the village. The Cock Inn is part of a building that dates from the 15th century and also houses the village stores. Locals are well served with The Cock at the west end of the High Street and The Dukes Head at the eastern end. The row of buildings shown on the right is also in the High Street, opposite The Cock; they all date from the 17th century. Thrums, on the right, has imitation timber framing.



The two houses below each date from the 16th-century: thatched Tudors on the left and Sparrows on the right with its jettied upper storey.



Sparrows is in Cage End where you can also find the two buildings below. Town Farm House on the left began life in the late 14th century and was once a manor house. The three gables facing the road were probably added later as the building was converted from a hall to two storeys. Part of the original hall roofline and eaves have been retained between the second and third gables.

White-weatherboarded Gingerbread Cottage, below on the right, is located further down Cage End. It dates from the 17th century and was formerly known as Barkers.





Barrington Hall stands a little to the north of the village but is clearly visible from Hatfield Broad Oak's village green, a public space that was designated as the village green only in the second decade of the 21st century. The Hall was built in the 1730s by the Barrington family who owned much of Hatfield Forest for many generations. The mansion remained largely unoccupied for a century. For most of the 20th century, Barrington Hall was the home of a branch of the Gosling family whose principal seat was then at Hassobury in the nearby parish of Farnham. After a period of use as offices, the mansion was refurbished and offered for sale in 2019 with some 40 acres of grounds and a guide price of £15 million.

Bush End is a hamlet in the north of Hatfield Broad Oak administrative parish. For a while, Bush End was a separate ecclesiastical parish with its own church, dedicated to St John the Evangelist. Nowadays, the church is associated with Hatfield Broad Oak parish church.

The church was built largely of flint in the 1850s, probably largely funded by the Houblon family who then owned Hatfield Forest. Today, the church has an active congregation and the main entrance to the Forest is just along the road.



Hatfield Broad Oak village and parish are often affectionately referred to by locals as HBO. The name Hatfield Broad Oak was first recorded in the 12th century. There appears to be some dispute among authorities about the specific oak to which 'broad oak' refers. Some believe it to be the well-known 'Doodle Oak' of Hatfield Forest; others think it was a different tree sited closer to the village. We will probably never know, but it is intriguing to speculate. The legendary Doodle Oak was one of the broadest trees ever measured in England. The Doodle Oak lived for around 900 years until the 1850s when it last produced leaves. Its stump survived for another 100 years but is no longer visible, although a young oak tree, possibly a coppice shoot attached to the old root, lives on. As it grows it seems to be taking the same shape as the original, and is being nurtured in the hope that it will live as long as its parent.

The National Trust, owner of Hatfield Forest since 1924, has suggested one or two possible origins for the name Doodle Oak, but thinks that it probably derives from the word 'doodlesack', which is the bag of a bagpipe. The tree had a huge, bulbous base to the trunk and a lopsided narrowing nearer the top under the canopy.

The parish embraces most of the one thousand acres of Hatfield Forest, a rare surviving example of a medieval royal hunting forest. Its ancient woodlands were adopted around 1100 AD by King Henry I. Some individual trees remain from that era, having acquired fantastic shapes as they have aged and weathered over the centuries.

The ancient trees have seen their 'owners' come and go; after the various kings, the line of owners has included Lord Richard Rich (of Felsted), the Barrington family and then the Houblon family from 1729 until 1923. Then, the Forest was purchased by Edward North Buxton who gave it to the National Trust.



The forest is a haven for nature lovers and ramblers. You might have to search hard for the deer and cattle, who mostly make their own decisions about which parts of the forest they frequent, but the lake, the curious 1759 Shell House (created by the Houblons and shown below), the Discovery Centre and the Forest Café are all central and easily accessed. Bear in mind the weather and dress accordingly if you plan to avail yourself of the café, as you will be eating al fresco.



Hatfield Forest is popular at all times of the year: rich with buttercups in springtime, a haven from the heat of the summer sun and particularly magical when it snows.



The village sign, in the High Street close to the church, includes the coats of arms of two historical local families: Barrington on the left and De Vere on the right. You can see the sign on Hundred Parishes walk number 125.

More serious walkers might want to pick up the long-distance Three Forests Way that passes through the village on its way from Hatfield Forest to two more ancient Essex forests: Hainault and Epping.

For the seriously energetic, we must not forget The Big O Road Race, which has become a notable local annual event, catering for more than a thousand runners of all ages. Each May bank holiday, competitors follow a figure-of-eight route through the quiet lanes of the area and it's a great way to see the parish at its scenic best. For those wanting quieter pursuits, the flower festival of the parish church is held on the same day.



For a small rural community, Hatfield Broad Oak is without doubt gastronomically extremely well-provided. Not only are there two pubs, a forest café and a village store, but the village has its own popular brand of sausages “Broad Oak Sausages”, made at Broad Oak Farm near the village hall for almost a century.

USEFUL INFORMATION ABOUT HATFIELD BROAD OAK

Hospitality:

Cock Inn, CM22 7HF – 01279 718306 - www.thecockinn-hatfieldbroad oak.co.uk

Duke's Head, CM22 7HH – 01279 718598 - <https://www.thedukesheadhbo.co.uk/>

Forest Café - <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hatfield-forest/features/the-forest-cafe>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 125 covering 1.7 miles around Hatfield Broad Oak village

Circular walk 159 starts in Takeley. Most of the 5 mile route is in HBO including the Forest. Both route descriptions may be downloaded from this website.

Adjacent parishes: Hatfield Heath, Little Hallingbury, Great Hallingbury, Takeley, Great Canfield, High Roding, White Roding.

Links:

Parish Council: <https://www.hbopc.co.uk/>

Hatfield Regis Local History Society: <https://hatfieldregislocalhistorysociety.weebly.com/>

History: www.recordinguttlesfordhistory.org.uk/hatfieldbroad oak/hboindex.html

British History Online: www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=63851

HBO 10k run: <https://broad oak10k.co.uk/>

Broad Oak Farm: www.broad oakfarm.com/

Rowley Gallery: <http://blog.rowleygallery.co.uk/hatfield-forest-hatfield-broad-oak>

Walks around Hatfield Broad Oak: <http://walks.moonrakre.com/>

Further Reading

The Last Forest, the story of Hatfield Forest, Oliver Rackham

Hatfield Broad Oak Conservation Area Appraisal: Available at www.uttlesford.gov.uk/caa