



The Hundred Parishes

An introduction to

SAWBRIDGEWORTH



Location: 3 miles northeast of Harlow. **Ordnance Survey grid square:** TL4814. **County:** Hertfordshire. **District:** East Herts. **Postcode:** CM21 9AR. **Access:** Sawbridgeworth station on London Liverpool Street – Cambridge line. A1184. **Buses:** 508/509/510 run regularly between Harlow, Bishop's Stortford and Stansted Airport; 347 (Tue and Thur only) single service to Harlow. **Population:** 8,007 in 2001, 8,458 in 2011, 8,700 in 2021.

The town of Sawbridgeworth is in the extreme southeast corner of Hertfordshire. The parish boundary to the east and south is marked by the meandering River Stort, defining the border with three Essex districts: Uttlesford, Epping Forest and Harlow.

This is a parish of contrasts: from the town's bustling and ancient centre to the large open space that is Pishiobury Park; and from the constant flow of traffic along the A1184 to the tranquility of the Stort riverbank. Sawbridgeworth Marsh Nature Reserve, on the east side of the river, half a mile north of the station, has rare plants such as marsh orchids and in summer teems with pond life, insects and birds. The road and the river were joined in the mid-19th century by the railway, each of them running north - south. These three transport highways, through their provision of easy access to London, have had a major influence on the town's evolution.



The Domesday Book shows that Sawbrixteworde was probably the richest place in Hertfordshire in the 11th century. It was at that time also one of the largest places in Hertfordshire, incorporating High Wych (which became a separate civil parish in 1901) and possibly also part of what is now Gilston. A sense of the parish's wealth, or at least the wealth of its former landowners, can be gained from a review of the many sculpted and bronze memorials in the parish church of Great St Mary.

The church dates from the 13th century, its mainly flint exterior contrasting with the red brick stair turret added to the tower in the 16th century. The church is listed as Grade I with the narrative, "The church is of special interest as a substantially unaltered large medieval parish church, typical of the Hertfordshire type, and with an outstanding collection of memorials of the highest artistic quality".



Church visitors are welcomed by informative descriptions beside the main memorials. Shown here is part of one from the 17th century commemorating Sir William and Dame Elizabeth Hewyt who lived at Pishiobury.

A monument to Robert, Viscount Jocelyn, a former Lord Chancellor of Ireland, is signed by the sculptor John Bacon, a number of whose works appear in Westminster Abbey. Another striking memorial is the painted alabaster tomb of Sir John Leventhorpe, who died in 1625, and his wife Joan in widow's black mourning dress.

The church has two intriguing Crimean connections. As well as a plaque to the fifth Earl of Roden, who saw active service at the battles of Alma, Balaclava and Inkerman, there is another to Corporal Joseph Vick who was one of the few survivors of the Charge of the Light Brigade and is buried in St Mary's churchyard.

The parish church is in the historic centre of town which, unusually, is not on the main road. The parish has 159 listed buildings, of which 70 date from 1700 AD or earlier. Many of these older buildings are clustered along Bell Street and Knight Street which meet close to the church at the corner of the so-called, "Square". Much of this area is protected as a conservation area, with a variety of building styles including brick, timber-frame and plaster, and some weather-boarding.

Below are two notable buildings in Bell Street. On the left is the so-called Market House, at the junction with Knight Street, a 16th-century building whose original purpose is uncertain – possibly for malting or some kind of manufacturing, or possibly as an inn. Now a private residence, it has also served as offices, a nursing home and a carpet warehouse. On the right is 18th-century Red House near the western end of Bell Street.



A short distance south of the Square is Fair Green, the location for regular fairs since 1447 and an annual May Fayre in more recent times. There was a regular hiring fair, the medieval equivalent of an employment agency. Below are photos of two of Fair Green's buildings: on the left, the Old Manse dating from the 18th century and, on the right, 16th-century Fair Green House.



After the Norman Conquest of 1066, Sawbrixteworde came under the jurisdiction of Geoffrey de Mandeville. Over succeeding centuries, it became divided into a number of manors, each large estate being headed by a wealthy landlord.

Most of the medieval manors covered several hundred acres and included Sayesbury (held by the de Say family), Hyde Hall (the Jocelyn family), Mathams (now in the parish of High Wych - the Leventhorpe family), and Pishiobury. Many of these family names, and some of the more modern versions of the manor houses, are still in evidence today.

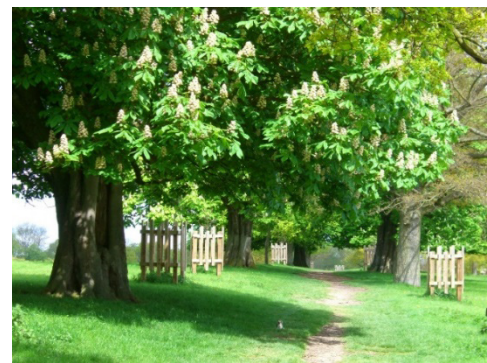
Pishiobury has perhaps the most noteworthy history, having been purchased in 1534 by King Henry VIII for his second wife, Anne Boleyn. At that time, it was recorded that the estate had a perimeter of two miles, with woodland that was well stocked with game birds, deer and rabbits. If the Queen ever stayed at Pishiobury it would not have been for long, for she was executed in 1536.

The house was replaced in 1585 by a new owner, Sir Walter Mildmay, and then substantially remodelled after a fire in the 1780s by the then owner, Jeremiah Milles. This photo shows the mansion's west face.



Milles had married Rose Gardiner, the heiress to Pishiobury. A wealthy man in his own right, Milles acquired several more Sawbridgeworth estates. It is believed that he engaged Capability Brown to contribute to the present design of Pishiobury's park and gardens which include a long meandering lake between the house and the River Stort.

In recent years, Pishiobury House has had multiple occupants. It retains substantial grounds, although part of the estate was developed into upmarket residential Pishiobury Drive in the 20th century. The open parkland between the house and Harlow Road, the A1184, is now an attractive public park with fine avenues of oak, lime and horse chestnut trees. It is a designated Local Nature Reserve. This photo was taken along Three Forests Way and Harcamlow Way, the routes of which follow the same path from south to north through the park. Hundred Parishes' walk number 7, a circular route starting and finishing at Sawbridgeworth Station, includes this path.



The wealth that was concentrated within a few land-owning families started to spread as opportunities and jobs arose from the upgrading of transport. The main road became a turnpike in 1744, with a tollgate at Spellbrook; the Stort was upgraded to a navigable canal in 1769; and the railway, with a station at Sawbridgeworth, was opened in 1845. These developments were privately funded and operated.

The presence of the canal facilitated the development of a substantial malting industry along its banks. This was Sawbridgeworth's major employer during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, processing barley from the surrounding countryside before shipping the resultant malt by barge to London's brewing industry. The transport connections and malting industry brought many new people to the town. The 1851 census records some 2,500 inhabitants of whom over one-third were not born here. The population has continued to increase, with more than 8,000 recorded in 2011.

The improved transport systems also helped the expansion of Rivers Nurseries, a substantial employer that had operated to the west of the town since 1725 [There is a short account of Thomas Rivers in this website's People pages]. Rail and then road gradually displaced the canal as the preferred form of transport. The canal remained in private hands until its closure in 1909. It re-opened 15 years later under the Lee Conservancy Board and is today primarily used for leisure. The six locks within the parish provide exercise for narrow boat users and offer entertainment and an insight into canal logistics for those who stroll or cycle along the towpath.

Today the parish has little industry, with many residents commuting to London or Harlow. Rivers Nursery closed in the 1980s and part of the site is now home to Rivers Hospital. Along the Stort, some of the large maltings buildings have been converted to apartments or adapted for use by all manner of small businesses. However, in the north of the parish, the hamlet of Spellbrook has been home to the successful Hayter lawnmower business since it was founded in 1946. It has held a Royal Warrant for 50 years as a supplier to the Queen. In 2014, Sawbridgeworth lost its other

modern “royal” connection when David and Victoria Beckham moved out of “Beckingham Palace”, a modern stately home they had developed over many years in the south of the parish.

Here is a town and parish just waiting for someone to write a comprehensive history. The Local History Society, founded in 2016, has updated some publications covering specific subjects and is working to make the town’s history more accessible. The town offers much of interest to anyone who takes time to wander around. This brief introduction merely scratches the surface of its many aspects and interesting hidden features.

Hospitality:

For latest information on dining, pubs and hotels, please see: <http://www.sawbridgeworth-tc.gov.uk/town-information/retail-entertainment/public-houses-dining-places-to-stay/>

As at February 2022, the following details appear to be correct:

Burstead’s Cottages B&B, CM21 0NB – 07789 214127 –

<http://2-bursteads-cottages.hotelshertfordshire.net/en/>

Spellbrook Farm Self Catering, CM23 4AX – 07973 340831 - <http://spellbrookfarm.doomby.com/>
Bull, CM21 9BK – 01279 722777

CJ’s Ice Cream, Desserts & Coffee, CM21 9AE – 01279 723860 – <https://cjsicecream.co.uk/>

Gate, CM21 9JJ – 01279 722313 - <https://thegatepub.weebly.com/>

George IV, CM21 9AT – 01279 723527 - www.mcmullens.co.uk/george-iv

Hand and Crown, CM21 0AY – 01279 725892 - <https://www.thehandandcrown.co.uk/>

King William IV, CM21 9AJ – 01279 722322 - <https://www.facebook.com/KingWillySawbo>

Listed, specialist coffee shop, CM21 9AR – 07549 541509 - <https://www.facebook.com/listed27/>

Mint Café, CM21 9QE – 01279 600516 - <https://www.mintcafe.co.uk/>

New Mexico restaurant, CM21 9JG – 01279 721070 - www.newmexicorestaurant.co.uk

Old Bell, CM21 9AN – 01279 721050 - <https://theoldbellsawbridgeworth.com/>

Orange Tree, CM21 0BP – 01279 722485 - <https://www.orangetreesawbridgeworth.com/>

Peking Palace Restaurant, CM21 9AX – 01279 722276 –

<https://takeaway.eat-way.co.uk/menu-pekings-palace-restaurant-takeaway>

Pizza Squisita, CM21 9AN - <https://www.pizzasquisita.co.uk/>

Queens Head, CM21 9AT – 01279 836057 - <https://www.queensheadsawbridgeworth.co.uk/>

Shed Coffee House, CM21 9JX – 01279 723853 - www.theshedcoffeehouse.co.uk

Star of India, CM21 9JH – 01279 726512 - <https://www.starofindiasawbridgeworth.uk/order.aspx>

Three Horseshoes (Spellbrook), CM22 7SE – expected to reopen in Spring 2024: 01279 722849 –
<https://www.chefandbrewer.com/pubs/hertfordshire/three-horse-shoes/>

White Lion, CM21 9EN - 01279 836118 - <https://www.greeneking-pubs.co.uk/pubs/hertfordshire/white-lion/>

Hundred Parishes Society walks include . . .

Circular walk 121 which covers 2.2 miles around the town

Three Station walks start or finish at Sawbridgeworth Station:

Walk 7: Circular route via High Wych, starting and finishing at Sawbridgeworth Station (6 miles).

Walk 8: From Sawbridgeworth to Bishop’s Stortford station (5 miles).

Walk 20: From St Margarets Station to Sawbridgeworth station (12 miles).

Adjacent Hundred Parishes parishes: High Wych, Thorley, Little Hallingbury, Sheering.

Links:

Town Council: <http://www.sawbridgeworth-tc.gov.uk/>

Sawbridgeworth Local History Society: <https://sbwhistory.com/>

Thomas Rivers and the nurseries - see the People section of www.hundredparishes.org.uk.

Rivers Heritage Site and Orchard: <http://www.rhso.co.uk/>

British History Online: www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol3/pp332-347

Sawbridgeworth Marsh Nature Reserve: www.essexwt.org.uk/reserves/sawbridgeworth-marsh

Sawbridgeworth Fire Brigade plus: http://www.sawbridgeworthfirebrigade.co.uk/site_home.htm

Further reading:

Several books from Sawbridgeworth Local History Society: <https://sbwhistory.com/publications/>
Britain in old Photographs: Bishop’s Stortford & Sawbridgeworth, WJ Wright, 1995, Alan Sutton Publishing Limited.

Great St Mary’s through the Ages, published by Nordic Press and available in the church.

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