



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

HUNSDON



4 miles NW of Harlow. Ordnance Survey grid square TL4114. Postcode SG12 8NJ.

Access: B180, no train station. **County:** Hertfordshire. **District:** East Hertfordshire.

Buses: route 351 (Monday to Saturday) between Hertford and Bishop's Stortford).

Population: 1,096 in 2001, 1,080 in 2011, 1,200 in 2021.



The village of Hunsdon was recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. The village centre is dominated by the 15th-century village hall, originally a house called The Harlowes which had previously been the village school as far back as at least 1806. The hall faces one of the village's original 5 greens, mainly now used as a car park but also the site of the war memorial.

A number of houses in the village date back to the same period as the hall, including White Horses to the right of the hall.

Hunsdon's greatest claim to fame is as the site of Hunsdon House to the east of the church. The house was built in the 15th century by Sir William Oldhall, but by the 16th century the building and its extensive parks were in the hands of the Crown. Henry VIII rebuilt the house expanding it into a palatial estate in the Tudor style, complete with royal apartments and even a moat, making it into a splendid palace. Henry spent much of his leisure time at Hunsdon hunting in the well stocked deerpark. All of the King's children lived there, Mary until her accession to the throne, Elizabeth and particularly Prince Edward. There is a well known portrait of Edward with the house in the background (see links below). Elizabeth I made Henry Carey the first baron of Hunsdon, after previously granting the house to him in 1559. The house has been greatly modified over the centuries. Most of King Henry's additions were torn down in the 17th century and it is now but a quarter of its size in Henry's time. Little or nothing now survives of the original house. Most recently it was rebuilt in 1860 in a neo-Elizabethan style.



St Dunstan's Church dates probably to the 11th century as a priest was recorded in the Domesday Book as living in Hunsdon. Certainly the north wall of the nave is thought to be at least 12th century and is probably part of the original church. Under the whitewash of the north wall are frescos depicting the 7 deadly sins. The rest of the building varies in age through the 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Its most notable feature is one of the finest examples in Hertfordshire of a Jacobean oak screen.

Sadly, the church is usually kept locked.

Hunsdon has also featured in more recent history. During World War II, RAF Hunsdon was home to a number of RAF units, most notably 140 Wing which on 18th February 1944 carried out Operation Jericho - a daring precision bombing raid on a prison at Amiens where many French Resistance prisoners were being held. Word had reached London that many were about to be executed and the raid was intended to free as many as possible. Though there were fatalities among the prisoners, 258 were able to escape. RAF Hunsdon was decommissioned in 1945. A Mosquito bomber of the type used in the raid is featured in the village sign. Today the airfield is used for flying by the Hunsdon Microlight Club.



The village also has a small part in sporting history. What are believed to be the first photographs of a cricket match were taken here in 1857.

A distinctive feature of Hunsdon's architecture is its white-painted buildings, whether they be weatherboarded or plastered. This style was established in the early 19th century by the Calvert family, then masters of Hunsdon House, to bring uniformity to their estate.

At the southern end of the parish is Hunsdon Mead, a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest. Its 68 acres of common land between the River Stort and the Stort Navigation is one of the finest surviving areas of unimproved grassland in eastern England. The Hertfordshire & Middlesex and Essex Wildlife Trusts acquired it jointly in 1981. For over 600 years Hunsdon Mead has been managed on the ancient Lammas system under which local farmers graze their cattle in late summer, after a July hay cut. If it were cut earlier some of the flowering plants would not have time to set seed for the following year. Grazing by cattle and sheep is allowed only between 1 August and 1 March, after which the vegetation is allowed to grow up. The remarkable abundance of wildlife found on the Mead is a result of that management regime.

Hospitality:

Fox and Hounds, SG12 8NH - 01279 843999 - <https://foxandhounds-hunsdon.co.uk/>

The Crown, SG12 8NZ – 07415 370860 - <https://www.facebook.com/crownhunsdon>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 166 which passes through Hunsdon and Widford – the 5.6 mile route can be joined in Hunsdon at the top of page 6 of the route description.

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes:

Stanstead Abbots, Wareside, Widford, Eastwick & Gilston.

Links:

Parish Council: <https://hunsdon.org.uk/> – including the following:

Hunsdon Airfield: <https://hunsdon.org.uk/village-history/hunsdon-airfield/>

Hunsdon House:

https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MHT2789&resourceID=1008

Prince Edward and Hunsdon House: <https://www.hunsdon.org.uk/images/Edward%20VI.gif>