



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

THE SALINGS



Location: 4 miles northwest of Braintree. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL7025.
Postcode: CM7 5DT. **County:** Essex. **District:** Braintree. **Access:** north off B1256.
Buses: 9 / 9A (Mon to Fri) between Braintree and Great Bardfield.
Population: 440 in 2001, 475 in 2011, 530 in 2021

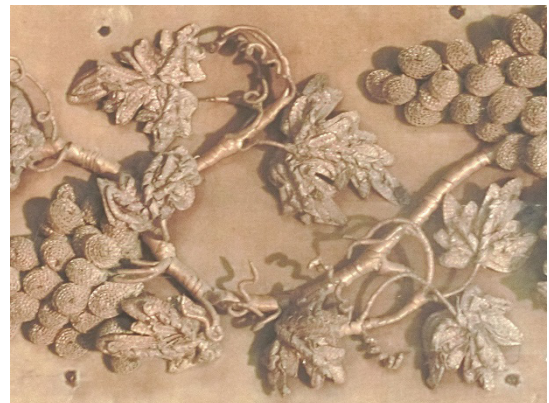
In 2019 the administrative parishes of Great Saling and Bardfield Saling combined to form one parish, The Salings. Records indicate that one Robert de Salyngge was the owner of the manor during the reign of King Henry II in the 12th century, and it may be that the Saling name was thus derived. Another suggestion is that it was named after the Old/Middle English word for the European willow - 'sallow', and indeed there still are fields of willow around the outskirts of the parish.

The combined administrative parish continues to be served by two parish churches and each justifies a visit. In Bardfield Saling, St Peter and St Paul is a delightful 14th-century, Grade I-listed church which, unlike many ecclesiastical buildings of this era is full of light and especially welcoming on a sunny day. It has a round tower, one of only seven in Essex and a particularly late example. The tower is the only example in the UK of the decorated period and would appear to be the last of its kind to be built in medieval times.



Of particular note in the interior are the 15th-century font, an unusual 17th-century hexagonal pulpit and the 18th-century musicians' gallery and chamber organ. There are also some very curious 16th-century graffiti carved into one of the pillars - allegedly a caricature of a churchwarden. In the porch and elsewhere there are initials and dates from two centuries later. One wonders how they came to be here; vandalism perhaps, or maybe just a distraction from long and boring sermons? Either way, a fascinating fingerprint of the illicit art we are more usually inclined to think of as a modern blight.

The church also has some fine framed examples of the straw-plaiter's art. Straw plaiting was introduced in the early 1800s to nearby Gosfield and Halstead as a means of income for the rural poor. Although never the extensive industry that it was in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, it became a viable trade across north Essex, particularly among women and children, enabling them to achieve a rare independence and to compete with their men as wage earners. Straw plaiting reached its peak in the 1850s – 1860s, but cheap imports of straw from abroad, mechanisation and a societal move



discouraging child labour brought about a sudden decline in the industry, and by the turn of the century there were no straw plaiters left in the county. Today, as we contemplate the extraordinary intricacy, art and skill in these samplers left to us, we are glad of and enriched by the keepsake; nevertheless, the remembrance (as so often) is tinged with regret at the obsolescence of another craft and tradition of a bygone era.

In Great Saling, the Grade II*-listed church of St James the Great (seen here) is considered, in part at least, to date from the 12th century, although much of the church's early origins have been obscured by 19th-century repair and 'restoration'. The west tower was added in the 14th century. The flint rubble building has a 15th-century octagonal font, a shape reflected in the much later 19th-century pulpit. One of the first marriages officiated from this pulpit would have been that of Samuel Ryder, the businessman and golf enthusiast who gave his sponsorship and name to the prestigious Ryder Cup golf tournament. St James is worth a visit, though its location is not immediately obvious. It is situated on the north side of the village and is set back off the road with one footpath access through the grounds of Saling Hall.



Saling Hall is of a similar era. It was described by the author and historian Philip Morant in his *History and Antiquities of the County of Essex* (1763-68), where he dates it in the first half of the 12th century. Nothing remains of the first building; the Grade II* listing of the present house suggests it dates from the early 17th century. Its gardens are also listed. Saling Hall has changed hands by sale only three or four times over the last 800 years.



Probably the most well-known event of modern times in the history of The Salings was the building of the first European United States airbase during the Second World War. It was known then as Andrews Field USAAF Station 485 after Lieutenant General Frank Andrews, commander of the US forces in Europe until his death in an air accident in 1943. It was built rapidly during 1942/3 using hardcore rubble from the London Blitz. At the height of its operations it employed over 800 American servicemen, but at the end of the war the airfield quickly fell into disuse and was abandoned by 1948. Two local farmers brought aviation back to the area and Andrewsfield Aviation was licensed by the Civil Aviation Authority in 1976. Today, apart from a tiny memorial on the village green, one would never know that this parish had, albeit in a small way, made a significant contribution to the war effort and functioned as a vigorous hub of the military machine.

It has to be said, of course, that a good half of the airfield (including vehicular access and a café) is actually in the neighbouring parish of Stebbing, but walkers can discover it using the excellent Parish Footpath Map. Great Saling and Bardfield Saling have long shared many things – such as The Salings Magazine, The Salings Millennium Hall and the Summer Fete.

For the walker, there are quiet winding lanes, footpaths and byways to explore, all of which can be found on the map of *Footpaths In and Around The Salings*, available from the parish council. See also The Hundred Parishes Society's walk number 139, referenced on the final page of this introduction.

There is much to be said for a leisurely approach, for there are over 60 listed buildings to be discovered. Not least of these is Pollards Farm, rendered infamous in 2008/9 by the discovery of 'dealer in death' Paul Alexander's gun factory and cannabis farm. It is hard indeed to believe that this sleepy parish, in many respects so detached and unworldly, should harbour 'one of the most notorious firearms dealers we have ever seen in this county'. Since Alexander was detained indefinitely at Her Majesty's pleasure, the parish has returned to its relative anonymity.

An altogether more honourable resident of Bardfield Saling was Baron Leslie Haden-Guest MC, whose memorial plaque is in St Peter and St Paul church. Baron Haden-Guest was a physician and surgeon who served in the Boer War, a social reformer and prolific author on health and social care issues, and latterly a Member of Parliament for a London constituency. He was the grandfather of actor and film director Christopher Guest, the fifth and current Baron, who is married to the actress Jamie Lee-Curtis.



In this essentially rural community, places of refreshment are to be found only on the southernmost edge of the parish at Blake End. A timber barn provides a characterful setting for Sconch Tea Rooms. It is part of a cluster of Grade II-listed 17th-century farm outbuildings which now comprise the Blake House Craft Centre. The centre is home to numerous small retail outlets selling gifts, crafts and home accessories, with intriguing seasonal events that include lawnmower racing and the amazing Great Maze.



Hospitality

Sconch Tea Rooms at Blake End, off B1256, CM77 6SH - 01376 743123 -

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

Palm Trees Restaurant (oriental cuisine), off B1256, CM77 6SF - 01376 328088 -

www.palmtreesrestaurant.co.uk.

Saling Grove Caravan Park, CM7 5DW - 01371 850185 – www.salinggrove.com .

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk number 139, covering a route of 3.5 miles from Great Saling village hall.

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes: Felsted, Great Bardfield, Shalford, Stebbing.

Links

The Salings Parish Council: <https://salings-pc.gov.uk/>

Blake House Craft Centre: www.blakehousecraftcentre.co.uk